

## Sharing ancient history

Pueblo Bonito, an ancient, sprawling Anasazi city in the heart of northwestern New Mexico's Chaco Canyon, evokes images of a once-bustling Indian metropolis that's become a desolate ghost town.

But Brooklyn Lewis, an exuberant, 17-year-old Navajo tour guide, helps capture a sense of life and beauty in the ruins.

"There are places where pueblo people still live like this," says Lewis, kneeling beside a flat rock on the floor of one of the 800 rooms that make up the ruins. "They used this rock to grind corn kernels into cornmeal, and that's something we still do at home."

Lewis is a student at Cuba High School's Travel Academy, a vocational course that prepares students for tourism careers. The academy is marketing Native American tourism attractions in northwestern New Mexico with help from NMSU's Rural Economic Development Through Tourism (REDTT) project.

Lewis and two other students recently guided an Arizona couple through Pueblo Bonito as part of a tour the academy is marketing. The couple, Katherine and Howard Rieder, say the students' personal knowledge was a central reason they signed up.

"They gave us a unique perspective on the ruins, and they shared so much of their own background," Katherine Rieder says. "That personal touch was wonderful."

That personal touch makes the academy unique. Visitors learn firsthand about Indian customs and traditions. "I'm glad to be a tour guide," Lewis says. "It's Navajo land they're visiting, so I can share what I know with people."

Like Lewis, most academy students are Native American, since



Teenage travel guides: Brooklyn Lewis, right, and two other students from Cuba High School's Travel Academy guide visitors Katherine and Howard Rieder through ruins in Chaco Canyon's Pueblo Bonito. The travel academy is marketing Native American attractions in northwestern New Mexico with help from REDTT.

about 70 percent of Cuba High's student body is Navajo, says Rudy Valenzuela, former travel academy director and school-to-work coordinator.

Travel academy tours, which range from two to five days at a cost of \$120 to \$736, include visits to Native American cultural sites, plus an overnight stay at a hogan, the traditional Navajo home. The hogan overnight includes storytelling and arts and crafts by the host family, plus a traditional Navajo meal.

"It's a rare opportunity for tourists to stay at a hogan," Valenzuela says. "It's also a great opportunity for the host families to earn some extra income."

REDTT granted funds to print academy brochures and helped arrange \$4,000 of in-kind donations from Ruidoso-based New Mexico Connection and Las

Cruces-based Southern New Mexico Online to provide free online marketing for the academy. The program also provided expense-paid trips for travel academy students to attend REDTT conferences in 2002 and 2003.

The students hope their experiences will translate into career opportunities.

"I'm learning all about how the hospitality industry works," says Pasqualita Toledo, a 17-year-old Navajo from Torreon who wants to be a flight attendant.

Toledo assisted Lewis as a guide for the Rieder's Pueblo Bonito tour. To prepare, both girls shadowed professional Chaco Canyon tour guides for three days.

"This is real-world experience," Toledo says. "Maybe it will help me get a job after high school."

*Kevin Robinson-Avila*

# Home on the range

As the frigid cold of a long winter continues to grip the Northeast, a long line of RV behemoths will begin rolling toward New Mexico to take advantage of the state's legendary warmth and pristine beauty.

Thousands of motor homes from across the nation will be here to participate in the Family Motor Coach Association's 71st International Convention March 16-18 at the New Mexico State Fairgrounds in Albuquerque.

"New Mexico ranks as a favorite destination among RVers," says Ken Sommer, media relations director for the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association. "The state is a perfect match for those who enjoy the wide range of terrains that the state has to offer. Of course, it's also a warm weather destination for the northern snowbirds."

The upcoming convention is a huge shot in the arm for Albuquerque's tourist economy,

adds Leary O'Gorman, tourism vice president for Albuquerque's Convention and Visitors' Bureau. The organization expects more than 3,000 motor homes and about 10,000 people at the meeting. Estimates put the group's direct spending somewhere near \$7.3 million, he says.

In addition, Las Cruces and NMSU will likely receive many of the convention visitors either before or after the Albuquerque fete, says Diana Kovar, coordinator of NMSU's conference services. New Mexico has hosted the prestigious recreational vehicle meeting twice before, both on the NMSU campus in both 1995 and 1998.

Held during spring break, the campus was packed with thousands of motor coaches, Kovar says. "It took a lot of coordination, but everybody who came to Las Cruces loved it," she says.

When the big recreational vehicles start rolling down Albuquerque's interstates and pulling into their parking spots

near Balloon Fiesta Park, they will become part of a finely orchestrated event, packed with activities. With exhibits operating from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. each of the three days, it won't be difficult for visitors to learn everything they ever wanted to know about RVs.

Motor coach mavens can spend their days browsing through 700 new display vehicles, visiting 450 vendor booths or attending a multitude of seminars about coach upkeep.

Robbin Gould, editor of *Family Motor Coaching* magazine, says the RV business is booming for a variety of reasons, including reluctance to fly and getting back to family basics. "Even with high gas prices, it's still economical for people to travel this way," she says.

A 2001 study by Richard Curtin, a research scientist at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, reveals that U.S. ownership of RVs has reached record levels, with new RVers ages 35 to 54 driving the gains. Nearly one in 12 U.S. vehicle-owning households has an RV. That's about 7 million households, he says.

The industry's brand-new RVs are among the biggest draws at the conventions. Manufacturers from across the country are expected to bring a number of new models to the rally. The vehicles range in price from \$60,000 for a big van conversion to \$1 million for a Canadian-made Prevost bus converted into a movable apartment.

Among the conveniences are washer-dryers and an unbelievable mix of electronic doohickies, including advanced sound systems, flat panel television screens and satellite-based radio and television coverage.

*Norman Martin*



Dandy digs: RVers will inspect the latest models during a motor coach convention in Albuquerque next March. Farrel Hendry, left, and Frances Martin relax in a new motor home at Sunland RV in Las Cruces.

# Park it!

The typical visitor to one of New Mexico's 31 state parks is more likely to peer through binoculars at the waterfowl than to ride the waves waterskiing.

The first-ever demographic study of state park visitors revealed that the most popular activity is viewing wildlife, even at Elephant Butte Lake State Park where boating was thought to be the biggest draw. NMSU Agricultural Experiment Station researchers surveyed nearly 6,000 state park visitors during summer 2001.

"It is very interesting to find out who your customers really are and what activities they like," says Paula Roybal, administrative deputy director of the state parks.

Park officials knew they needed to get a better handle on their customers for marketing and planning purposes, when visitors complained about the parks doing away with an \$89 annual camping permit in 1998. A new deal offers a four-month, seasonal camping entrance pass for \$99.

With funding from the New Mexico Legislature, agricultural economist Frank Ward and research specialist Leeann DeMouche developed the survey to identify visitor characteristics, needs and preferences.

"The Legislature wanted to know what visitors wanted and how satisfied they were," says DeMouche, who visited 23 of the state parks in just four days for the project.

Results showed that the typical visitor is 25 to 40 years old, has an above-average income, comes on the weekends from the Albuquerque area and brings along fishing equipment, a tent, binoculars and a boat. Besides checking out the wildlife, visitors most commonly hike, picnic, relax and fish.



Packing them in: New Mexico's state parks attracted more than 4 million visitors during fiscal year 2001. For each vehicle that arrives at Elephant Butte Lake State Park, an average of \$41.98 is spent in the park. An additional \$113.32 is spent on fuel, groceries, dining out, lodging, equipment rental and fees and other expenses at businesses located outside the park.

These results weren't quite what Roybal was expecting. She thought her primary customers were senior citizen "snowbirds" from out of state. "This could change how we market our parks," she says.

In general, visitors were happy with their park experiences. "But they weren't satisfied with three parks—Conchas Lake, Elephant Butte Lake and Ute Lake, which are very congested," Ward says.

At Elephant Butte, for example, visitors want additional staff for crowd control, especially on holidays. They also say the park needs improved boating management, along with more attention to the dump station, vehicle camp access, developed and primitive campgrounds, boat parking area, restrooms and campground parking.

Once the researchers had a profile of the state parks' cus-

tomers, they built a visitor predictor model that took into account such factors as elevation, lake water level and park amenities. The model showed that park visitation increases with increased water surface area and more park employees, volunteers and electrical hookups. Having visitor centers, picnic areas and showers also increases use.

"Managers can even use the model to figure out if it is worth it to add more volunteers at a certain park," DeMouche says.

This year, the researchers continue to survey park visitors. They also will develop a more powerful model that managers can use to maximize the number of people parking it across the state by comparing alternatives for adding more amenities, employees and volunteers.

*Natalie Johnson*

# Mouthwatering tourism

New Mexico's ever-expanding menu of food festivals serves up sensory delights, such as succulent mountain-grown cherries, crunchy peanut confections, sophisticated wines and 10-foot enchiladas smothered in red chile and cheese.

Food-based festivals give everyone in the community something to celebrate, says Bealquin Gomez, who whipped up enthusiasm for events from wine festivals to chile wars in nearly 30 years as an economist and marketer extraordinaire with NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service.

"Having a successful event helps put communities on the map and bring in tourists," Gomez says. "You're always looking for a unique theme, and food is so important as part of our identity in New Mexico."

Festivals pay dividends long after visitors have departed with full stomachs and lighter wallets, he adds. "The Hatch Chile Festival may attract a few thousand people on Labor Day weekend, but it's creating a chile label people are looking for the whole year."

Another option for growers is bringing visitors into their you-pick chile fields or cherry orchards during festivals. "With chile, for example, half the cost of growing the crop is in harvesting it, so you're saving labor costs and getting retail prices," he says.

Wine makers toast festivals as a venue to sell their wares at retail prices without sharing profits with distributors and wholesalers.

"Some producers we worked with sold 25 to 50 percent of their wine at the five events we developed," Gomez says. "Having 50,000 people attend every year—about half of whom are

new from the year before—opens up a significant market."

Visitors who have sipped and savored festival food often are willing to seek it out on the Internet, which allows producers to sell online rather than through more expensive store-



fronts. "The long-term advantage of festivals may be in advertising as much as sales," Gomez says.

Cooking up the perfect fiesta involves a healthy amount of effort, as well as dedicated volunteers, without whom an event will be a one-year flash in the pan.

"You need a theme that sets you apart, excitement and entertainment, good food and people who are willing to do the work year in and year out," Gomez says of the ingredients for success. "But festivals are great for tourism in New Mexico."

*D'Lyn Ford*



Festival feasts: The chance to sample fresh-cut watermelon and a giant enchilada attracts visitors to Las Cruces' Whole Enchilada Fiesta in late September. Below, restaurateur Robert V. Estrada prepares one of three 250-pound tortillas for the world's largest enchilada, which contains 175 pounds of grated cheese, 50 pounds of chopped onions and 75 gallons of red chile sauce.