

If you're too stuffed right after lunch, you can linger and take in the Old Firehouse, an art gallery-concert venue, shop over to Blue Moon Gardens nursery (it's actually 4.5 miles — get this — east of Edom) and commune with the plants.

On your way back, don't be too hasty in getting home. You still have lots of winding roads and rustic scenery to enjoy.

Campsite

RUIDOSO — Somewhere along the road it'll hit you: Man, this country is big. On this trip, vastness is the point, and y here to [New Mexico](#) if you don't.

I set out for the mountains with a couple of riding buddies. Our aim: Camp on a mountainside in the Lincoln National F

Along the way, it's mile after mile after mile of pavement, stringing off toward the horizon. But one of the motorcyclist's monotony. The changing vegetation, the sky, even the temperature — these can add unexpected dimensions.

Once in Ruidoso, we dropped in at the U.S. Park Service ranger station, which steered us up the mountain that leads gentle twists, then tightens and tightens into hairpins flanked by spectacular scenery — if you dare look. Halfway up tl almost magical area we were looking for.

We camped at 8,100 feet above sea level: 2,200 feet above the city itself and a world away. In the isolation of the fore from Ruidoso's strips of motels, real estate offices, ski rentals and schlock shops.

Dallas, too, feels blessedly distant when you hear elk bugle in the distance and see the Milky Way splashed overhear

The trip back contains plenty of diversions: Smokey Bear's grave just up the road near Capitan, N.M. (see a story in tl few miles onward; West Texas' mesmerizing wind farms; incomparable Texas barbecue at Al's & Son in Big Spring; a Cranfills Gap, home of the very motorcycle-friendly Horny Toad Bar and Grill.

For sure, Ruidoso isn't a short hop away, but you're an adventurer, aren't you?

Falls star

DAVIS — For decades, I've seen the sign along I-35 just south of Davis: Turner Falls Area. But I'd never stopped. I st

Don't just zoom straight up the interstate. Circle around through Weatherford and head north on State Highway 51; ve horse country, with a few goats here and there. The roads are perfect for lazy motorbiking: not technically demanding occasional curve, a narrow bridge over a wooded creek or a four-way stop in the middle of nowhere.

I did hop onto the interstate at Gainesville for a peek at the architecturally ghastly Winstar casino just over the state lir interstate, as you head into what my dad used to call the LBRs, the low but rugged Arbuckle Mountains. (Watch out fc in the median.)

Soon, there's Exit 47: Turner Falls Area. Jog onto U.S. Highway 77 that winds through arroyos and outcroppings on it

Stop at the curio shop shortly after you exit — not for the curios, but for the observation deck. You'll get an impressive hills beyond.

The park, operated by the city of Davis, is built around a 77-foot-tall waterfall that pours into a sizable swimming hole. Picnic tables dot the valley, and up the rise is a camping area with 44 RV and 500 tent sites. Spend the night. On you wooded Chickasaw National Recreation Area.

Before you head out that way, one more stop: Arbuckle Mountain Fried Pies, at the intersection of U.S. 77 and I-35. I art form, but these folks didn't. (There are also Texas locations in Weatherford, Glen Rose, Canton and elsewhere.)

Wend your way back down U.S. 177 and 377 and savor the woods and fields that edge right up to the road. You'll be

The royal thing

MENA — I've been to Arkansas to visit a queen.

Missed her, but I enjoyed the trip to her namesake park anyway.

Queen Wilhelmina State Park, the queen I went to visit, is near the eastern end of the 55-mile-long Talimena Scenic I Oklahoma across to Mena. Dandy for motorcycling, especially; it's winding and hilly, with plenty of turnouts for survey

The twists are challenging enough to keep experts interested, and for the fainter of heart (like me), the two lanes are enough that you can plan your moves. It's a great confidence-building road, one where you can develop your skills as trucks allowed.

The park is modest, but not short of things to keep you busy. Hiking trails, from easy to exhausting, radiate from the c Lodge. For a drastically more relaxed pace than you took getting there, check out the miniature train that circles throu Day.

Don't take the term "lodge" too literally. It was one once, but now it's more of a quaintly done-up motel out at the edge service.) Despite its apparently better intentions, the restaurant doesn't rise above lunch-counter quality. (You could would turn out better.) Still, the staff is hugely friendly, and the lodge is cozy and scenic.

This corner of Arkansas is, in fact, packed with scenery. Nearby Cossatot River State Park is home to a beautiful river. When the river's up, it attracts boatloads of kayakers.

On your way back, enjoy the woods that line the roads. If you get caught behind a logging truck, remember: It's better

Flavor

NATCHITOCHEs — As you cross the Sabine River bridge into Logansport, La., you slip quickly into the past. Frontie century riverfront trading town. It's pointing you ever earlier, toward what visiting Natchitoches is all about: history.

Well, history, plus scenery and — ah! — food.

Natchitoches (say NACK-a-tish) has existed since 1714. History shouts to you from every street corner and rooftop. T enough for walking, even in clunky motorcycle boots. Front Street is a procession of antique stores, gift shops and oft sight. Wrought-iron balconies are everywhere, and the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception a block away adds an e

You're required to have a Natchitoches meat pie or two while you're there, preferably at Lasyone's. The pies are only best I've ever had (the spices were pungent and distinct), and the squash casserole outstripped anything served at a green tomatoes were the sweetest thing this side of a dessert plate.

South of town lies a string of plantations. The pastoral Melrose, about 18 miles away, was founded in the late 1700s by writers, including Erskine Caldwell and [Alexander Woollcott](#). The Magnolia complex, another five miles along the road, offers a more rough-hewn portrait of plantation life.

The ride out to Natchitoches along U.S. Highway 84 isn't hugely scenic, although as you move deep into East Texas, it's stunning.

But take a more southerly route back home along El Camino Real. [Louisiana](#) Highway 6 (State Highway 21 when you enter the forests that creep almost up to the edge of the road. As you slice through their slatted shadows, you expect some encounters

Eventually, though, you part company with El Camino Real and emerge into typical Central Texas landscape. You're sure to be hard to forget.

When you go

Mileage: 550

Queen Wilhelmina State Park,

3877 Highway 88 West, Mena, Ark.; 479-394-2863; www.queenwilhelmina.com.

Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area, 870-385-2201; www.arkansasstateparks.com/cossatotriver. The park is east of Mena.

When you go

Mileage: 300

The Shed Cafe,

8337 FM279, Edom; 903-852-7791; www.theshedcafe.com.

Blue Moon Gardens,

13062 FM279, Chandler; 903-852-3897; www.bluemoongardens.com.

The Old Firehouse

(visual arts gallery, therapeutic massage, acoustic folk music), 8241 FM279, Edom; 903-852-2781; www.theoldfirehouse.com

Zeke & Marty,

8271 FM279, Edom; 903-852-3311; www.zekeandmarty.com.

When you go

Mileage: 1,400

Smokey Bear District ranger station, [U.S. Forest Service](#), 901 Mechem Drive, Ruidoso; 575-257-4095.

Lincoln County Grill,

2717 Sudderth Drive, Ruidoso; 575-257-7669; www.lcgrill.com. Check out the green chile cheeseburger.

Fatman's Beef Jerky, 1600 S. Main St., Roswell, N.M.; 575-623-0731;

<http://fatmansbeefjerky.com>.

Al's & Son Bar-B-Q,

1810 S. Gregg, Big Spring; 432-267-8921.

Horny Toad Bar and Grill, 319 N. 3rd St., Cranfills Gap; 254-597-1100; www.hornytoadbar.com.

When you go

Mileage: 350

Turner Falls Park, on U.S. Highway 77, three miles north of I-35 Exit 47, one mile south of Exit 51; 580-369-2988; www.turnerfalls.com

Original Fried Pies (a.k.a. Arbuckle Mountain Fried Pies), Exit 51 on I-35, south of Davis; 580-369-7830.

Chickasaw National Recreation Area,

1008 W. Second St., Sulphur, Okla.; 580-622-3161; www.nps.gov/chic/index.htm.

When you go

Mileage: 650

Natchitoches Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, 781 Front St.; 1-800-259-1714;

www.natchitoches.net (hear locals pronounce Natchitoches).

Lasyone's Meat Pie Restaurant,

622 Second St., Natchitoches; 318-352-3353; www.lasyones.com.

Cane River National Heritage Area, www.caneriverheritage.org and www.nps.gov/crha.