

Spunky 'senior' doesn't miss much in New Mexico

By Beverly A. Len
Special Writer

The group cheered as Mom declined help, then charged down the face of a 35-foot sand dune. I scrambled after her, gave her a pat on the back and wheezed, "Not bad for 60." Twenty sets of eyes widened and 20 jaws dropped in unison.

Traveling with my spunky "senior" Mom is never dull.

Boasting daytime temperatures at White Sands, N.M., convinced us that an early evening dunes tour would allow us to live to enjoy other parts of America's 47th state. During the day, temperatures often reach 115 degrees with a humidity of 4 percent. Under these conditions, a glass of ice water did not sweat.

Mom and I did.

At night, however, temperatures can reach freezing. So at 7:30 p.m., we stood at the base of a gleaming, white gypsum dune. A park ranger conducted a walk among some of the smaller dunes of this 146,565-acre National Monument. Most of the area appears barren, but a few tenacious plants, animals and insects have adapted to the harsh environment.

We watched a beetle-sized "stink bug" tiptoe across the sand. The bug is the equivalent of a skunk and nearly as potent. "Give the bug plenty of space," the ranger advised, as he led us to a tall dune to watch the sunset.

As the sun sank lower in the sky, winds whipped fine mists of sand farther up the dunes. By 8:30, the sun winked behind the San Andres mountains creating a 350-degree pink ring around White Sands' Tularosa Basin.

We put on sweaters and walked back to the car in respectful silence of nature's awesome performance.

Nature performed another spectacular feat at our next-day destination, Carlsbad Caverns. This time, we beat the heat by taking an elevator to the "Big Room," 550 feet below ground. The temperature is a constant 56 degrees.

There is also a mile-long natural entrance, from which thousands of Mexican freetail bats fly at sunset. We opted for the ride down because we faced a 1.5-mile trail within the chamber.

The 60 million-year-old Big Room chamber is 1,600 feet by 1,100 feet. The ceiling rises to 255 feet in one area. Throughout



Bigger than life: More than one-and-a-half times life size, this bronze horse gallops outside the Museum of the Horse, Ruidoso.

the Big Room, huge stalagmites grow from the floor, reaching toward equally huge stalactites hanging from the ceiling. In the dimly lit chamber, we walked slowly along the path, holding on to a railing.

On our self-guided tour, we listened to descriptive commentary through headphones. The commentary was triggered by electronic signals at points of particular interest. There were long stretches of silence, allowing us to gawk at the ghostly displays.

Suddenly, two thin hands grabbed my arm; I heard a muffled scream. I yelped and turned. Mom was holding onto my arm for dear life. Seems the volume on her headphones had been bumped up. When the commentary was triggered, it scared the daylight out of her. Now, we held on to the railing, weak from laughter.

We had had a lot of laughs since leaving Livonia two weeks earlier. Mom had packed a "goodie box" of low-calorie snacks, utensils, plates and LYSOL spray. At each motel, Mom sprayed and wiped until the room was shrouded in a LYSOL mist. We left a trail of surgically sterile rooms through seven states.



Good business: Space aliens help sell, especially in the famous UFO town of Roswell.

Everything was so antiseptic, I had to eat a spoonful of dirt just to keep my immune system going.

By the time we left Santa Fe, heading for Albuquerque, Mom needed a rest (that cleaning, you know.) She didn't want to miss having dinner at Sandia Peak, so she stayed at the motel while I toured Old Town Albuquerque.

Since 1706, Old Town's Plaza

can fare, either inside or on the patio.

If New Mexican food is not to your palate, everything from American hamburgers to French crepes can be found. I think I walked every inch of Old Town. By the time I returned to the motel, I was exhausted; Mom was ready to tackle all 10,378 feet of Sandia Peak.

We took the 2-mile tramway. From the tram, we had an

incredible view of 11,000 square miles. At the peak, we had dinner, then shivered in the mountain air to watch the sunset. The performance, with heat-lighting flashes, was out of this world.

Even further out of this world is Roswell; at least some of its visitors have been otherworldly. Although Roswell's economy is based on agriculture and oil production, it is best known for the purported 1947 crash landing of an alien spacecraft, with occupants. The International UFO Museum and Research Center on Main Street, houses tacky

displays, re-creations and "art" focusing on sightings. A tour to the crash site is also available. I had to drag Mom to the museum. The crash site wasn't even suggested.

Mom wanted to go to the new Tinnie Mercantile where, unlike Main Street stores, there are no references to space aliens. Then, she wanted to be on the road again.

Less than two hours west of Roswell is the late 1800s town of Lincoln. Here, Billy the Kid was to hang, but he killed his guards and escaped. Lincoln's sheriff, Pat Garrett, eventually tracked Billy down and shot him.

The courthouse, jail and other buildings are all open to the public. One home of special interest is that of Dr. Earl L. Woods, who reportedly graduated from the University of Michigan.

Twenty miles past Lincoln is Capitan, "Birthplace of Smokey the Bear." In 1950 the cub was found clinging to a burned tree after the Capitan Gap wildfire.

His fur was singed and his paws charred. He was nursed back to health, became the symbol of forest fire prevention and lived out his days at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

Only 30 minutes from Capitan is Ruidoso Downs, home of the famous racetrack and the Museum of the Horse. Outside of the museum seven breeds of horses are represented in a painted bronze sculpture "Free Spirits at Noisy Water."

More than one and a half times life size, the band of horses appear to be caught in mid-gallop.

We had been galloping around New Mexico for almost a month. It was time to head for home. Mom had just enough LYSOL left to make the trip.



Tenacious: Tough but beautiful plants cling to life, defying the White Sands and New Mexico's harsh environment.

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