

# El Malpais

Official Map and Guide

El Malpais National Monument  
El Malpais National Conservation Area  
New Mexico

National Park Service  
Bureau of Land Management  
U.S. Department of the Interior



As flowing masses of hot lava cooled, large lava tube caves were formed. One lava tube system at El Malpais extends 17 miles.

George H. H. Huey



Despite seasonal heat, some lava tubes contain ice year-round.



Laurence Parent

Despite its badlands character the landscape knows its share of flowers in season and after periods of rain.



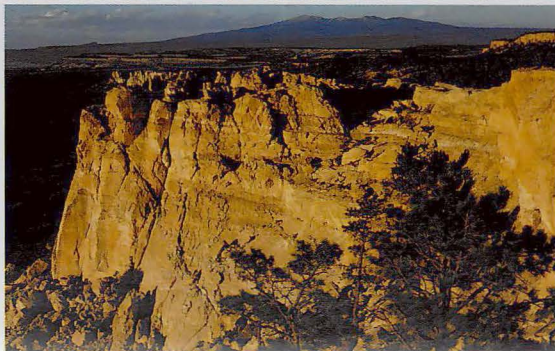
Margaret Fleming

Homesteading increased in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression. New-comers attempted to wrest a living from a challenging environment.



Laurence Parent

In the Cebolla Wilderness and other areas, petroglyphs tell us of ancient human presence.



Laurence Parent

Sandstone bluffs afford excellent viewpoints, even for motorists, high above El Malpais lava flows.

## Where Sharp Lava Meets Smooth Sandstone

In satellite photo images of New Mexico, lava flows blanketing much of El Malpais National Monument and National Conservation Area look like a huge lake southwest of Grants. The imagery betrays only dominant landscape features—lava flows, mountain ranges, mesas—that in reality mask a myriad of mysteries and wonders. El Malpais means “the badlands” in Spanish and is most commonly pronounced *el-mal-pie-EES*. Its volcanic features include jagged spatter cones, a lava tube cave system extending at least 17 miles, and fragile ice caves. There is much good in these badlands; the area offers diverse natural environments and tantalizing evidence of American Indian and European history. More than mere artifacts, these cultural resources are kept alive by the spiritual and physical presence of contemporary Indian groups, including the Puebloan peoples of Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni, and the Ramah Navajo. These American Indians made their homes here and continue their traditional uses.

Paradoxically, the malpais landscape is at once primal, pristine, ancient, and surprisingly modern. Here is a living remnant of the Old Southwest entering the 21st century as virtual *terra incognita*, or unknown lands. With continuing research new knowledge is revealed. Lava that poured out of McCartys Crater established a new land surface 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. Elsewhere, ancient Douglas fir trees thrive in the midst of rugged lava terrain. The diversity of life tells a story of unique adaptation to a challenging environment. Past and present, myth and reality mix here and will continue to mix for centuries to come.

Many landscape features in El Malpais bear Hawaiian names because early scientific knowledge of volcanoes was developed in the Hawaiian islands. Kipukas are undisturbed areas that lava flows encircled but did not cover. These ecological islands of vegetation are living remnants of native plant and

animal communities. Study of these kipukas will yield benchmark information for restoring disturbed portions of El Malpais. Lava types bear Hawaiian names, too. Smoother, ropy-textured lavas are pahoehoe, pronounced *pah-HOY-hoy*. Sharp, jagged lavas that rip up all but the sturdiest hiking boots are a’a, pronounced *AH-ah*. By studying active volcanoes geologists can determine how similar features formed at El Malpais.

For more than 10,000 years people have interacted with the El Malpais landscape. While truly ancient Indian artifacts have been found, peak human occupation occurred between 950 and 1350. During this time El Malpais was at the fringe of a political and economic system centered in Chaco Canyon 80 miles to the north. As participants in this system, the ancestors of modern Puebloans, sometimes called Anasazi, established outlier communities along the edges of the lava flows. When the Chacoan system collapsed in the late 1100s these outlying

communities continued to thrive. Although the Anasazi left El Malpais by the mid-1300s they did not disappear. From here they moved to the Acoma area and established a new homeland. In 1540 Coronado’s expedition encountered two major Indian pueblos—Zuni and Acoma—flanking El Malpais. When New Mexico became a U.S. territory in 1848, Anglo explorers saw El Malpais as little more than a hindrance to travel. Anglos did not move into El Malpais in significant numbers until the 1930s, during the Great Depression. Many were homesteaders or sheepherders escaping the flood of immigration to other parts of the West.

Throughout the centuries El Malpais has posed an unrelenting challenge for Indian, Spanish, and Anglo travelers. Today ancient trails serve to remind us how those who crossed this rugged landscape persevered.

Top photographs: Jagged lava flow, left, and La Ventana Natural Arch Laurence Parent

### Visitor Information

El Malpais lies in the high desert lands south of I-40 midway between Gallup and Albuquerque. To the east are reservation lands of the Laguna and Acoma Indians; to the west are those of the Zuni and the Ramah Navajo.

The National Park Service (NPS) administers El Malpais National Monument, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administers El Malpais National Conservation Area. The NPS operates a visitor center 23 miles south of I-40 on N. Mex. 53. The BLM operates a visitor center 9 miles south of I-40 on N. Mex. 117.

The Northwest New Mexico Visitor Center is located south of I-40 at exit 85. This facility is run jointly by the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service. Exhibits, audiovisual programs, a bookstore, and a trip-planning area will help you explore the public lands and attractions of the region.

For more information write to: National Park Service, 123 East Roosevelt Avenue, Grants, NM 87020; or Bureau of Land Management, P.O. Box 846, Grants, NM 87020; or visit [www.nps.gov/elma](http://www.nps.gov/elma) on the Internet.

Road access to the national monument and national conservation area is via N. Mex. 53 and 117 and County Road 42, which links the state roads on the west and south of the area. Use high-clearance vehicles off the state routes; 4-wheel-drive vehicles are not generally required. Dirt roads may be impassable when wet.

Note: all vehicles are restricted to designated roads. In wilderness areas both vehicles and mechanized equipment are prohibited. Some 85 percent of the national monument is suitable for ultimate designation as wilderness.

More than 100,000 acres of the national conservation area are designated as wilderness.

Regulations regarding land use and visitor activities differ between the NPS and BLM. Make your first stop at one of the visitor centers to obtain maps, books, and other publications about the area. Employees can answer questions about your visit, including road conditions and points of interest. Some facilities are available for people with disabilities. Motels, camping, food, and other travel services and facilities are available in and near Grants.

### Cultural Traditions

Southwestern American Indians have deep ties to El Malpais. The lands have figured in Acoma, Laguna, Zuni, and Ramah Navajo cultures for thousands of years. Their ancestral uses—gathering herbs and medicines, paying respect, and renewing ties—continue today. Protecting these lands ensures the continuation of traditions integral to this region’s cultural diversity.

### Exploring El Malpais

Many points of interest can be reached via area roads. Ask at the visitor centers about maps and brochures describing the areas. Always check on local road and trail conditions.

**Sandstone Bluffs Overlook** An easy drive leads to a ridge of sandstone offering excellent vistas of El Malpais lava flows and surrounding countryside.

**La Ventana Natural Arch** Largest of New Mexico’s readily reached natural arches, La Ventana was eroded from sandstone dating back to the age of dinosaurs. (See photo at top right.)

**The Narrows** Where lava flowed near the base of 500-foot-high sandstone cliffs, N. Mex. 117 threads a narrow corridor. Enjoy solitude and scenic views while hiking the Narrows Rim Trail.

**Cebolla Wilderness** East of N. Mex. 117 lie some 62,000 acres of forested rimrock country, the Cebolla Wilderness. This area is rich in prehistoric petroglyphs and historic homesteads; hiking, horseback riding, and camping opportunities abound.

**Lava Falls Area** Explore lava features and plant adaptations unique to McCartys flow, the youngest lava flow in this region.

**Zuni-Acoma Trail** This ancient Anasazi trade route crosses four of the area’s major lava flows. The hike is a strenuous 7.5 miles one-way over rugged lava terrain.

**El Calderon Area** Forested and offering year-round opportunities for exploration, El Calderon includes Junction Cave, Double Sinks, El Calderon cinder cone, and a bat cave. Do not enter the bat cave or otherwise disturb the bats.

**Big Tubes Area** Lava tubes can be huge. Including its collapsed sections, this tube system is 17 miles long. A route marked by cairns leads to two caves, Big Skylight and Four Windows. High-

clearance vehicles are recommended for reaching the Big Tubes area.

**Chain of Craters** Hot lava below the surface found a weak area here and created a rift lined by 30 cinder cones.

**West Malpais Wilderness** Lava surrounds a ponderosa pine parkland here known as Hole-in-the-Wall. Mechanized access is prohibited, but hiking and backpacking offer wonderful rewards.

**Continental Divide Trail** A portion of this national trail crosses El Malpais. Ask at visitor centers for specific information.

### Hiking & Camping

Hiking opportunities exist in several areas of El Malpais. Most routes are marked with rock cairns; some are dirt trails. Falls on lava can cause nasty cuts and abrasions. Hikers must have sturdy boots on the rugged, often sharp lava. Leather work gloves are helpful on lava and in caves. Carry one gallon of water per person per day in summer; do not drink surface water.

All overnight use in the national monument requires a free backcountry use permit available at visitor centers. Overnight use in the national conservation area does not require a permit, but we encourage you to notify ranger station staff to help us monitor use.

### Safety and Other Considerations

**Travel Conditions and Courtesy** When roads are wet, travel is discouraged on unpaved roads that normally require high-clearance vehicles. Check at a visitor center for current conditions. Close all gates. Respect private and Indian lands.

**Cave Safety** Never go caving alone. Hard hats, boots, protective clothing, gloves, water, and three sources of light are necessary when entering lava tubes. Please be careful. Check on special restrictions.

**Plants and Animals** El Malpais is home to seldom seen poisonous scorpions and rattlesnakes. Nonpoisonous

bullsnakes sometimes act like rattlesnakes. If you encounter a snake, do not disturb it. Also avoid cactus spines and the sharp-edged leaves of yucca.

**Preservation** All natural and cultural features are protected by law. Do not disturb them. Leave archeological and other artifacts in place; they provide important information about the past. All plants and animals are protected by law in the national monument. Hunting and trapping in the national conservation area require state licenses, and all state regulations apply.

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# Visiting El Malpais

