

Self-guided tour: The story of turquoise

Leave the parking garage of the La Fonda, go around the block to your right and turn left onto Old Spanish Trail, which becomes Old Pecos Trail, and this leads to I-25 south that you will take. Exit 278 will put you on Hwy 14 south towards the village of Cerrillos, which is about 15 miles from Exit 278. Along the way, you'll see some spectacular sedimentary rocks that have been turned up vertical. This is a consequence of the pushing up of the intrusions that make the Cerrillos Hills, the source of turquoise that has been exploited since at least 600 BCE. The most extensive mining of these hills was by the American Turquoise Co. (major stockholder: Tiffanys of New York) from 1890 to about 1905. The usually-quoted production from this operation is \$2 million, but this is probably a run-of-mine figure. The value of the finished material on the New York retail market was certainly much greater. At the time, the mine site was the scene of sporadic armed conflict with local Pueblo Indians claiming ancestral heritage rights to the deposit.

You will cross a bridge over the Galisteo 'River,' and the main line of the Burlington-Santa Fe RR. Turn right on the road to the village. Stop at the historical marker to read:

Official Scenic Historical Marker
Cerrillos
Elevation 5688 feet

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the mineral rich area around Cerrillos produced turquoise, which was broadly traded across the American Southwest and into México. An early settlement of Los Cerrillos harbored Spanish refugees from the 1680 revolt, but the present community was not founded until the lead strike of 1879.

As you're stopped here, look to the southern skyline. The mountains there are the Ortiz Mountains. The Y-shaped dump in the Ortiz Mountains is from the now abandoned Cunningham open-pit mine that has been recontoured and revegetated as part of an environmental restoration plan. The two smaller white piles to the left are mill tailings from Gold Fields Mining Company's cyanide-leach operation. Mines such as these stimulated several minor gold rushes in the 19th century. If you look back toward the highway and a little to the northeast, you can see Glorieta Mesa on skyline, where the westernmost battle of the Civil War took place March 26-28, 1862, in which 4000 Union troops fought with 3000 Confederate troops, leaving 280 dead and the Confederates returning to Texas.

Continue into the village. At the first stop sign, turn left for one block and then right. Go to the end of the street and find Mr. Brown's Mining Museum. Here you can see raw turquoise.

Return to Hwy 14 and turn right or south to Madrid. Today it's a community of artsy-craftsy folks and you might enjoy looking in some of the shops. Until 1954 it was an active coal-mining community. It supplied coal to Albuquerque for generating electricity, but also had some specialty coal. Because of the same intrusives that make the Cerrillos Hills, intrusives here baked the coal into anthracite, some of the only coal outside of Pennsylvania and Rhode Island where anthracite has been mined.

Continue on Hwy 14 south. At the intersection of Hwy 14 and I-40, take I-40 south to Albuquerque. We suggest two turquoise stops in Albuquerque. The first is the Utility Shack at 11035 Central Ave., NE (on the north or right side of the road). Take Exit 167 onto Central Ave. This also is Historic Rt. 66. You will find the Utility Shack on your right between Juan Tabo Blvd and Morris St. Watch for their sign. They have probably the best and widest selection of turquoise jewelry anywhere. They are a very reliable outfit. Our family has done business with them for years. If you feel the need to introduce yourself, tell them that Carol Kinney's daughter sent you.

To reach the Turquoise Museum, turn left out of the Utility Shack's parking lot and at the stoplight at Juan Tabo Blvd, turn left and then, in about three blocks, take I-40 west for about 9 or 10 miles to the exit for Old Town or Rio Grande (Exit 157A). Turn left (south) at the stoplight onto Rio Grande Blvd. At the intersection with Mountain Rd, you are at the NW corner of Albuquerque's Old Town. Continue straight ahead to the intersection with Central Ave. (yes, this is the same street that you left). Notice to your right a Walgreen's. Turn right at the stoplight at this intersection and then right into the parking area. Just west of the Walgreen's you'll find the Turquoise Museum where you'll find displays and information about turquoise.

From here, you may return to Santa Fe by retracing your steps to I-40. Take I-40 east. At the intersection of I-40 and I-25, take I-25 north toward Santa Fe. Take Exit 284 or The Old Pecos Trail, which will again morph into The Old Spanish Trail, which will end at Water St., the backside of the La Fonda. Go around the block to your left and then right to the parking garage. We hope you've had a good trip.