

# THE GILA

KEN ORTH

Perhaps because of their proximity to the Duke City, much of the notoriety for mountains in New Mexico falls on those to the north... the Jemez, the Sangre De Cristo, and the Rockies above Taos. Beautiful places all, as their crowded campgrounds will attest. B and B's, big RV's, and apre skis.

To our southwest, however, are some wild mountainous regions less famous, less travelled. Unlike their popular Rocky Mountain cousins to the north, these are truly mountains of New Mexico... drier, more desolate, rugged, and wild. Touched with an air of danger. These are the mountains of the Gila, taking up a major portion of the southwest quadrant of the state. For my money and for many reasons, these are the real gems of the southwest; the biggest, baddest, best unknown area in New Mexico and perhaps in the entire lower 48.

Much of the reason admittedly, is their inaccessibility. They're not only hard to get into, they're darn difficult just to approach. But for those who make the effort, the payoff is huge. In these mountains one can find solitude midst the grandeur, sharing an expansive valley with none save the elk and the mule deer. Raccoons, skunk, mountain lions, bears... well, solitude is a relative thing isn't it?

There are basically 2 ways into the Gila, from the north and from the south. And ne'er the twain shall meet, lest you do it yourself through a wilderness, on foot or horseback. On our recent journey, we intended to explore from both directions. Coming down from Albuquerque, we headed west at Socorro past the Very Large Array and skirted along the northern edge of the Gila National Forest. At several

places along this highway, there are forest service access roads of the washboard gravel variety that head south into the Gila. If you have a map, a semi-high-clearance vehicle, food and water for a few days, and some time... take any one of 'em. Use your camera and report back to us.

We however, had a destination in mind and a late start, so we bypassed all those siren-song roads and travelled westward nearly all the way across the state to the Arizona border where we jogged around back east

along the Bursom road through the ghost town of Mogollon. That twisting, turning ascent of the mountain on a narrow, blacktop road is worthy of several stories in and of itself... the spectacular views of the mountains to the west in Arizona and the specters of old mines long dead but not buried... those stories I'll leave to another time.

Past Mogollon (Muh - ge - own) it's another torturous 28 miles on a bumpy, gravel road to our destination. Somewhere along that deserted stretch you begin to wonder about the sanity of this whole proposition. What was I thinking?

Suddenly there's a sharp descent into a beautiful valley and all of the doubting disappears. What you've found here is

Willow Creek, a little slice of heaven. When we pulled in on a Thursday evening in June, the campground was deserted. The creek gurgled merrily, knee deep in occasional pools, just over the ankles in



most. The kids were wet before I could get the cooler out of the car. As we set up camp a great blue heron rose from the deserted beaver ponds upstream. He circled lazily above us before heading off to less densely populated areas.

That night a nearly full moon added its fluorescent glow to the dancing shadows from the fire. We sat and sometimes talked, often not, preferring to hear the nothingness, the wildness, the crackle of the fire and the murmur of the creek. It was hard to go to bed, but it was easy to sleep.

From this place, there are several good hikes southward into the Gila wilderness. Just above the dilapidated

beaver dams a small creek trickles down the mountainside and a trail switchbacks up the side a couple of miles to the top of the mesa and an overgrown muddy pond called Iron Creek Lake. There is neither a creek nor a lake there.

There are ducks, though. They congregate on the isolated pond. And several trails spread out from there... east along the length of the mesa or south off the mesa down to Iron Creek and eventually to the headwaters of the Gila River.

No matter which direction you go, you probably won't see any people. This is a wilderness in the truest sense of the word. Walk softly and listen to the wind. Imagine a world like this, without roads and clocks and refrigerators humming in the night. It's easier to do here, sitting with your back against a creaking, ageless ponderosa pine. Perhaps in the peacefulness you'll catch a bit of the tree's story in the whispering breeze. Perhaps as you leave you'll give that tree a hug.

But don't tell anybody.

There's another good trail just a little ways down the road from the Willow Creek campground at Gilita creek. If you like to hike along waterways as I do, this is a beauty. It's got a few rough spots where it ascends up and over lava-rock strewn boulder fields with treacherous footing where one would not want to be in a rainstorm, but for the most part it's an easy path. It follows the creek down until it dumps into the Gila some 5 or 6 miles from the start.

Take it as far as you like. Get your feet wet. The trout are wily and elusive. When you catch the faint, sweet scent of mint, try to find its source. The plants often grow right in the water. Take some sprigs back to camp and make yourself a little mint tea after dinner. Better yet, if you have ice and bourbon, a mint julep may be just what the doctor ordered.

Tearing yourself away from the Willow Creek area may be the toughest thing you've had to do in a while. If you're not foolishly intent on exploring the entire Gila region in one trip, I'd suggest

remaining here as long as your calendar (and bourbon supply) permits. Put off the southern entrance for another trip.

But as for us, we circled back out the way we came and around down to Silver City where we restocked our supplies and headed north into the bowels of the Gila wilderness and the enigmatic Gila Cliff Dwellings.

This road too, has a dozen stories to tell. What I'll say about it is that you should make time to stop as you near the north end at the little grocery store near the hot springs. Get a cup of home-made ice cream for a buck. Best deal in New Mexico.

If you're camping and can handle primitive campgrounds you'll want to stay at the Forks campground just before and right on the Gila River. No water, no tables, no people, but raccoons as big as small bears with an uncanny knowledge of ice-chests. And access to a wild and rugged river where all three forks come together into one tantalizing yet slightly fearsome tumbling, churning siren song of cold water. On a sunny day it delights. On a cloudy day it mystifies. On both it beguiles. Hopefully you'll get a little of both.

Without question, you'll want to do a side trip to the Cliff Dwellings. Do the tour with a ranger if you prefer groups and talks. Walk alone with a brochure if you want to commune with the spirits. It's a powerful, strange, and wonderful place unlike anywhere else. You'll not soon forget it.

From the end of the road in the Cliff Dwellings monument, there are so many trails off into the wilderness that it is difficult to choose. We opted to go backpacking northward along the middle fork of the Gila. Like most of the trails here, it crosses the river many times so you'll have to be prepared to hike with wet boots.

Along the way you'll pass over a hot springs coming out of the side of the mountain and meandering down into the river. In years past the spot had a series of pools built into the side of the river with

varying temperatures in each, but this years spring floods changed the course of the river and the pools are gone. A new pool at the confluence is in the process of being built by energetic hikers and I've no doubt that soon it will be an inviting way station.

The river here is really a large stream... mid-calf deep in most places, hip deep in some, and up to your neck in those few elusive, enchanted swimming holes. We camped the first night near one such hole and ended up staying in that spot for the duration. Why mess with a good thing?

We spent several serene days swimming in the clear, cold water, laying out on the rock ledges under cloudless skies, and exploring the pristine wilderness. We did not discuss our jobs or our schedules or the thing in Iraq. We wondered instead at the architectural marvels of the beavers and waterside spiders, and the iridescent gleam of dragonfly wings in the brilliant midday sun. Water striders and woodpeckers... through the hours and the days these things gently dabbed at the dirty spots on our brains like a caring mother delicately wiping the tears and the blood from the face of her banged-up child. Until, in time, like that child, we were clean and fresh and smiling again and ready to face the world.

And in that way, we hiked back out of that magical wilderness, our packs and our hearts lighter. We climbed into the car and somewhat sadly headed back on the long journey toward Albuquerque.

But we did stop briefly at a certain small grocery for a last little bit of magic in the form of some homemade ice cream. And I swear to you, I could feel mother nature smiling when we resumed our journey and, glancing up into the mirror, I saw that I had to dab some wayward ice cream off my chin.