

The New West
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Column

Getting Your Just Deserts In the Ojito
By Ted Alvarez

Visitors to the proposed Ojito Wilderness Area in New Mexico will find no comfort in arched gateways, trail signs, or wooden park map kiosks huddled across from restroom facilities. In fact, in these rugged desert badlands where the best directions consist of "once your odometer hits 11 miles, look for the faded two-track just past the second cattle guard," you'll be lucky to find a trail at all.

But fear not, intrepid hikers: Ojito will treat those who persist to **a banquet of arid solitude**. This pocket wilderness just an hour northwest of Albuquerque has remained unchanged for hundreds if not thousands of years, and recent legislation by the U.S. Senate puts it on the fast track to stay that way. New Mexico Sens. Pete Domenici (R) and Jeff Bingaman (D) shepherded the bill through the Senate, and a similar version sponsored by Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M., and Rep. Heather Wilson, R-N.M. is expected to pass in the fall. Presuming no sudden oil gushers turn up, all we need is the president's J. Hancock, and presto! 11,000 acres of this Bureau of Land Management tract will be designated as national wilderness area—the first in New Mexico in over 15 years.

It seemed only right that my first The West Less Traveled expedition should concern Ojito; it's freshness as a wilderness area is practically unimpeachable, and the last thing I need is to get cyber-egged for singing the praises of a tired locale my first time out. I am by no means the first to visit Ojito, but even a local fruit (and puppy!) vendor in nearby Bernalillo had no idea what I was talking about when I asked him if he knew anything about it. About the only usable resource on the area comes from Ojito.org, a website maintained by Martin Heinrich, an Albuquerque city councilor and longtime booster of Ojito. He's been visiting for over a decade, and it shows: his detailed trail maps rely on local landmarks (like mesas and the aforementioned cattle guards), but I never missed a trailhead, despite my original doubts and occasional bungling of the odometer. Luckily, I brought a cheap research assistant (read: sister) with legendary navigational skills.

I Do, You Do...Hoodoo?

The entrance to Ojito has one prominent feature: it essentially has no entrance. No signs point to Ojito; though you will see grand, red-stained mesas rising on the left, you'll never know which dirt road to turn on unless you've somehow obtained the inside dope. This set the tenor for the rest of my day at Ojito: I felt like I had divined the site of a secret valley whose location had long ago died with the ancients. As we drove down the gravel ribbon of Cabezon Road, a crude sign at a fork in the path proclaimed our entrance into "public lands," but there were no other signs besides the occasional postcard-sized BLM marker.

For our first hike, we chose Heinrich's "Hoodoo Pines" route, which was the deepest trail in and promised long desert vistas among the hoodoos...whatever those were. We found the faded, overgrown two-track, strapped on our Nalgene's, and followed it through a gap in a wire fence. Except for a few long-fossilized piles of horse dung, the trail lacked any traces of footprints or human presence. We were **thrillingly, utterly alone** amidst the scrub and rising yellow cliffs of the nearest mesa.

After a mile or so, the path crossed another trampled wire fence and faded into the ether. In the distance, we spied strange phallic shapes among a grove of stubby pines. Our superior powers of observation indicated that they were inanimate and therefore posed no immediate threat, so we followed the sandy path of an arroyo in their direction.

As we came closer, the shapes of the hoodoos became more distinct: these singular columns of compressed and eroded sandstone twisted upward and often had a flat chunk of rock as a crown. They looked like soft ice cream cones with a graham cracker perched on top. (Hoodoos form when the soft insides of plateaus erode into pillars; the harder stone on top often degrades more slowly, creating a caprock. Those familiar with Santa Fe's Camel Rock will recognize the head and neck as a hoodoo). We were soon surrounded by several hoodoos, some as tall as twenty feet; in their vaguely humanoid shape, they stood like sentinels overlooking the rest of Ojito. This momentary flash of awe didn't keep us from trying (and mostly failing) to scramble to the top of the bigger hoodoos for a view.

Voices From the Past

As the sun approached noonday heat on our trek back, some of Ojito's wildlife came out to play. Hawks flew overhead, and countless jackrabbits zipped in and out of their burrows. Ring-necked lizards started to dart out from the edges of the rock piles, as if to taunt us with their endurance. A big nine-incher sat still on a boulder long enough for my hand to come within grasping range; then, with a spin of its beady eye it effortlessly jumped three feet straight above to the rock cliff and looked down at me with reptilian contempt. (Lizards are apparently the desert's showoffs).

Our next hike would lead us across a small mesa to what's known as the Puñi Views (Puñi is the Zia Pueblo word for "Land to the West"). Though the vegetation on top of the mesa was greener and the breezes were more frequent, the sun bore down on us hard, and my assistant called into question the value of pursuing yet another desert view under arduous circumstances. But I'd read that researchers had discovered a 110-foot *Seismosaurus* --one of the largest fossil specimens ever found--somewhere in the vicinity of this trail, and so I pleaded with her inner child to trudge on. As the ridge descended and promises of a stellar view faded, I turned my sight to the ground, searching for fossils. Every so often, the sand would break open, revealing odd, broken spines of bedrock as thick as tree trunks. Though we scanned for fossils, we couldn't find any.

At the end of the trail, again the path petered out, this time into a piney maze. The sand was surprisingly white and beach-thick, and though our feet sunk, I decided to at least go

look over the cliff for the "view." I nearly stepped on one of the best-kept secrets of Ojito: on chocolate patches of rock near the cliff faces, voices from the past rose up in white etchings. Heinrich speculated that some of the petroglyphs might be thousands of years old, but they looked as if they'd been cut yesterday. Renderings of a hand, a hunter, the sun and moon, and the precocious lizards I'd seen earlier were instantly recognizable; the artist (or artists) made them in clumps scattered along the semicircle of the ridge. I'd seen petroglyphs before, in museums and in controlled situations, but it's another matter entirely to discover them yourself in the wild. We scampered around trying to find them all, and as we did, we felt the boundaries of time erase, allowing prehistory to flow seamlessly with the present.

Badland-Bound

The petroglyphs were an understandably hard act to follow, but Ojito still had a dazzler or two in store for us. When we first entered Ojito earlier, we saw some multicolored badlands peeking out from dusty foothills, but we resolved to go deeper first. On our way out, we decided to revisit this area, once again using one of Heinrich's trail maps. We already saw small patches of multicolored clay bubbling up through the sand in other sections of the park, but this was a mere taste of what we'd find in the designated badlands section of Ojito. As we rounded another trail, my research assistant started grumbling again. When not navigating the wastes of the American Rockies and Southwest with her dashing reporter/brother/employer, she is an opera singer, and as such she has a bit of le diva in her. To her credit, she keeps it in check, but when the days get long and the water gets warm, she gets surly. "Is this really going to match up to what we just saw? I mean, really-- thousand-year-old petroglyphs or colored dirt? This better be worth it. And The oranges you brought are hard."

As we turned the corner, I think I actually heard the air get sucked out of her lungs.

The badlands folded out in front of us, brighter than we could ever have imagined: Chalky whites faded into darker blues and teal, which then twisted into shades of rust and coral. The badlands curled into tight little crevasses, eventually swallowing all the vegetation until we were surrounded by tie-dyed earth. Upon closer examination, the landscape wasn't even technically solid: everything was composed of little polyps of clay clumped together, like earthen popcorn sculpted into hills and canyon walls. They even sounded like popcorn, crunching underfoot as we tunneled further in.

The walls began closing in, and we began a hard climb just as the rain clouds rolled over us. We decided to err on the side of caution, and after our diva sang a brief aria at the edge of a badland precipice and I barked an off-key whoop of victory, we trundled back to the car. On our way out, two miles from the entrance, we finally passed a truck--a maintenance worker out to check the natural gas station beyond Ojito. Total number of people we saw in Ojito:1. Total number of people we saw enjoying the park: 0.

Ojito: The Movie?

The media coverage of Ojito will likely ramp up the visitor count, but there's still plenty of room to get lost. "I've been hiking in the area extensively over the last seven or eight years, and it's not uncommon for me to not see anyone," says Heinrich. "Recently I've seen a few on the weekends." Heinrich says that the finalization of the Ojito bill has a dual purpose: to protect the land and unite the two halves of the Zia Pueblo Nation. The Pueblo of Zia, along with the Pueblo of Santa Ana will be heavily involved in the stewardship over the land. "They will help manage some of the incredible fossil and cultural resources within Ojito, while also maintaining the land for primitive recreation--no motorized vehicles or anything." But you might see Ojito on the silver screen someday. "The Pueblo are very good at [safely] utilizing land for movie sets," he says.

Though Ojito's visibility is on the rise, it will hopefully retain much of its remoteness and stark beauty. Even with its proximity to major cities, it will probably attract only those rare personalities who voluntarily choose to wander off into a trackless desert devoid of paths or water, in search of vague geological formations and hidden artifacts. For these lucky few, sand-filled shoes and sunburns on the back of their calves are signs of a day well spent.

Who's in?