

easy writer

The feel of the state's open roads beckons motorcyclists from across the country to the Land of Enchantment.

Now, local enthusiast **Charles Mann** and a group of intrepid friends head out for a ride through northern New Mexico, where a sense of freedom, scenic views, and a soothing soak in Ojo Caliente mineral springs await.



STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHARLES MANN**

With scenic views and winding roads, New Mexico's highways are a rider's delight. Here, a group of friends wends through the red rock mesas near Ghost Ranch on U.S. 84.

My motorcycle's engine revs to a sweet spot, and as the bike surges forward, I feel

the familiar speed, exhilaration, and lightness as the pavement drops away beneath me on N.M. 502. I catch a brief whiff of piñon smoke that seems out of season here in the summer—perhaps someone at nearby San Ildefonso Pueblo is firing pottery. Black Mesa's dark wedding-cake shape looms to my right. Ahead, sandstone cliffs of white, beige, and pink, capped with toothy ridges of black basalt, tower above green cottonwoods, and as I traverse the bridge over the Río Grande at Otowi Crossing, I drop the BMW into a lower gear and gun it up the hill toward Los Alamos.

I've been absorbed in the scenery, but now I'm lagging behind our group.

For once, I'm breaking my habit of riding alone or with a single partner in favor of a group excursion. Veteran riders Chuck West and his wife, Fabian, are riding their bright red BMW. Sal Perno and his wife, Kristi, a woman with a smile so warm it would ripen a green apple, are also riding two-up on their yellow BMW GS. Thirtysomething Canadian transplant Matt Kowalyszyn and his pretty girlfriend, Mallery Whitehorse, on their zippy yellow Suzuki 650, represent the voice of youth among us silverbacks.

Our congenial crew is hitting the

road for a two-day trip through northern New Mexico's back roads. Murrae Haynes and his wife, Mabel, both operators for MotoDiscovery, a group offering worldwide motorcycle tours, have planned our trip. Haynes is also the riding-training manager at Santa Fe Harley-Davidson, where he also plans expeditions. Although I'm a type-A guy, and usually have a map in hand, this time I'm content to let someone else create the itinerary so I can relax and ride. I traveled these roads in years past, burning along in the heady bubble of youthful distraction. In those days I was always rushing through this paradise; now, I'm taking time for another look.

On the road, I catch up with my new friends.

By 9 a.m., we've logged quite a bit of distance from our Santa Fe starting point. We've climbed onto the Pajarito Plateau near Los Alamos, slid past the bedroom village of White Rock on N.M. 4. Now the string of colorful bikes dips and weaves like a loosely connected train of roller-coaster cars through canyons and ridges of ragged volcanic rock studded with ponderosa pines and ruffed with wildflowers.

Forty miles out from Santa Fe, a short side trip into Bandelier National Monument shifts the landscape's scale as we

realize we've been riding the lip of a gorge. Frijoles Canyon is an ancient site of Native American occupation, and the deep, unexpected chasm cuts down through 600 feet of soft tuff and pumice to a winding strip of creek and lush green cottonwoods below. The scene is a dramatic contrast in culture, time, and space with the ultra-high-tech science of Los Alamos National Laboratory perched atop the mesa, just six miles away on N.M. 501.

Soon, we are vaulting through aspen and fir, carving our way to the top of the Jémez Mountains. Switchbacks and curves are a biker's delight, and we snake giddily through deep, shady curls,



Clockwise from top, this page—Forty miles outside of Santa Fe, Bandelier National Monument makes for an excellent side trip to explore ancient Native American dwellings. (From left) Mallery Whitehorse, Matt Kowalyszyn, and Kristi and Sal Perno await lunch at Los Ojos Restaurant and Saloon in Jémez Springs. A gently curving road leads into the quaint village of Jémez Springs. Writer/photographer Charles Mann on the road.



Clockwise from top, this page—The ruins at Jemez State Monument convey part of the area's Native American history. Traveling out of Jémez Springs, N.M. 4 runs parallel to the Jémez River and offers graceful curves shaded by cottonwood trees. A rest stop off N.M. 96 provides a scenic overlook of Abiquiú Reservoir. N.M. 96 passes through timeless villages and verdant pastures; a pleasure ride along here also offers views of Cerro Pedernal, which was immortalized by painter Georgia O'Keeffe.



negotiate gnarly fishhook turns, and lean our machines around bends clinging to the mountainside.

At the hill's summit the trees thin, and the landscape balloons into an expanse of wild grasses bending in the breeze. We pull over at an information point to rubberneck at Valles Caldera National Preserve, the giant collapsed caldera at the top of the Jémez. The entire mountain range is what's left of one of the largest supervolcanos on the planet. More than a million years ago, it blasted lava and ash as far away as Kansas. Today, the dormant crater is 12 miles wide and blanketed with grass; elk grazing here look smaller than ants.

On two wheels again, we swing through high-speed curves as the road descends from the high country into San Diego Canyon. I can smell the sulfur hot springs for which the area is known. Buff-colored sandstone cliffs rise hundreds of feet above us. The road parallels the Jémez River, and we race the water to our lunch stop.

Jémez Springs is a bucolic resort town centered around a hot-springs spa, a bar, art studios, and a few bed-and-breakfasts. It's the kind of place that New York travel writers delight in "discovering"—an off-the-map spot with real charm, lots of local attractions, good food, and an air of

relaxation. Visitors can see ancient ruins, fish, drive through a railroad tunnel, hike to natural hot springs, get a salt wrap, grab an enchilada, and buy pottery from a Jemez Pueblo artist.

We stop at the Los Ojos Restaurant and Saloon for lunch, buoyed by a banner: "BIKERS WELCOME." We converge on the patio for *The Canterbury Tales* portion of the trip—everyone comments on the road we've traveled so far, compares motorcycles, and tells jokes. My red-chile fix from my huevos rancheros breakfast at Pantry Restaurant, in Santa Fe, has long since worn off. After another dose to stoke the fires, we're firing up the bikes again.

For 15 miles the lane drifts and rolls, leading us under roadside cottonwood groves and past super-red cliffs along N.M. 4, part of the Jémez Mountain Trail National Scenic Byway. As we leave the high canyon walls behind, the pavement skirts Jemez Pueblo, and cuts in front of a tiny, marshmallow-white, tin-roofed Spanish church in San Ysidro. We make our way onto a modern divided highway and head toward the village of Cuba along U.S. 550.

Now, as the bikes spread out across two lanes, we kick in the throttles, moving in formation like a cozy squadron of piston-powered fighter planes communing wingtip to wingtip. The exhaust

notes wow and flutter, vibrating in our chests, and everyone glances around to confirm that their friends feel it, too. To the south, the massive volcanic plug of Cabezón Peak swims into view. It's one of several stunning buttes—had Monument Valley been unavailable, John Ford could have shot *Rio Bravo* here. Cabezón Peak is a favorite place of mine; the sight of it, along with the bikes' hypnotic drone, sends me into a reverie.

Maybe it's middle age, but lately I've been experiencing a sort of inner awakening, a reformation. It's a bursting feeling in my chest—a heart

attack of sorts—and it has to do with this landscape, this place.

I've been in New Mexico for 28 years, and it has always been a romance. As in a story of a rock star and his fashion-model wife, at first my relationship with New Mexico was a youthful infatuation, a wild and lustful frenzy. I wanted to take it in by the handful. I backpacked into the Gila, Bandelier, and Pecos wildernesses, climbed iconic Cerro Pedernal, near Ghost Ranch, ran naked with my girlfriend at White Sands National Monument, slurped up fiery-hot green chile at Dave's Not Here and Tomasita's, and read Plato at St. John's College, in Santa Fe.



Opposite page, top—After a long day’s ride, the friends don their bathing suits and plunge into the refreshing pools at Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs Resort & Spa. (From left—Fabian and Chuck, Kristi and Sal, Matt and Mallery.) *Opposite page, bottom*—Ojo Caliente’s soothing pools set against scenic cliffs, lovely guest rooms, and a fine restaurant are the perfect way to cap off the day’s ride. *Center*—The pastoral landscape north of Ojo Caliente shows off New Mexico’s diverse beauty. *This page, above*—The riders note that U.S. 64 is a motorist’s paradise: broad, sweeping curves flanked by wide-open pastures. *This page, right*—The striking mesas and way-out-West ambiance near Ghost Ranch are a highlight of the return trip to Santa Fe.



Then I drifted off to other dalliances. I flirted with Italy, sat in quiet rapture with ancient Zen gardens in Japan, ogled the fjords of New Zealand, and rode a motorcycle through Bavaria. I snuggled with Ireland. I kissed Canada and beached in Mexico.

Now, years later, after so many indulgences, my infatuation with New Mexico has grown deep. She’s still here with me. Every beautiful and interesting thing about her seems richer, fuller, and begging for my attention. I still can’t get enough. I think I love her. What’s more, I think I need her.

Our thundering motorcycle herd stops for gas in Cuba, a quiet town sandwiched between the Jémez Mountains escarpment and the outback edge of the Jicarilla Apache Nation.

It’s big country here. Motorcycle country.

Two more clicks down the line we turn onto N.M. 96. It’s a patchy two-lane road—like Route 66, a throwback road with crumbling pavement that’s fading into a memory before our very eyes. Around the bend, toward the tiny post-office villages of Gallina and Coyote, the landscape becomes a rainbow tapestry of red, ocher, and green, capped with an azure sky. The fang of Cerro

Pedernal, the flat-topped peak immortalized in paint by Georgia O’Keeffe, suddenly dominates the landscape. This is the best you can do on a motorcycle, short of the Alps. Better, maybe.

Down U.S. 84 through Abiquiú, and N.M. 554 toward El Rito, quaint places with boomer views of iconic landscapes pass by. We are riding a world away from chic Santa Fe, let alone Des Moines or Cleveland (New Mexico, that is).

Our overnight destination is Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs Resort & Spa, in the little village of the same name. The site has been used beyond memory by Native Americans, and was considered a peaceful

zone where adversaries shared the respite of a truce. It’s still so today. Here, visitors relax in the natural springs, said to be a balm for both body and spirit. It’s good for socializing, too, and we’re quick to swap our motorcycle suits for towels and share our many experiences of the day. There’s good food, wine under the stars, and, yes, more New Mexico tomorrow.

Come morning, under Ojo Caliente’s blissful influence, we get off to a slow start. We head north on U.S. 285 to Tres Piedras. Seventy-seven miles and 90 minutes later, we’ve toured the high, green landscape of U.S. 64 West, and we arrive in Chama after a quick jaunt north on

U.S. 84 for refreshments, gas, and a prowling around the railyard of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. The train has left for the day, but the color and charisma of the station, the coal piles, the cars, water tanks, and rails, make for good exploring. And then we are off again.

The highlight of our descent to Santa Fe is a stop at Ghost Ranch, north of Abiquiú. A resort, retreat center, hiking destination, and more, Ghost Ranch never fails to impress. The rustic cabins date from the 1930s, the hikes are spectacular, and the way-out-West ambiance is timeless. Georgia O’Keeffe’s fingerprints are everywhere here, too, and off to the south,

the truncated peak of Cerro Pedernal again presides over the distant skyline, the Eiffel Tower of the Southwest.

We hover near Kitchen Mesa, perhaps the most beautiful red-and-yellow cliffs we’ve seen yet. Here, a girlfriend once remarked, “The landscape feeds me.”

It’s true.

Wending down U.S. 84, following the bends of the Río Chama toward Santa Fe, we pass the spot where Ansel Adams shot his iconic image *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, and where the Sangre de Cristo Mountains rim the wide eastern horizon like silver brocade, far across the Río Grande Valley.



Above—Classic New Mexican fare at JoAnn’s Ranch O Casados Restaurant in Española is worth the stop. **Right**—Charles Mann reclines on his bike in Taos during a 1980 love affair with the Land of Enchantment.



Our wild bunch pulls in for one last shot of red chile at JoAnn’s Ranch O Casados Restaurant in Española. There are no tourists here, just lip-smacking enchiladas and a feeling that we’re eating the real deal. Perfect.

Somewhere, in a drawer back home, I have a black-and-white photo of myself taken in Taos. I was

introducing a New England girlfriend (yes, another one) to motorcycle touring and New Mexico. She snapped a photo of me, reclining on my BMW in front of a colorful mural at a liquor store, wearing mirror aviator sunglasses, in my custom-made leather motorcycle jacket. The mural is still standing, and so am I.

These days, however, I drive more slowly, reflect longer, and feel more

humbled by the landscape’s beauty and mystery. It’s a pleasant shift from the headlong rush of seeing it for the first time, but no less exciting. Even though I have never really gone away, I’ve somehow returned to the Land of Enchantment.

So much New Mexico. So little time.



Charles Mann is featured in “Storytellers” on page 5.



MAP IS FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSES ONLY. PLEASE CONSULT A ROAD MAP, SUCH AS BENCHMARK NEW MEXICO ROAD & RECREATION ATLAS, FOR DETAILED DIRECTIONS.

if you go

- The Pantry Restaurant, 1820 Cerrillos Rd., Santa Fe, (505) 986-0022, www.pantrysantafe.com
- Bandelier National Monument, off N.M. 4, (505) 672-3861 x 517, <http://www.nps.gov/band>
- Valles Caldera National Preserve, 18161 N.M. 4, (505) 661-3333, www.vallescaldera.gov
- Los Ojos Restaurant and Saloon, N.M. 4 and Abousleman Loop, Jémez Springs, (575) 829-3547, www.losojossaloon.com
- Jemez State Monument
- Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs Resort & Spa, 50 Los Baños Dr., Ojo Caliente, (505) 583-2233, <http://ojocalientesprings.com>
- Ghost Ranch, off U.S. 84, (505) 685-4333, www.ghost ranch.org
- JoAnn’s Ranch O Casados Restaurant, 938 N. Riverside Dr., Española, (505) 753-1334, www.joannsranchocasados.com

motorcycling

- Freedom Tours, 44 Cheyenne, Lyons, Colorado, (303) 823-5731, www.twisty-roads.com/swtour.htm
- MotoDiscovery Tours, (800) 233-0564, www.motodiscovery.com
- Thunderbird Harley-Davidson, 5000 Alameda Blvd. NE, Albuquerque, (505) 856-1600, www.thunderbirdhd.com

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