

Travel and Adventure: Sky-high in Acoma Country

by Ruth A. Hill

America celebrates her 400th anniversary in 2007, yet it can be arresting to realize that while a small band of Englishmen put down the nation's first root at Jamestown Fort in 1607, indigenous civilizations had already flourished for centuries on the other side of the continent. One scenic and living remnant of those ancient American Indian groups now includes a new culture stop an hour's drive west of Albuquerque. Nearby touring bonuses include natural wonders and what's left of New Mexico's portion of the Mother Road - legendary Route 66.

MODERN BUILDING, ANCIENT CULTURE - Situated at the base of the 370-foot sandstone mesa topped by Sky City Pueblo of Acoma, the new \$15 million Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum showcases the history, art and lifestyles of the Acoma people. CNS Photo courtesy of Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum. Situated at the base of the 370-foot sandstone mesa topped by the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America - Sky City Pueblo of Acoma - the new \$15 million Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum showcases the history, art and lifestyles of the Acoma (ACK-oma) people. Its contemporary architectural design utilizes colors, stone, wood and mica from the surrounding Acoma Valley, which is itself an eye feast of natural rock formations, big sky and windswept mystery.

Visual pleasures inside the center include traditionally made jewelry and pottery crafted primarily by Acoma women. They learn the traditional coiling technique from older family members. When potters like Tena Garcia demonstrate their craft for culture center audiences, it becomes clear why many collectors pay up to thousands of dollars for the best examples of Acoma art. Along with her skill and steady hand, Garcia demonstrates her craft using common household objects like Popsicle sticks and tin can lids to shape her pots.

SACRED LAND - Centuries before Englishmen landed at Jamestown Fort, indigenous civilizations had already flourished on the other side of the continent. A cultural center and museum now showcases the history, art and lifestyles of the Acoma people. CNS Photo by Ruth A. Hill. Artistic pieces like the pristine white vessel sitting beside her begin with a difficult clay-making process, she explained.

"Clay must be dug from locations that are only accessible on foot," she said. "In its original form, the clay is rocky and slate-like. If it's damp when dug, it must be left to dry for days in the sun, then cleaned of unwanted material like twigs and pebbles. Then you have to crush it with a stone. To make the pot strong, you have to break up old shards, sometimes hundreds of years old, for temper. You hand grind it to a powder, then add the clay to bind and prevent it from shrinking and cracking."

MADE BY HAND - The Sky City Cultural Center and Haakâ€™™u Museum displays traditional jewelries and potteries crafted primarily by Acoma women. The center offers live demonstrations of these crafts. Shown is a group of storyteller dolls. CNS Photo by Ruth A. Hill. The Yaak'a Cafe and its signature dishes of blue corn porridge, blue corn pancakes, venison steak, buffalo burgers and deer stew are another popular feature of the new culture center. Diners with more tastes for breakfast burritos, hot dogs, onion rings and Starbucks find breakfast and lunch culinary satisfaction in the Yaak'a as well.

Many windows of the culture center frame the Sky City Pueblo, the center of Acoma culture for two millennia. Built to evade raiders on a sheer-walled, 370-foot sandstone bluff, Sky City Pueblo remains a testament to Acoma culture. Until 1959, it was only accessible via a steep footpath. The National Historic Landmark mesa-top village is a treasure of heritage, art and its centerpiece: San Esteban del Rey Mission. The Acoma took a decade to construct the church because they had to haul tons of earth, timber and rock up the mesa on foot, beginning in 1629. There's a smorgasbord of cultural and scenic features to explore inside the pueblo, such as homes with foundations hundreds of years old and faraway views of towering monoliths such as the legend-laden Enchanted Mesa.

REMNANTS OF A LOST ERA - Route 66 is the legendary road that used to stretch for nearly 2,500 miles between Chicago and Los Angeles. Some of their ghosts still hover alongside the old road, such as Budville, a former trading post dating back to 1938. CNS Photo by Ruth A. Hill. Though most Acoma people live in modern homes throughout the surrounding valley today, Sky City remains the spiritual and cultural center of tribal life for annual festivals and events. A few Acoma remain in the pueblo with no electricity and rely on incongruous Porta Pottis that intrude on the ancient architecture for their plumbing.

Visitors who want to tour the pueblo must purchase tickets in the culture center and be escorted by an Acoma guide. Nobody is allowed to wander on their own on the mesa.

Acoma Business Enterprises' Sky City brand includes Sky City Casino Hotel, located a 20-minute drive from the pueblo site, and it offers sleeping rooms, suites, a conference center, restaurant and casino where smoking is allowed but alcohol is not. The company also runs a trophy elk, bear, mountain lion and pronghorn antelope hunting program on its 431,000-acre reservation.

Grants, a small town that Interstate highway construction almost killed, is home to a few hundred people and a couple of other sleep and eat options. La Ventana Steak House is the white-linen-dining option in the area. Cibola Outpost Bed and Breakfast is located high in the hills above Grants. New Mexico Mining Museum is the Grants stop to bone up on the history of uranium mining that made the town boom in the 1950s, then fizzle three decades later.

Natural attractions near Sky City include El Malpais National Monument Sandstone Bluffs, a conservation area that preserves 114,277 acres. El Malpais means "the badlands," but its beauty belies the name. The 200-million-year-old sandstone bluffs, lava tubes and caves present an enticing draw for hikers, climbers and observers. The La Ventana Natural Arch is especially dramatic. Scenic backcountry roads in the area lift sojourners into country high above the desert.

Another area touring bonus: kicks for history buffs along pieces of Route 66, that legendary road that used to carry people and vehicles nearly 2,500 miles between Chicago and Los Angeles. The old highway began in 1926 during a national campaign to standardize America's highways and grew to legendary significance in the '30s, '40s and '50s. Motels, Burma Shave signs, billboards, fast-food drive-ins, service stations and drive-in theaters adorned the landscape alongside Route 66. Some of their ghosts still hover alongside the old road, such as Budville, a former trading post with origins in 1938. When the Interstates came along in the '60s, the road began to pass into history. New Mexico's bits of the old road are accessible from Interstate 40, which runs through Acoma country.

IF YOU GO

Trip planning information is available from Acoma Business Enterprises, 888-SKY-CITY (759-2489); www.skycity.com.

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