

Paseo de la Mesa Trail

The Paseo de la Mesa trail on Albuquerque's far west side is peaceful and quiet and a long way from the hubbub of the big city. But for the occasional private plane or helicopter flying overhead, you could be in a completely isolated part of New Mexico. You can park at either end of this 4.4 mile trail, but you can also make a 20 mile ride of the trip by starting and ending at one of Albuquerque's hidden jewels, the Open Space Visitor Center, just off congested Coors Blvd. There are busy streets between the visitor center and the trailhead, making it less than ideal for children, while the trail itself would be perfect for a family outing. The tour, including the trail itself, heads generally in a westward direction and also heads gradually and occasionally fairly steeply uphill, making the return trip much faster than the upward journey.

Parking available at

- Open Space Visitor Center
- Along streets between Visitor Center and intersection of Montañó Rd. and Taylor Ranch Road
- At large paved parking area at east end of trail, off 81st Street
- At small, gravel parking lot off Atrisco Vista Boulevard

0.0 miles from Open Space Visitor Center
5.5 miles east of east Paseo de la Mesa trailhead

The Open Space Visitor Center is housed in a lovely adobe-style building looking out its east windows at the Bosque. Although the address of the center is 6500 Coors Blvd. NW, it is located a few hundred

yards east of the arterial, at the end of Bosque Meadows Road, between Montañó Road and Paseo del Norte.



The visitor center, based on the home and land donated by Albuquerque developer Coda Roberson, contains a gallery displaying local art. The exhibits are usually based on what one might see in city open space, museum exhibits concerning city open space parcels – their geology, archeology and biology. The Visitor Center also includes a large garden, meeting rooms, restrooms and water fountains, and a viewing tower from which you can look out on the Bosque and the Sandias beyond. You're almost certain to see Canada geese here

all year long, with the special treat of sandhill cranes flying in to feed in the fields east of the Visitor Center in winter.

Just north of the visitor center lie the largely unexcavated Piedras Marcadas (“painted rocks” in Spanish) Pueblo ruins. Piedras Marcadas was probably the largest pueblo in the Middle Rio Grande Valley when Coronado first arrived in the valley in 1540, but it was abandoned by the 17th century. Cochiti, Sandia and Santa Ana Pueblos cite evidence that their ancestors came from Piedras Marcadas. The pueblo is being examined using sonar and other non-invasive techniques while being left almost completely unexcavated.

The Open Space Visitor Center hosts frequent talks and walks on history and natural history of the area; occasionally these concern the Piedras Marcadas ruins. Information about the Open Space Visitor Center, its art exhibits, the trails leading out into the Bosque from here, its sculpture garden, and its speaker programs is available at <http://www.cabq.gov/parksandrecreation/open-space/open-space-visitor-center>.

Open space rangers and volunteers, always helpful, staff the desk at the Visitor Center. If your trip up the mesa to the Paseo de la Mesa trail leaves you wanting more and different exposures to the area,, there are three miles of loop trails heading from the visitor center across the Corrales Riverside Drain into the Bosque and out to the Rio Grande itself. These are not paved, and probably suited only to hikes or mountain bikes.

Head out from the parking lot; you’ll soon be on Bosque Meadows Road, which leads a short distance to Coors, a major arterial (at 0.3 miles). Coors has a bike lane on both sides, making travel there moderately safe. Turn south on Coors for 0.5 miles, and then west on La Orilla Road and climb the hill to Taylor Ranch Road (2.6 miles). You meet Taylor Ranch Road at the corner of Mariposa Basin Park.

Mariposa Basin Park is a grassy space that serves, according to the Taylor Park Neighborhood Association website, trna.org, as “a place for the whole community - and home of the annual Easter egg hunt. Here's the library [a mile west]. Here are schools. Here's the community center that finally opened in October 2005.” Here also are three “prescription trails.” Prescription trails are one of Albuquerque’s answers to the epidemic of obesity sweeping the US; physicians and others can recommend trails for walking, stroller-pushing, or wheelchair rolling in every corner of the city. The three in Mariposa Basin Park range from ½ to 1 mile and are paved for all users. To find more information about the prescription trails in Mariposa Basin Park and in all parts of the city, go to <http://www.cabq.gov/parks/prescription-trails>. The park is also home to one segment of the Unser/Mariposa/Riverside Bike Trail system, which is described in another tour.



“Crossing”, by Jack Mackie

You can get to the trailhead by road, turning north on Taylor Ranch Road, then west on Montañito and north again on Unser Blvd. Construction of this part of Unser caused a great deal of controversy in the early 2000s; religious leaders from the Rio Grande pueblos were outraged at desecration of Pueblo religious sites

by commuter traffic. Whatever you may think of it, the road cut is sweetened by Seattle artist Jack Mackie’s immense and impressive stone, ceramic and tile mosaic sculpture, “Crossing,” lining both north and south sides of the cut.

However, it’s more pleasant to take a mostly bike trail route from the southwest corner of Mariposa Basin Park (get there by taking the park’s perimeter trail either clockwise, a bit shorter, or counterclockwise), which travels in a generally westerly direction up the arroyo from the park, crosses San Ildefonso Drive and moves to the opposite side of the arroyo before continuing west, and on to Tesuque Drive. Turn left on Tesuque Drive for a block, and then take Mojave Street a long block west to Atrisco Drive. From this corner, you can see the controversial part of Unser Blvd. to your left, but turn right instead on Atrisco and ride up the steep escarpment on a well-paved bike trail past the part of the Petroglyph National Monument called Boca Negra Canyon. At the top of the hill, you’ll pass some picnic tables and come out on Unser Blvd., where you turn left (south) for one-half mile until you reach a right turn at Molten Rock Road.

The area now called the Albuquerque West Mesa was and remains a cultural necessity for many of the Pueblo tribes in the area. Although remains of Pueblo villages are confined to areas closer to the Rio Grande, Pueblo tribes consider the ancient trails, shrines, and petroglyphs central to their sense of self. According to Phillip Lauriano, Sandia Pueblo tribal councilor,



“The petroglyphs are the nerve center of Pueblo culture, religion, and tradition. They are there to protect, to teach, to advise, to doctor, to cure. When anything is planned in the way of ceremonies, there are certain areas there [among the images] where you make your announcement in the form of

prayer. And that is channeled into the petroglyphs,... somewhere beyond the great divide to a reservoir of strength and power, and the spiritual is awakened.”

We have written more about the petroglyphs and what can be known of their meaning to Pueblo tribes when discussing the Unser Boulevard/Mariposa/Riverview Trail. For purposes of this tour, realize that you are riding among some 20,000 rock images drawn and etched into the volcanic stone all around you.

Turn west on Molten Rock Road before Unser Blvd. descends through the cut – though it’s called Molten Rock Road, the rock that you will see is quite solid by now. The last eruption of the fissure volcanoes in the Albuquerque field is thought to have been about 150,000 years ago.

Turn south quickly again at 81st Street. You’ll see a sign on the west side of the road for the Paseo de la Mesa bike trail. Turn in here, parking in the parking lot if you’re in a car, or continuing through the parking lot if by bike.

If you were to continue south on 81st Street, you would first encounter the Boca Negra Horseman’s Complex (<http://www.cabq.gov/openspace/BocaNegraHorsemansComplex.html>), and then the George J. Maloof Memorial Air Park for radio-controlled model airplanes (<http://www.cabq.gov/openspace/GeorgeJ.MaloofMemorialAirPark.html>). Both of these are open to the public.

5.5 miles west of Open Space Visitor Center
0.0 miles from east Paseo de la Mesa trailhead

For the first 0.6 mile of the Paseo de la Mesa, you are traveling adjacent to a fence, separating the untamed mesa to the south from a housing development to the north. Flowers and desert plants line the trail; in spring the bush penstemon (*Penstemon ambiguous*) puts on a white/pink/purple show; the orange globe mallow in summer and the yellow chamisa in fall also contribute to the beauty of the trail.



Bush penstemon in spring along trail

Albuquerque's line of largely extinct volcanos are arrayed ahead and to the south. The nearest is Butte Volcano; to the south stand first Bond, then Vulcan, Black, and JA (the last three are often called the Three Sisters), as well as 14 smaller fissure volcanoes. The volcanoes and the surrounding plains have been home to some celebrated hijinks, some enjoyable, some grisly. In 1947, an apparent volcanic eruption caused intense local interest and some consternation until it was determined that college boys were simulating a volcano's smoke by burning old tires; a similar escapade in 1950 was more quickly diagnosed. In 1990, unusually-patterned lines and crosses were discovered over a large area of the Mesa, prompting speculation that aliens were landing there and erecting complex signals to one another (it is only about 170 miles as the spaceship flies from here to Roswell, that center of "alien activity"). Again the speculation proved untrue: a group had staked out an elaborate game site and then laid low when the newspaper accounts began. Much more real, unfortunately, was the finding of the remains of some 11 bodies of young women on the West Mesa beginning in 2009, the result of the murders of these women; the murders remain unsolved.

Much of the land you'll be passing through on this tour was once part of the Black Ranch, named for A.F. Black, who came to New Mexico from West Virginia in 1929. Black and his descendants worked horses, cattle, and sheep for more than 50 years on a large swath of land stretching from the Rio Grande to the edge of the mesa breaks overlooking the Rio Puerco to the west. Prior to that, the land had been part of the Alameda Land Grant given by King Philip IV of Spain in 1710 to a Spanish soldier, Francisco Montes



Vigil, who sold it in 1712 to Juan Gonzáles Blas. And even before that, a group of Pueblo Indians had abandoned the Alameda Pueblo on part of the same land along the river. The old Black Ranch land is home to a large part of the explosive growth on Albuquerque's West Side; the West Mesa's population was listed as 39,602 in 1980 but had increased more than five times to 210,740 in 2010.

The trail passes between the North and South Geologic Windows – openings into the geologic past created by occasionally-filled washes revealing the strata underlying the gently rolling high desert. According to the Petroglyph National Monument's



former chief interpretive officer, Diane Souder, the South Geologic Window belongs to rattlesnakes and blown-in tumbleweeds. The North Geologic Window is of more interest, though the status of visiting it is in flux. Periodically, Albuquerque Open Space offers tours of the area, complete with geologic discussion (consult the Open Space Visitor Center information at their website, listed above).

Along much of the trail, occasional pipes and fiber optic cable warnings pop up from among the lava rocks and desert plants. The Double Eagle Airport, which sits just past the end of the trail, needed both water and a fiber optic connection, especially when the airport was to be used to house test flights of the Eclipse Aviation Company. Eclipse was to have been a major economic engine for the always-marginal Albuquerque economy, manufacturing relatively inexpensive private jets (initially to have cost less than \$1 million); the economic recession of 2008 eclipsed the company's chances.



Chamisa in fall, with a visitor

In any case, in order to allow the routing of water and fiber optics through city Open Space, the Open Space Division exacted the concession of an accompanying bike trail. Mayor Richard Berry inaugurated the new trail, called Paseo de la Mesa, in August 2010. Although there will be continued development on the burgeoning West Side, the area west and south of here is safely preserved as Open Space.

1.9 miles from its start, the trail takes a ninety degree turn to the north close to a large electricity transmission line. Turning almost ninety degrees to the south here instead takes one on an unpaved double-track trail to each of the volcanoes in turn, but it is closed to bicycles.

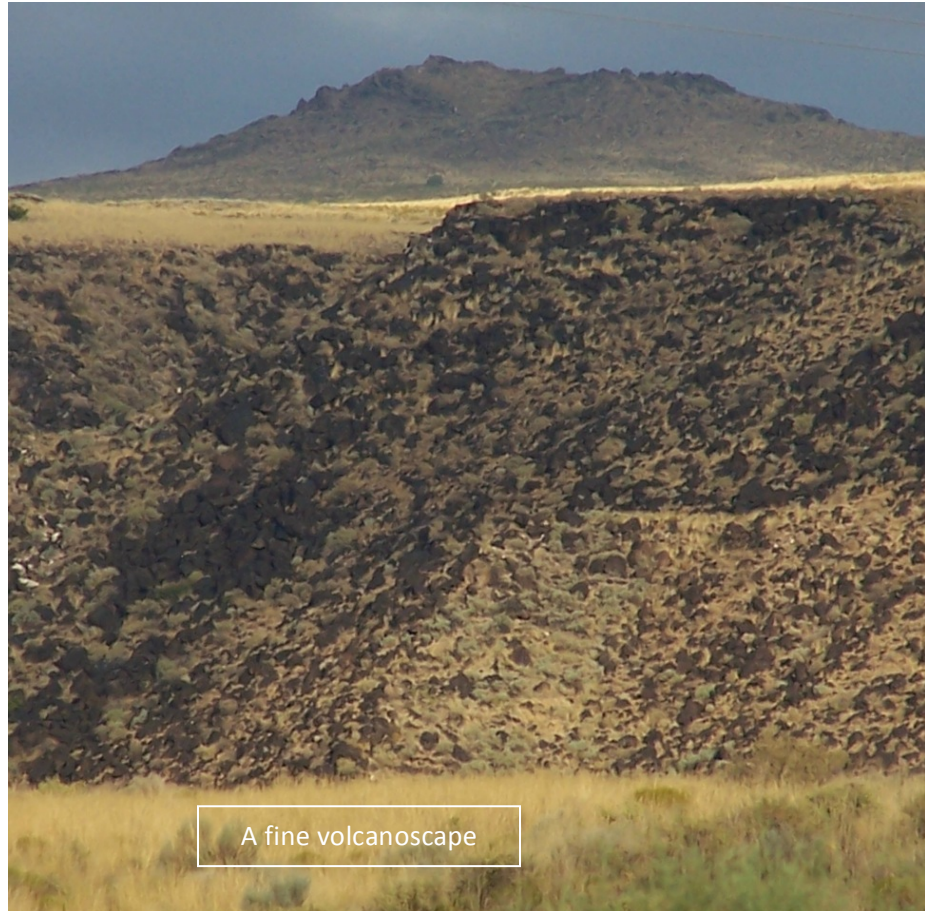
The 200,000 year old solidified molten rock – basalt – is at every hand. The austere landscape hides many treasures, among them animals – bears, bobcats, cougars, badgers, elk, and antelopes have all been seen here, though it is more likely that you'll see a few birds, a lizard or stinkbug or two, and the ever-present hares and their predators, the coyotes. High desert plants, too, are common. Native Americans sought medicinal herbs in this area; scorpionweed, sand sage, four-wing saltbush and dock were all



Stinkbug, or pinacate beetle

collected in this area and used by both Native Americans and Hispanic settlers for their medicinal qualities. The pretty snakeweed, however, is mildly toxic to animals. The West Mesa was once covered with high grasses, but overgrazing and climate change contributed to the current lower, mixed vegetation.

At 3.3 miles from the Paseo de la Mesa's start (8.8 miles from the Open Space visitor center, the trail turns back to the west; ahead of you to north is a pile of volcanic rocks.



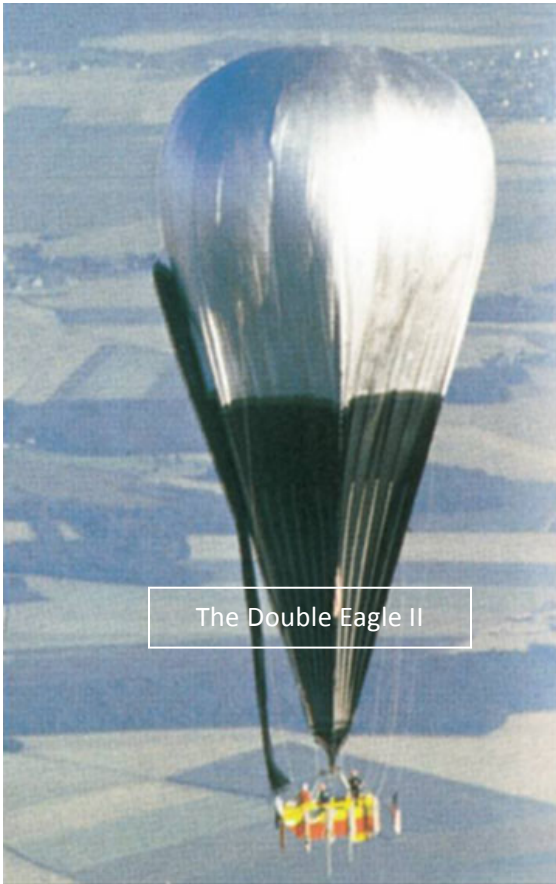
A fine volcanoscape

10.0 miles west of Open Space Visitor Center
4.4 miles west of the east Paseo de la Mesa
Trailhead

The end of the paved trail is 4.4 miles from its beginning, at a little gravel parking lot, just one-tenth of a mile from new pavement on Atrisco Vista Boulevard. Across the street from the small driveway, signed for the Paseo de la Mesa, you will see the northeast corner of the Double Eagle II Airport fence. The Double Eagle Airport (website: <https://abqsunport.com/about-us/double-eagle-ii-airport/>) was built in 1982-83 as a reliever airport for general aviation. At one point, it was thought to perhaps be a future replacement for the Albuquerque International Airport, given the extensive land available nearby, but that appears unlikely now. Just south of the driveway for Double Eagle Airport, itself south of the end of this trail, a spur road leads to a

parking area for the Volcano Day Use area, where you can get up-close-and-personal with the three largest volcanoes by walking on well-developed dirt trails with beautiful views of the valleys and the Sandia Mountains to the east.

A comment is important here on two of the names here at the west end, the Double Eagle II Airport and Atrisco Vista Blvd. The naming of Double Eagle II Airport reflects Albuquerque's romance with the hot air balloon as well as faster and more predictable modes of air transport. The Double Eagle II balloon was the first hot air balloon to cross the Atlantic, leaving from Presque Isle, Maine, and landing in



Miserey, outside Paris, France in August 1978. Its pilots at the time were Larry Newman, Ben Abruzzo, and Maxie Anderson, flying the course in 137 hours in the Double Eagle II balloon. Abruzzo and Anderson were Albuquerqueans and are honored in the naming of the Anderson-Abruzzo Balloon Museum in north Albuquerque (see the description of the North Diversion Channel Trail).

The Atrisco Land Grant, for which Atrisco Vista Blvd. is named, was one of the first Spanish land grants in New Mexico. Following the Spanish reconquest of the province in 1692 after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the chief re-Conquistador, Don Diego de Vargas, granted one of his soldiers, Don Fernando Duran y Chavez II, an 82,000 acre swath of land stretching from the Rio Grande to the Rio Puerco to the west. Settlement on the land, which became known as Atrisco, began in 1703, three years before the onset of settlement across the river in the Villa de Alburquerque. The village, apparently named after a town near Puebla, Mexico called Atlixco, has been inhabited since, largely by descendants of the early settlers.

Revised April 26, 2020.