

Along U.S. 285, the road is the trip.

Take a drive with John T. Davis from Austin to Santa Fe.

By John T. Davis

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, February 08, 2009

There are some trips where the road is the vacation. Where a cleansing infusion of empty skies and high-lonesome country is its own tonic. As the visual artist and songwriter Terry Allen once observed, no one with an open road and a good song on the radio should ever need a psychiatrist.

Driving the back road from Austin to Santa Fe is about a 12-hour, 750-mile endeavor. Call it an acquired taste. Sometimes, when it comes right down to it, you just feel like driving.

Luckily, the latter half of the trip transpires on one of those highways that seems to have it all: scenery, a reasonable degree of solitude, more than a dollop of romantic history and just the right amount of roadside attractions. I'm talking about U.S. 285, which stretches from the tiny desert crossroads of Sanderson, near the Mexico border, north to the Rocky Mountains and its terminus in downtown Denver.

New Mexico-bound, you pick up U.S. 285 in Fort Stockton, on the northern edge of the Big Bend country. Gas, fast food and expedient shelter from the West Texas elements are the plainspoken cornerstones of the former cavalry post's appeal. Better to pick up 285 off Interstate 10 and keep rolling, past an improbable golf course and out of town.

As the highway (two lanes at this point) lances to the northwest, the last vestiges of the Chihuahuan desert fade away and one finds oneself skirting the edge of the vast oil fields of the Permian Basin, the source of so much Texas wealth and Lone Star myth. The oil patch was riding high, wide and handsome not long ago on the back of almost-\$150-a-barrel oil. But even with the collapse of the oil market, pump jacks, derricks and oilfield service depots are in ample supply. It's hard country, studded with creosote bush and catclaw acacia.

Except for the town of Pecos (home of the world's first rodeo, it's said, in 1883), the road makes a lonesome run to the state line, at a nondescript crossing south of the New Mexico hamlet of Loving.

On a clear day, as one approaches the Texas border, one can off to the west glimpse the craggy profile of Guadalupe Peak, the highest mountain in Texas, and El Capitan, the signature features of Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Formerly limestone reefs at the bottom of a long-vanished ocean, they now tower above the desert.

Nothing about the town of Loving is significant except its name. Oliver Loving and his friend and fellow cattleman Charles Goodnight blazed the Goodnight-Loving Trail, one of the most

famous cattle trails in the history of the West, in 1866-67. For a good chunk of its New Mexico run, U.S. 285 parallels the path of the trail along the drainage of the Pecos River.

Contending with both marauding Indians and the unforgiving landscape, the pair eventually extended the trail north to Cheyenne, Wyo. In 1867, Loving was wounded in an Indian attack and died in Fort Sumner, N.M., though not without extracting a promise from Goodnight to return his body to Texas for burial. Together, the two men formed the rough historical template for the characters of Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call in Larry McMurtry's "Lonesome Dove."

The former seabed that forms the Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Caverns begins to pucker into low hills as one approaches the city of Carlsbad (Carlsbad Caverns National Park itself lies about 30 miles south and west of the town). The high school team is called the Cavemen, and the town boasts one of my favorite New Mexico guilty pleasures — the green chile cheeseburgers at Blake's Lotaburger, a statewide chain whose southernmost outlet lies alongside the highway.

North of Carlsbad, en route to Roswell, the countryside begins to flatten and open up and, outside the honky-tonk oil town of Artesia, the snow-tipped peaks of Capitan Peak and the Capitan Mountains (gateway to the ski town of Ruidoso) appear tantalizingly close on the western horizon.

"Roswell," of course, has become pop culture shorthand for UFO beam-me-up/conspiracy/"X-Files" weirdness, thanks to a 1947 "incident" involving a crashed flying saucer north of town. Adopting an if-you-can't-beat-'em philosophy, the city has embraced its inner Martian, even to the point of painting slanting black ET-style "eyes" on the glass streetlight globes along the main drag. There is a five-day UFO Festival each summer, and the downtown International UFO Museum and Research Center provides detailed exhibits surrounding the crash and other UFO phenomena, as well as a great gift shop.

The next 140 miles are my favorite part of the journey, especially around dawn or dusk. The land has been rising steadily, and north of Roswell, one finds oneself adrift on the vast plains of the Llano Estacado amid classic basin-and-range topography. These are the same treeless, unmarked expanses that the Spanish conquistador Coronado crossed in search of the Seven Cities of Gold, and even today, there is a breathtaking sense of space and timeless isolation about the landscape. Red-tailed hawks perch on telephone poles and antelope graze on the prairie. The breeze, coming off the unseen mountains to the north, is tart and dry. The light lays golden across the naked contours of the land and the sky is as hard and blue as porcelain.

The intersection with Interstate 40, east of Albuquerque, arrives all too soon, and along with it Clines Corners, the ancestral "tourist trap" that dates back to when I-40 was a two-lane strip called Route 66. Besides providing a tank of gas, Clines Corners can fulfill whatever kitschy souvenir shopping itch the UFO Museum in Roswell might somehow have failed to satisfy.

The mountains are evident now — the Manzanos to the west, the frozen wave of stone that is the Sandia Mountains above Albuquerque — and ahead, across the sweeping Galisteo Basin, loom the Sangre de Cristos, the southernmost arm of the Rockies that cradle Santa Fe itself.

Topping a plateau, the lights of Santa Fe come into view. There's time enough for a drink on the Plaza, watching the last of the sunset and shaking off the miles. But the memory of the road still resonates.

Davis is an Austin freelance writer.

If you go ...

West of the Pecos Museum: 432-445-5076, www.westofthepecosmuseum.com.

Guadalupe Mountains National Park: 915-828-3251, www.nps.gov/gumo.

Carlsbad Caverns: 575-785-2232, www.nps.gov/cave.

International UFO Museum and Research Center: 800-822-3545, www.roswellufomuseum.com.

Suggested reading: Larry McMurtry's 'Lonesome Dove,' Paul Horgan's 'The Centuries of Santa Fe,' John McPhee's 'Basin and Range'

Suggested listening: Terry Allen's 'Lubbock (on Everything)'; Tom Russell's 'Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs'; and Ian Tyson's 'Eighteen Inches of Rain'