



As flowing masses of hot lava cooled, lava tube caves formed.

© GEORGE H. H. HUEY

Some lava tubes have ice year-round.

Despite its badlands character, this landscape is home to flowers in season and after periods of rain.

© LAURENCE PARENT

Homesteaders in the 1930s tried to wrest a living from this challenging environment.

© MARGARET FLEMING

Hike over volcanic rock on the Lava Falls Trail.

© LANNY WAGNER

Sandstone bluffs provide excellent viewpoints—even for motorists—high above lava flows.

© LAURENCE PARENT

Top: View from sandstone bluffs (left) and El Calderon Trail. © LANNY WAGNER

Where Sharp Lava Meets Smooth Sandstone

El Malpais means “the badlands” in Spanish and is most commonly pronounced el-mal-pie-EES—yet there is much good in these badlands. In satellite photos of New Mexico, lava flows blanketing much of El Malpais National Monument look like a huge lake southwest of Grants. The imagery shows dominant landscape features—lava flows, mountain ranges, and mesas—that mask deeper mysteries and wonders.

Lava that poured out of McCartys Crater 3,900 years ago created a new land surface. Volcanic features include cinder cones, a lava tube cave system extending at least 17 miles, and fragile ice caves. The malpais landscape is primal, pristine, and ancient, but this living remnant of the old Southwest is also surprisingly modern.

Like the ancient Douglas fir trees that thrive among this rugged lava terrain, life uniquely adapts to El Malpais. Continuing research leads to new knowledge about volcanic landscapes. Because early scientific knowledge of volcanoes was developed in the Hawaiian islands, lava types and many features in El Malpais bear Hawaiian names. Smooth, ropy lavas are pāhoehoe, pronounced pah-HOY-hoy. Sharp, jagged lavas that rip up all but the sturdiest hiking boots are ‘a‘ā, pronounced AH-ah.

Kīpukas 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 kīpukas will yield benchmark information for restoring disturbed portions of El Malpais.

In addition to the rich variety of natural environments, this area offers evidence of prehistoric cultures. People have interacted with the El Malpais landscape for over 10,000 years. Peak human occupation occurred between 950 and 1350, when 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 ancient Pueblos established outlying communities along the lava flows’ edges. When the Chacoan system collapsed in the late 1100s, these outlying communities continued to thrive.

Although the ancestral Pueblos left El Malpais by the mid-1300s, they did not disappear. They moved to the Acoma area and established a new homeland. These cultural resources are kept alive by the spiritual and physical

presence of the Puebloan peoples of Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni, and the Ramah Navajo. These American Indians make their homes here and continue their traditional uses.

In 1540 Coronado’s expedition encountered two major Indian pueblos—Zuni and Acoma—flanking El Malpais. When New Mexico became a US territory in 1848, Anglo explorers considered El Malpais a hindrance. Anglos did not move into the area in significant numbers until the Great Depression of the 1930s. Many were homesteaders or sheepherders escaping the flood of immigration to other parts of the West. Throughout the centuries El Malpais has challenged American Indian, Spanish, and Anglo travelers. Today, ancient trails remind us how those who crossed this rugged landscape persevered.

People of El Malpais

The lands of El Malpais have figured in Acoma, Laguna, Zuni, and Ramah Navajo cultures for thousands of years. Their traditional 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.

As you travel El Malpais, please respect private and Indian lands.

Explore El Malpais

Sandstone Bluffs Overlook Take an easy drive to vistas of El Malpais and surrounding country.

Lava Falls Area Visit McCartys flow, the youngest lava flow in the region. Many plants have adapted to this harsh environment.

Zuni-Acoma Trail This ancient trade route crosses four major lava flows. The hike is 7.5 strenuous miles one-way over rugged lava.

El Calderon Area Explore the monument’s oldest lava flow in this forested area. Do not enter caves.

Big Tubes Area See some of the 10,900-year-old Bandera lava flow and its 17-mile-long tube and trench system. Do not enter caves.

Chain of Craters Backcountry Byway Drive this unpaved road along a rift where lava flowed 200,000 years ago and see the 30 cinder cones left behind.

Continental Divide Trail Hike a portion of this national trail where it crosses El Malpais. Please ask at visitor centers for specific information.

Plan Your Visit

El Malpais lies in the high desert lands midway between Gallup and Albuquerque, NM. To the east are lands of the Acoma and Laguna people; to the west are those of the Ramah Navajo and Zuni.

El Malpais Visitor Center, south of I-40 at exit 85, has exhibits, audio-visual programs, a bookstore, and a trip-planning area.

El Malpais Information Center (NPS), 23 miles south of I-40 on NM 53, has exhibits, a bookstore, and a picnic area. Open seasonally.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For more

information ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

Camping Please ask at the El Malpais Visitor Center for dispersed camping rules.

Other Services Motels, camping, food, and other services are in and near Grants.



Brazilian free-tailed bats roost in the park’s caves. © RON GROVES

Safety and Regulations

Water Carry one gallon of water per person per day in summer. Do not drink surface water.

Driving Always stop at a visitor center to learn about roads safe for your vehicle. Vehicles must stay on designated roads and are prohibited in wilderness areas.

Hiking Lava rock is sharp! Wear sturdy boots. Watch out for cactus spines and sharp yucca leaves. When a hiking route is marked by cairns (rock piles), do not leave your cairn before you have the next cairn in sight. Leave cairns in place.

Lava Tube Caves You must have a free permit to enter lava tube

caves that are open to the public; entry into all others is prohibited. Ask at El Malpais Visitor Center.

Hunting and Trapping Hunting and trapping are prohibited in the park. For firearms regulations, check the park website.

Preservation Federal law protects historic and natural features in the park. Do not excavate, disturb, deface, or destroy any structure, exhibit, artifact, animal, or plant.

Venomous Animals Rattlesnakes and scorpions live here. Non-venomous bullsnakes can act like rattlesnakes. If you encounter a snake, do not disturb it.

More Information

El Malpais National Monument
1900 East Santa Fe Ave.
Grants, NM 87020
www.nps.gov/elma
505-876-2783

El Malpais National Monument is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more, please visit www.nps.gov.

 **National Park Foundation.**
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

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Visiting El Malpais

