

New Mexico

Lakewood •

# The Original Ranch

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**Dust devils race my rig alongside State Highway 285 toward Artesia as I head for the Escapees RV Club SKP Co-Op park outside Carlsbad, New Mexico.**

“The Original Ranch,” they’ve called themselves ever since the Rainbow Park was built at Congress, Arizona, near Wickenburg, and named North Ranch. Airstream chrome sparkles silver across the desert as I glimpse the park when I approach the turnoff to the near-ghost town of Lakewood on Highway 137.

The sky is big here and the Chihuahuan Desert stretches 360 degrees around me. The breeze sifts the smells of oleander and creosote bush. The sandy ground scrub rustles and whispers with unseen life. A roadrunner with its funny land-bird gait scuttles across the road. Nature is close and real all year long.

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Carlsbad Caverns National Park,  
New Mexico. Photo courtesy of  
the National Park Service.



Folks gather to enjoy a cookout, good weather and camaraderie at this friendly Escapees park. Photo by Barbara Pilgrim #97181.

### For Whom the Bell Tolls

I pull in through the gate and stop in front of the managers' office. To my amazement, someone rings the bell. People come out of their RVs to hug and welcome me. As an SKP of 20-plus years, I can tell you that warms the cockles of my heart because it's just like old times.

When the SKP parks were young, each park had a bell. When visitors pulled in, the bell called members to gather 'round and greet them like this. Nowadays, of course, most of the parks are far too busy, but all the managers still give each visitor an Escapees hug after they register.

According to Bob Railey #9927, president of the Ranch Board, "We're not on the way to anyplace else. Escapees who come here intend to come here. Friendliness is our strong point."

Volunteer construction began in 1982 with Escapees workers taking turns renting a motel room in Carlsbad so people could shower after digging for hours in hot weather. When they opened in 1983, Joe and Kay Peterson #1, Escapees founders, were among the first lot owners.

Each of the 118 spaces, plus the two for the managers, is different, lovingly and creatively decorated. No two sheds are alike.

The Ranch House activities center has two rest rooms, but there are no showers, so they have listed the park on the SKP Co-Op park chart as "self-contained RVs only." Plan to come with your fresh-water tank full and your holding tanks empty.

### From Desert to Mountains

"Believe it or not," Bob Railey tells me, "here in the desert we're only 100 miles away from tall pines, trout streams and snowy mountains."

Just 55 miles south of Carlsbad lies Guadalupe Mountains National Park, one of America's least-discovered national parks. From Guadalupe Peak at 8,749 feet to the deep oasis of McKittrick Canyon with its mysterious old growth of oaks, maples, walnut and oak trees cornered here since the Ice Age, you are surrounded by wildlife and beautiful vistas.

Lincoln National Forest covers 285,000 acres for rock climbing, back-country camping, mountain biking, hiking and horseback riding. At Sitting Bull Falls Recreation Area, another oasis, a 150-foot waterfall pours over canyon walls.

Roswell, world famous for its International UFO Museum and Research Center, has other sightseeing to offer the doubters among us who may not

personally be expecting E.T. home anytime soon. The Robert H. Goddard Planetarium is New Mexico's largest. The Roswell Museum and Art Center, WPA-built in 1937 and one of the Southwest's great museums, displays Georgia O'Keefe and Peter Hurd, among other notable artists.

The ski resort of Cloudcroft is a day trip away, and Ruidoso isn't far.

And then, of course, there's Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

If you think you've seen caves and you haven't seen this one, you haven't seen caves. These, the world's largest underground chambers, have never yet been fully explored. The Big Room will hold 14 Astrodomes.

A variety of underground tours are available, from the wheelchair-accessible paved walk to the true spelunking adventures of the Hall of the White Giant and the Spider Cave with bizarre formations and breathtaking crawls through tight crevices.

Hang around for the bat flight at sunset before you return to the Ranch for more of those hugs. 🦇

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Janet Carter #3419 took her first RV trip at the age of 18 months and has been selling her writing since she was 13. She belongs to the Penwheels BOF.

For more information about this and other Escapees parks, turn to page 99.