



BEST TENT Camping

3RD Edition

NEW MEXICO

YOUR CAR-CAMPING GUIDE TO SCENIC BEAUTY, THE SOUNDS
OF NATURE, AND AN ESCAPE FROM CIVILIZATION



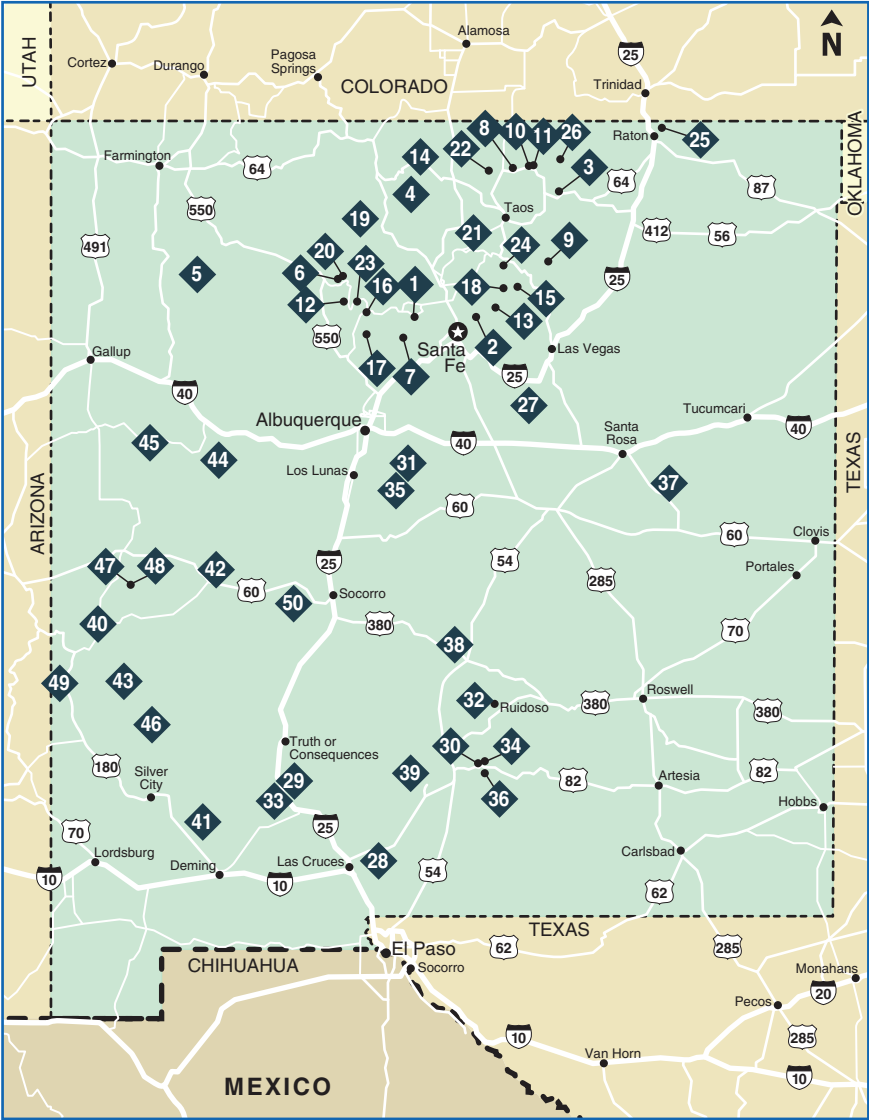
Amaris Feland Ketcham
Prior edition by Monte Parr



MENASHA RIDGE PRESS

Your Guide to the Outdoors Since 1982

New Mexico Campground Locator Map



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A tree struggling to survive in Water Canyon takes on a sculptural appearance (*see page 167*).

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

Welcome to *Best Tent Camping: New Mexico*. Whether you're new to camping or you've been sleeping in your portable shelter for decades of outdoor adventures, please review the following information. It explains how this book is organized and how you can make the best use of it.

Some text on the following pages applies to all books in the Best Tent Camping series. Where this isn't the case, such as descriptions of weather and wildlife, the author has provided information specific to the area covered in this particular book.

THE RATINGS AND RATINGS CATEGORIES

The author personally experienced dozens of campgrounds and campsites to select the top 50 locations in New Mexico. Within that universe of 50 sites, the author then ranked each one in the six categories described below. A tough grader, the author awarded few five-star ratings, but each campground in this guidebook is superlative in its own way—for example, a site that rates only one star in a particular category may merit five stars in another category. In every case, the star-rating system is a handy tool to help you pinpoint the campground that will fit your personal requirements.

- ★★★★★ The site is **ideal** in that category.
- ★★★★ The site is **exemplary** in that category.
- ★★★ The site is **very good** in that category.
- ★★ The site is **above average** in that category.
- ★ The site is **acceptable** in that category.

BEAUTY

Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, but panoramic views or proximity to a lake or river earn especially high marks. A campground that blends in well with the environment scores well, as do areas with remarkable wildlife or geology. Well-kept vegetation and nicely laid-out sites also up the ratings.

PRIVACY

The number of sites in a campground, the amount of screening between them, and physical distance from one another are decisive factors for the privacy ratings. Other considerations include the presence of nearby trails or day-use areas, and proximity to a town or city that would invite regular day-use traffic and perhaps compromise privacy.

NORTHERN NEW MEXICO



Rio Grande cutthroat trout and brown trout swim the icy waters of the Rio Santa Barbara (see page 85).

Bandelier National Monument:

JUNIPER FAMILY CAMPGROUND

Beauty ★★★ Privacy ★★ Spaciousness ★★ Quiet ★★★ Security ★★★★★ Cleanliness ★★★★★

Climb a ladder into a small cave dwelling where you can peer out over the Tyuonyi ruins.

Between 1150 and 1600 C.E., Ancestral Pueblo people dug cliff dwellings into the soft volcanic tuff, carved kivas into the earth, and built freestanding structures in Frijoles Canyon, part of the Bandelier National Monument. Archaeologists have uncovered campsites of hunter-gatherers dating back to 1750 B.C.E., but the canyon was abandoned by the 1500s, before Spanish conquistadores arrived.

The monument boasts some 3,000 archaeological sites, but the impressive Long House and Alcove House are the main attractions for most visitors. On this popular trail, ancient footpaths lead you up stone stairways and through narrow slots along the 800-foot stretch of multistoried stone homes and small cave dwellings. Ladders take you into these hand-carved homes in the cliff, where you can peer out over the Tyuonyi ruins. At the Alcove House, the daring can climb four wooden ladders towering 140 feet above the canyon's floor to see a reconstructed kiva.

The park, however, covers 33,750 acres, so there's much more to explore than one day would allow. Luckily, Juniper Family Campground provides a comfortable place to rest between explorations. This campground doesn't often fill up, so all sites (excluding group

From a nearby overlook, you can see the ruins of Tyuonyi Pueblo on the valley floor of Frijoles Canyon.



KEY INFORMATION

LOCATION: 15 Entrance Rd.,
Los Alamos, NM 87544

CONTACT: Bandelier National Monument,
505-672-3861, ext. 517, [nps.gov/band/plan
yourvisit/juniper-family-campground.htm](https://nps.gov/band/plan-yourvisit/juniper-family-campground.htm)

OPEN: Year-round

SITES: 57, including 2 group sites

EACH SITE HAS: Picnic table, campfire ring
with grill, tent area

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Sites 38 and 45

ASSIGNMENT: First-come, first-served;
only the 2 group sites (\$35/night) can be
reserved (877-444-6777, [recreation.gov
/camping/campgrounds/233395](https://recreation.gov/camping/campgrounds/233395)).

REGISTRATION: On-site, payable by credit
card at digital kiosk

AMENITIES: A central restroom with running
water is located at the center of each loop.

PARKING: At sites

FEE: \$12/night (\$6 with Interagency Pass).
Separate park-entrance fee is \$25/vehicle
(free with Interagency Pass).

ELEVATION: 6,660'

RESTRICTIONS

PETS: Allowed on leashes; not permitted
on trails within the park

QUIET HOURS: 10 p.m.–6 a.m.

FIRES: In fire rings only. Firewood is sold
within the campground for \$1/log.

ALCOHOL: Permitted

OTHER: Limit of 2 tents, 2 vehicles, and
10 people/site. Not all campground loops
may be open at any given time. Generators
may run 8 a.m.–8 p.m. Dump station is at
the entrance.

sites) are first come, first served; the visitor center did warn that the campground fills on holidays, though. Claim an empty site and then pay by credit card at the entry kiosk. If you need to pay with cash, you must go to the visitor center before it closes.

Along Abert's Squirrel Loop are two small group sites that accommodate between 10 and 20 people; these are the only two reservation sites in the campground. A separate group campground 6 miles west, Ponderosa, has two sites that can accommodate a maximum of 50 people. A couple of sites have also been combined: sites 19–20 and 21–23 share tent areas, so I would avoid them unless you're camping with a dear friend.

Whereas Coyote Loop seems to accommodate mostly RVs, Black Bear Loop has a good number of dedicated tent sites. Site 25 is ideal—spacious, with a ponderosa pine shading the picnic table. Junipers shade site 33 well; and though site 17 looks small, it has some neat little tent spaces tucked into junipers. Packrat Lane divides Black Bear Loop and provides walk-in access to sites 34–38. These have parking lots on the north and south ends of the loop.

Each loop has flush toilets and sinks with running water to wash your hands. Wash dishes at your campsite, and use the campers' dump sink to dispose of the water.

Bears are active in the area; use the provided bear boxes and keep a clean campsite. In addition to bears, there may be mice, squirrels, pikas, ringtail cats, and raccoons scavenging the campground for food.

Remember that Bandelier National Monument is part of Ancestral Pueblo lands, and leave all ruins and artifacts as you find them. As the Affiliated Pueblo Committee says, "Spiritually, our ancestors still live here at Bandelier. You see reminders of their presence here—their homes, their kivas, their petroglyphs. As you walk in their footsteps, value the earth beneath you and show everything the same respect we do when we revisit this sacred place."

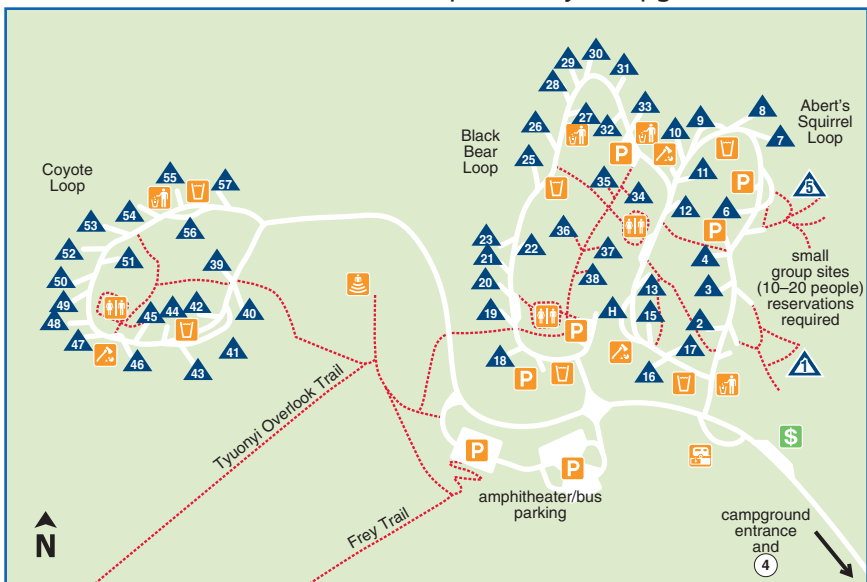
Access to Bandelier National Monument and the Frijoles Canyon Visitor Center is by shuttle bus only: May 17–October 17, daily, 9 a.m.–3 p.m. The shuttle picks up passengers

at the parking lot in the Juniper Family Campground, or you can hike down. Two trails leave from the campground: the Frey Trail descends to the visitor center, and the Main Loop Trail is a dusty, steep trail with lots of switchbacks, so you may prefer taking it down and using the shuttle on the way back, or vice versa. The Tyuonyi Overlook Trail leaves the amphitheater parking area for a 0.75-mile hike to an overlook of Frijoles Canyon and Tyuonyi Pueblo. Inside the park, there are 70 miles of hiking trails. The Upper Frijoles Falls Trail is worth a visit.

If you'd like to skip the campground, you can backcountry-camp in the park. You'll need to stop by the visitor center first to obtain a free permit; you can get one up to 48 hours in advance. Unfortunately, the Las Conchas Fire of 2011 burned many of the ponderosa pines and trees, meaning that subsequent monsoons flooded the canyons and washed out many trails. Check with the park staff for up-to-date information and review the Trail Condition map before venturing out. You can download several park backcountry maps on the park's website, nps.gov/band. During monsoon season (July 1–September 15), backcountry camping is closed in Frijoles, Alamo, and Capulin Canyons—the flood risk is simply too great.

The nearest town is White Rock, which has gas and other necessities. For a more detailed shopping list, you'll likely have to visit Los Alamos.

Bandelier National Monument: Juniper Family Campground



GETTING THERE

From the intersection of Rover Boulevard and NM 4 in White Rock, head west on NM 4 for about 8.5 miles. The park entrance is on your left. *Note:* The park advises that GPS may not be accurate in this area.

GPS COORDINATES: N35° 47.764' W106° 16.504'

SOUTHEASTERN NEW MEXICO



Yucca is one of the few plants you'll see growing in White Sands National Park (see page 133).

Aguirre Spring Recreation Area Campground

Beauty ★★★★★ Privacy ★★★ Spaciousness ★★★★★ Quiet ★★★ Security ★★★★★ Cleanliness ★★★★★

Rising above the Chihuahuan desert, the rocky spires of the Organ Mountains form a stunning backdrop to the campground at Aguirre Spring Recreation Area.

The creviced, craggy peaks resembled an organ's pipes, according to the European explorers who named the Organ Mountains in 1682. According to the 2014 Presidential Proclamation that established this wilderness as a National Monument, the peaks "conceal numerous ancient dwellings, including La Cueva, and other caves where smoke-blackened ceilings evidence long-extinguished campfires." Rising above the Chihuahuan desert, these rocky spires of the Organ Mountains form a stunning backdrop to the campground at Aguirre Spring Recreation Area. This beautiful campground has several great day trips and hikes nearby.

Summer would be a very hot time to camp here—with highs near 100°F and lows in the 60s—but each site has a shaded picnic table, and most have some combination of alligator juniper and Emory oak for additional shade. Mountain mahogany, sotol, and boulders add privacy to most of the sites, but some (13–20) are more open if you're wanting to keep an eye on the kids. Several sites are large enough for more than one tent, and the ground is sandy and comfortable.

The campground has the bizarre sound phenomenon where it gets so quiet you can hear a conversation several campsites away and make out nearly every word. The sun sets early behind the sawtooth Needles of the Organ Mountains, and it cools off right away. You can still enjoy the sunset by watching the vibrant stripes appear on the eastern plains of the

Level sites in the foothills see the sun set early behind the Organ Mountains.



KEY INFORMATION

LOCATION: Aguirre Spring Road

CONTACT: Bureau of Land Management,
Las Cruces District Office; 575-525-4300,
blm.gov/visit/aguirre-spring-campground

OPEN: Year-round

SITES: 55 single sites plus 2 group sites

EACH SITE HAS: Picnic table with shelter,
fire ring; most have pedestal grills as well

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: ADA restrooms,
group picnic areas; site 45 has an accessible
picnic table

ASSIGNMENT: First-come, first-served;
group sites reservable

REGISTRATION: Self-register on-site or
call 575-525-4300 for group sites

AMENITIES: Vault toilets, no water

PARKING: By sites; some have a
50' walk to site

FEE: \$7/night (\$3.50 with Interagency Pass)

ELEVATION: 5,685'

RESTRICTIONS

PETS: Permitted on leash

QUIET HOURS: 10 p.m.–6 a.m.

FIRES: In fire rings only

ALCOHOL: Permitted at sites

OTHER: No fireworks; no cutting or gathering
wood. Drones prohibited near the fence
line. The gate is locked at night, and only
campers are permitted in the campground
after 10 p.m. The gate remains open daily
April–September, 7 a.m.–8 p.m.; October–
March, 8 a.m.–6 p.m.

missile ranges. In the morning, the sun rises behind a hill, lighting the camp late, which is nice for late sleepers.

The first, main loop had the most campers in it when I visited, but with 55 campsites, it still felt like I had the campground to myself. Most sites don't have large enough or level enough space for RVs, and until recently the narrow, winding entrance road had a rough reputation, so there was only one RV here when I camped—and they were parked in the day-use area for the Pine Tree Trail between the two loops. The east loop has several nice sites, many of which are terraced with the picnic table above the campsite. Each loop has multiple vault toilets.

On pleasant spring and fall weekends, you may expect more traffic as Las Cruces residents picnic at sites in the main loop (the day-use fee is \$5), but they'll clear out by nightfall. The spring has the added bonus of blooming cacti, but strong winds might whip your tent all day.

Aguirre Spring's camp host stays just outside the gate. Each night, the host locks the gate, primarily to keep people from having car accidents on the dark road at night. From April until September, the gate remains open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.; from October until March, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The Organ Mountains Colorado chipmunk will likely beg you for snacks during your stay; this little chipmunk is only found in these mountains. You might also see snakes—several signs warn of rattlesnakes on the trails. Best to keep your tent zipped shut, lest any of these visitors find their way in.

The two group sites cost \$50 a day to reserve. They have several picnic tables and even a grilling area complete with a prep table at group site 2. Both are accessible as far as getting to the picnic tables; there is also accessible parking and a vault toilet by the sites.

Two trails start in the gated area of the campground. The Pine Tree Trail, a 4-mile loop, starts across from site 32. The trail climbs 1,000 feet and has magnificent views when you're stopping to catch your breath. Baylor Pass Trail picks up closer to the entrance; this 5.4-mile, one-way trail will take you to Baylor Canyon. You may opt to hike to the halfway point and

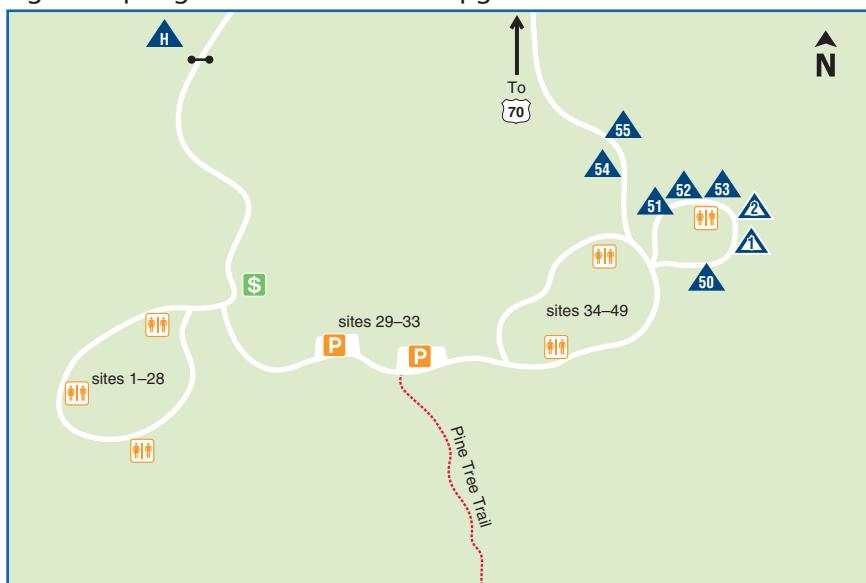
back. A sign in the campground warns that several people have died hiking or climbing in the mountains, and not to venture off of the trail. There's no water at the campground, so make sure you bring plenty.

The nearby Rough and Ready Hills is a popular climbing spot, with more than 40 routes for trad, sport, and top rope climbs. This area is shady in the afternoon and protected from western winds, making the volcanic tuff good for warm-weather climbing. Just don't leave water out for your dog—it will attract bees.

There's much to explore in the surrounding area, including fossils of ground sloths, rock art painted in unique styles not seen elsewhere, more than 200 ancient archaeology sites, the Butterfield Stagecoach Trail, historic sites from the Apache wars (including "Geronimo's Cave") and Billy the Kid's hideout, the Gadsden Purchase International Boundary, and the volcanic fields where astronauts trained for lunar expeditions in the 1960s. In a quiet canyon near Dripping Springs, you can find the ruins of a resort once visited by Pancho Villa, as well as the lawman Pat Garrett, who famously killed Billy the Kid. You can find out more about the area at the Dripping Springs Visitor Center, 10 miles east of I-25 off Exit 1. It's open all year—excluding winter holidays—from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The nearest services are in Las Cruces, 17 miles west.

Aguirre Spring Recreation Area Campground

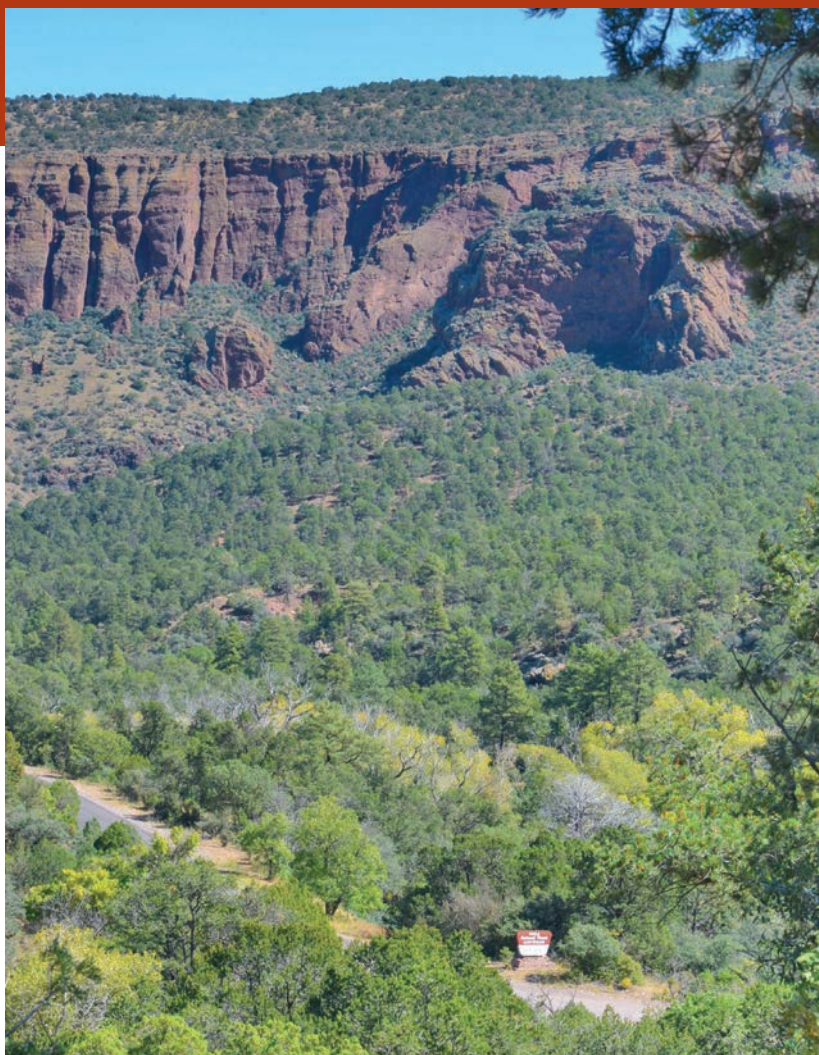


GETTING THERE

From Las Cruces, drive 17 miles east on US 70, then turn right (south) onto Aguirre Spring Road. Follow this paved road 5.5 miles to the campground, on your left.

GPS COORDINATES: N32° 22.227' W106° 33.654'

SOUTHWESTERN NEW MEXICO



The view from Water Canyon Campground lets you watch your friends arrive
(see page 167).



Apache Creek Campground

Beauty ★★★★★ Privacy ★★★ Spaciousness ★★★★★ Quiet ★★★ Security ★ Cleanliness ★★★

You may spot the threatened Chiricahua leopard frog here along the banks of the creek or leaping through the cattails at one of ponds.

Apache Creek Campground is a lovely, quiet campground surrounded by willows and ponderosa pines. The area has a rich history of ancient Puebloan residence; near here you'll find the Apache Creek Ruin, a collection of pit houses erected between 1150 and 1300 C.E., as well as many petroglyphs. More-recent history includes the Apache resistance fighters Mangas Coloradas, Victorio, Geronimo, Chato, and Cochise; down the road is the site of the Alma Massacre of 1880.

Now you'll find the sleepy town of Apache Creek, population 67. A one-lane bridge crosses the lazy creek, which pools into small, serene ponds. Ponderosa pines stand silent, barely moving in the breeze. Willows grow bright yellow in the fall, contrasting with black chunks of basalt. Along the banks of the creek, or leaping through the cattails at one of the ponds, you may even spot the threatened Chiricahua leopard frog. Listen for the sound of snoring and you may see this large, stocky, spotted frog—they can even call while underwater!

Purple asters and petite yellow flowers cover the campground. For several years, this campground was completely undeveloped, dispersed camping, and the practice was simply to pull up to your favorite ponderosa pine and pitch your tent. Now each of the 10 sites has the standard picnic table and campfire ring with a grill; a few sites also have shade structures or benches carved from felled ponderosa pines. Many are situated under choice pines and have ample shade. Some campers still make their own sites a little way from the

Near Apache Creek Campground, a small hill is home to several petroglyphs.



KEY INFORMATION

LOCATION: Just southwest of the junction of NM 12 and FS 94, Apache Creek, NM 87820

CONTACT: Gila National Forest, Reserve Ranger District, 575-533-6231, tinyurl.com/apacheccreekcampground

OPEN: Year-round

SITES: 10

EACH SITE HAS: Picnic table, fire ring; some have shade structures and benches

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Accessible toilet

ASSIGNMENT: First-come, first-served; no reservations

REGISTRATION: Self-register on-site

AMENITIES: Vault toilet; no trash service or water

PARKING: At sites

FEE: Free

ELEVATION: 6,448'

RESTRICTIONS

PETS: Permitted on leash

QUIET HOURS: 10 p.m.–6 a.m.

FIRES: In fire rings only

ALCOHOL: Allowed at sites

OTHER: 14-day stay limit; no saddle, pack, or draft animals; no fireworks

loop. If you do set up a dispersed camp, choose a spot at least 200 feet from any water. Also, remember that campfires are only permitted in the provided fire rings.

While Apache Creek Campground does have a vault toilet in the main loop, no trash service is offered, so pack out whatever you pack in. There's also no potable water available at this location, so plan to bring plenty to drink, cook, clean, and dead-out your fire with.

The whole campground is fairly level and easy to drive. Given its proximity to the highway, flat sites, and ease of access, RVers frequent this campground, especially in the fall once hunting season starts.

If you're looking for a nice stroll with the opportunity to view archaeological evidence from hundreds of years ago, you can head to the Apache Creek Interpretive Trail 16. From the campground, you can walk a quarter of a mile down Forest Service Road 94; the trailhead will be on your left. When I visited, the trail didn't look like it got much traffic, so during more lush times of year, it may be more difficult to spot. The trail is a loop a little less than a mile long, with almost 200 feet of elevation change. At the apex of the loop, you'll see several petroglyphs pecked into the basalt wall. Do not touch the petroglyphs—even tiny amounts of oil from your hands can erode the images.

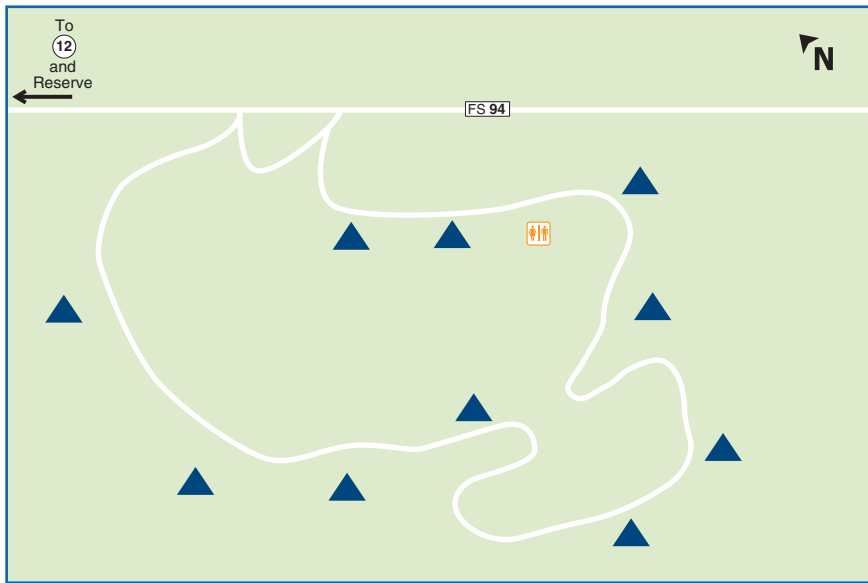
Another petroglyph trail, Walk in the Past Trail 616, offers a moderate, 3-mile round-trip hike that passes by an old Tularosa Ranger Cabin and a number of Mogollon period glyphs on the southwest-facing volcanic escarpment along the Tularosa River. To get there, drive 2 miles south on NM 12, and take a left on the road with the blue cattle guard; you should see a sign with a hiker symbol.

Another popular nearby trail is Frisco Divide Trail 762. This difficult, 7-mile-long trail follows a slot canyon that leads to Warm Springs Trail, where you can soak in one of two concrete tubs built on the springs. The trail crisscrosses the chilly San Francisco River, which adds considerable time to the hike. The tubs are not managed; soak at your best judgment. Beware of flash floods, especially during monsoon season. For a more relaxing adventure, just 32 miles north on NM 32, you can fish at Quemado Lake.

Back at the junction with NM 12, a little store offers taxidermy, among other services. Many campers report pleasant conversations with the owner about the history of the area.

If you can't find what you need there, you can head to Reserve, about 13 miles southwest. There you'll find several restaurants, a gas station, grocery store, and a medical clinic.

Apache Creek Campground



GETTING THERE

From the intersection of NM 435 and NM 12 in Reserve, drive northeast on NM 12. In about 12 miles, just past mile marker 19, turn right (south) onto FS 94. In about 200 feet, turn left to reach the campground entrance.

GPS COORDINATES: N33° 49.734' W108° 37.638'

Perfect Camping for You in **NEW MEXICO**

The **LAND OF ENCHANTMENT** provides a spectacular backdrop for some of the most scenic campgrounds in the country. But do you know which campgrounds offer the most privacy? Which are the best for first-time campers? Amaris Feland Ketcham has traversed the entire state—from the rugged beauty of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the arid and peaceful Chihuahuan Desert—and compiled the most up-to-date research to steer you to the perfect spot!



Inside You'll Find

- 50 national park, state park, national forest, and state recreation area campgrounds, organized into three distinct regions
- Selections based on location, topography, size, and overall appeal
- Detailed maps of each campground and key information such as fees, restrictions, dates of operation, and facilities
- Driving directions and GPS coordinates
- Ratings for beauty, privacy, spaciousness, safety and security, and cleanliness

Whether you seek a quiet campsite near a fish-filled stream or a family campground with all the amenities, grab *Best Tent Camping: New Mexico*. This guide is a keeper.



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