

TRAVEL

Historic sites dot magnificent journey to Taos

[Last of a two-part series on Northern New Mexico.]
By JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

For me, the best thing about Taos is the journey there and back. We leave Santa Fe on one of those exquisite, unforgettably fresh, mid-June, northern New Mexico mornings beneath a cloudless blue sky ... We had decided to take the "high road to Taos," that climbs to more than 8,000 feet over its 80-mile span and winds through a chain of remote Spanish villages. I'm torn between looking at the magnificent valley, plains and forests unfolding before us and reading from Robert L. Casey's wonderful guidebook *Journey to the High Southwest* in which he and his family take our same route.

First stop
Our first stop is the Santuario do Chimayo, an adobe church built in 1814-16. Its simple Spanish architecture blends with its setting — a sacred peak for Native Americans in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Its interior is just as disarming, with its brightly colored altar and Spanish-style crucifix. We also visit a small adjoining room where people come to scoop a bit of its wet-ash, thought-to-be healing clay. On to Las Trampas, where a dog wanders into the road, blocking our way, as we are about to turn in to see its church, San Jose de Gracias. We coax him out of harm's way realizing he probably belongs to one of the town's 70 inhabitants.

In the small square, which along with the church is on the National Historic Register, we learn from a resident shopkeeper that the town has "no government, no fire, no police and no school."
"It's very slow," he tells us, "I belong to the mountain." We're sorry not to be able to see inside the mud-plastered adobe church that dates to 1776. It is locked and our informant tells us it's used infrequently. With its balcony centered between two wooden bell towers

and surrounding adobe wall, it appears timeless.

Disappointments
We reach Taos by lunchtime, and are unimpressed by its commercial atmosphere and terrible traffic. Whereas Santa Fe, for the most part, sells legitimate art, Taos, for the most part, sells kitsch. We realize we are hungrily grumpy, and feel a lot better after a pleasant meal on the patio of Ogelvie's Bar and Grille, overlooking shady Taos Plaza. Our mood isn't helped by our arrival 15 minutes too late to get in to see the Fechin House. We didn't know it was open only between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Casey describes this restored adobe home of Russian artist Nicolai Fechin as: "the rarest and most beautiful blend of two worlds (Russian and 20th Century New Mexican) that you are apt to find anywhere."

We are very disappointed. However, we go stoutly on to the former home of Matilda Dodge Luhan. This wealthy heiress who hosted salons for the intelligentsia in her New York home moved on a whim to New Mexico.

There she married her fourth husband, a full-blooded Taos Indian, Tony Luhan. It was he who supervised the restoration and expansion of what had been a simple three-room adobe (built in the early 1800s) and since 1991 has been both a museum and a Bed and Breakfast.

We are able to see the original three rooms including the kitchen, where you can just imagine her discussing the issues of the day with Georgia O'Keeffe, Willa Cather, Ansel Adams, Carl Jung, Alfred Stieglitz, Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, to name a few. She is credited with revitalizing the cultural life of the region. I couldn't resist buying one of her books, *Edge of Taos Desert*, subtitled *An Escape to Reality*.

Her former property abuts the Taos Pueblo, but by car we must go back through town to reach it. Our Native American guide makes very sure we know she is university-educated and also a tribute to her heritage returns in



Stunning: A view of the Rio Grande River on the "Low Road" back from Taos.

summers to guide tours. She also makes sure we know who is to blame for the plight of Native Americans today.

The tour includes both the Christian church and the burial ground. Then, encouraged to wander about on our own, we enter a small first-floor adobe where Meko Concha is selling his art. He primarily works in clay, but my eye lights on a painted horse's skull adorned with a feather he had hanging on the wall. Concha said he found the skull on the plains, bleached it and then decorated it with traditional symbols of his Northern Tiwa tribal ancestry.

It turns out that he received an Associate of Fine Arts degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts, whose museum I visited in Santa Fe, and a bachelor's degree. He had also exhibited at area galleries and museums. I bought the piece, although it has definitely received mixed reviews from family and friends. (One suggested I put it in a basement bathroom!)

Mission church
We make one last stop before heading back to Santa Fe. It's the Mission Church of St. Francis of Assisi, just outside of Taos,

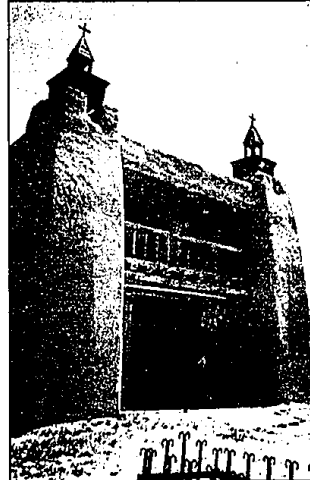
another adobe church built around 1776. This one is often painted and photographed, even from its back side whereas Casey writes "massive adobe buttresses seem to flow from the earth supporting the walls like great hands."

The low road back from Taos follows the meanderings of the storied Rio Grande River, where my husband, son and son-in-law will return on another day for white water rafting.

Once again, it's a journey I enjoy.

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Charming: San Jose de Gracias church in Las Trampas was built in 1776.

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