



Trails Across Borders Scenic Byway

Click the small regional map to see area attractions on New Mexico's tourism website.

The Tracks Across Borders Byway connects Chama, New Mexico to Durango, Colorado via a 124.5-mile route along a combination of U.S. and State highways, county roads and a Bureau of Indian Affairs road. Most of the route is on paved or graded gravel roads. The route traces the narrow gauge right-of-way of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RG), the nation's largest narrow gauge railroad system. Prominent sections of the byway corridor are located on or adjacent to the original railroad grade. Once connected by the railroad, Chama and Durango serve as the primary gateway cities to this byway. Railroad history can be experienced at two National Historic Landmarks along the route: The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad and the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad which provide scenic railroad trips at both ends of the byway. The 64-mile long Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad began tourism excursions in 1971 and is now the highest narrow gauge steam railroad in the United States. Check out the original coaling tower in Chama, which is still used today.

A section of the byway between Dulce and the New Mexico/Colorado border had previously been designated a New Mexico Scenic Byway, known as the Narrow Gauge Byway. The Narrow Gauge Scenic Byway has had many twists and turns, both literally and historically. This isolated road winds through a beautiful and dramatic landscape. It started as a primitive trail forged by early settlers and miners, and became a crude toll road in 1877. In the early 1800s, the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad laid track on the same alignment. It has come full circle - the track has been removed and it is once again a largely unimproved road, now known as Jicarilla 9 (J-9). This short, 10-mile section straddling the New Mexico-Colorado state line is an earthen road and may have variable driving conditions depending on the weather. Given the current roadway composition, this section, about half of which is in New Mexico, may require a high-clearance four-wheel drive during wet conditions to negotiate slick muddy surfaces and ruts. Otherwise the road can be traversed with a two-wheel drive automobile.

The Route:

After taking a ride on the Cumbres & Toltec train and enjoying the selection of restaurants, hotels and beautiful architecture in Chama, the first stretch of the route covers 27 miles through high plains and mountains, passing between Monero Mountain and Briggs Mesa before arriving in Dulce along US 84/64.

Drive out of Dulce on J-9, which now parallels or overlays nearly ten miles of the old railroad bed from Dulce northeast to the Colorado border. Most of the original track has been removed, but a short segment remains at the junction of US 64 and J-9 along Narrow Gauge Street in Dulce. Two old D&RG wooden boxcars are former stock cars used originally to haul cattle and sheep. These sit next to the Jicarilla Culture Center. Several yellow frame buildings with rust trim along the road in town were once associated with the D&RG, but they have second careers as tribal administration buildings.

The canyon closes in on the paved road as it continues northwest alongside Amargo Creek. About four miles northwest of Dulce, the pavement and the creek disappear. The one-time station stop of Navajo was here at the confluence of Amargo Creek and the Navajo River. Still

present to testify to the presence of busier times are a round yellow water tank with rust red roof and timber supports, and a steel truss bridge across the river. A plaque on the bridge says that this was once the D&RG Royal Gorge Route Scenic Line. Where tracks once were, planks were laid to allow cars over the bridge. It outlived even that use and has now been bypassed completely by a modern concrete bridge to the west, leaving it nothing more than an elegant witness of earlier times.

Continuing north, the road narrows, and rock outcrops and tall pines loom down from either side. Horses have been seen grazing by the river. Riding in a train through these narrow, winding canyons must have been an adventure in the late 1800s! Traveling this road is still an adventure, even in the comfort of an automobile. (See: <http://www.newmexico.org/narrow-gauge-trail/>)

Continuing north of the state line along the historic railroad grade, the byway skirts the north end of Navajo Lake, a little-known environmental and recreational gem in the New Mexico and Colorado State Parks systems. Traveling through Southern Ute reservation land, whose Tribal Council headquarters are located in Ignacio, Colorado, the route passes the excellent Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum. It also links to Chimney Rock National Monument, designated in September 2012.

Historical Context:

Visitors are connected to the region's history, including the economic and engineering heritage of the D&RG, and Native American and Hispanic cultures as the route travels along the historic railroad grade, and crosses the Continental Divide, the Bill Humphries Wildlife Area and the Jicarilla Apache Nation.

Hispanic settlement of the area dates back at least as far as the establishment of the Tierra Amarilla Land Grant of 1832, the first land grant in New Mexico. By 1870, mining interests in the area spurred the D&RG railway to draw up plans to connect Denver to El Paso, and eventually Mexico City. Six branch lines would serve the booming silver mining areas of Colorado. Both the rough terrain and the cheaper cost of construction and operations led to the company's decision to use narrow gauge track, with rails laid three feet apart rather than the standard 4 feet 8.5 inches. Minimal grading was done in preparation for laying the track, and the line ran through narrow canyons and over steep grades.

In late 1881, the San Juan Branch was completed from Antonito to Durango, and from there to Farmington and Silverton, connecting the east and west sides of the Rocky Mountains. It served isolated farming and mining areas, transporting raw materials like timber and mineral ore, passengers, and tourists. After the silver boom ended in 1893, the freight shifted to agricultural products and timber milled by a Pagosa Springs lumber company. By 1915 the timber supply had nearly disappeared, and the company moved its operations to Dulce, a station on the San Juan Branch, where it built a new mill and company town in 1916.

In 1935 the San Juan Branch stopped operation for freight shipment completely, in 1951 it discontinued daily passenger service, and in 1968 it was abandoned between Chama and Durango. The Cumbres-Toltec and Durango-Silverton lines, which continue in operation today

as tourist trains, are all that remain of the San Juan Branch. It doesn't take a railroad buff to enjoy the sound of a steam engine and the rhythmic clack of wheels on the narrow gauge, and the mountain scenery is enchanting.

Perhaps the greatest significance of this corridor today is the fact that it connects the sovereign nations of the Jicarilla Apache in New Mexico and the Southern Ute in Colorado. J-9 facilitates the exchange of commodities and religious and cultural heritage between the two tribes. Two of the seven original Ute bands, the Mouache and Capote, make up the present day Southern Ute Indian Tribe. They reside on approximately 800,000 acres in southern Colorado. The Jicarilla Tribe consists of two bands: the Llaneros, or plains people, and the Olleros, or mountain valley people. They once roamed a large part of northeastern New Mexico and southern Colorado. After attempts to remove them from their land, they petitioned Washington for a reservation, and In 1887 a permanent reservation was established by an executive order from Grover Cleveland. The reservation created in 1887 did not provide sufficient quality land to grow crops and raise livestock, which contributed to malnutrition and disease. The reservation was expanded in 1907, and now encompasses one million acres.