

Los Angeles Times | TRAVEL

NEW MEXICO

Natural and cultural beauty etched into New Mexican expanse

Gov. Bill Richardson gives an artist a tour of his beloved state.

By Judith Fein, Reporting from Santa Fe, N.M.

05:42 PM PDT, September 25, 2009



[Click to Enlarge](#)



A tour of New Mexico with Gov. Bill Richardson

[More Photos »](#)

New Mexico Travel Guide »

- [Hotel Guide](#)
- [Attraction Guide](#)
- [Restaurant Guide](#)
- [Offers & Deals](#)

Related Stories

- [Planning your trip to New Mexico](#)
- [There's a new age of golf in New Mexico](#)
- [New Mexico History Museum debuts](#)
- [Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico is the untamed West](#)
- [In New Mexico, history is etched into El Morro monument](#)
- [Be my guide: Sledding at White Sands National Monument in New Mexico](#)

The sun beat down on the weathered wooden buildings of the deserted western town. Four cowboys circled on their mounts, anticipation flashing in their eyes as they looked out toward a long, dusty road.

Then he appeared: 6 feet 2 inches tall, black cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes, chaps covering his legs. He strode past the saloon, the telegraph office and the freight depot and called for Toby, his horse. Then he rode out into the desert scrub, as the rest of the cowboys trailed after him.

It was almost a movie moment. In fact, this was a movie set at Bonanza Creek Ranch, about 20 minutes from Santa Fe, where "Lonesome Dove," "Into the West" and "Silverado" were shot. The star of the show this day was New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, former U.N. ambassador, candidate for the presidency, negotiator for the release of hostages.

The First Cowboy took time out of his schedule to show me his New Mexico, the 47th state admitted to the union a little more than 97 years ago. With its sweeping vistas, wide-open spaces and collision of cultures, it's a visual and cultural buffet that captivates the governor, who makes the Energizer Bunny look like a slacker.

So here we were, hanging out. It was his job to show me some of his favorite places. It was my job to try to keep up with him. Richardson, 61, who has spent a couple of decades in the saddle, had Toby plus his trainer with him, and he was clearly comfortable and in control. I was jelly-legged with fear as my steed and I tried to keep up.

"This is what I do for fun and relaxation and to get away from work, staff, BlackBerries and the relentless pressure," Richardson said as I clutched the reins. "I go riding once a week. I love the savage beauty of the landscape and the rhythm of the horse. It's like being on a boat on the ocean with the wind, the air, the peace. It's a dialogue between me and my horse."

He paused and glanced at me in an avuncular way, sensing my conversation with my horse wasn't going all that well: "Keep your heels down, sit up straight, don't hold the reins too tight."

Richardson looked out over the seemingly endless expanse of high desert in his adopted home. It may be his upbringing that makes him especially suited to govern this state. His father, an American, met his mother while working in Mexico City, but before their son was born in 1947, she traveled to Pasadena to ensure the child would be unquestionably an American citizen.

He spent the next 13 years in Mexico, then went to prep school in Concord, Mass., on his way to Tufts and then to Washington, D.C. He moved to New Mexico in 1978 and won a seat in the House in 1982. After his U.N. ambassadorship and a stint as President Clinton's Energy secretary, he returned to New Mexico in 2002 and was elected governor the same year. He explored a presidential bid in 2008 but ultimately chose the land of real horses over Washington horse trading.

We rode from the movie set out through the scrub, sand and shrubs of the surrounding landscape, and then looped back to the western movie town. After we dismounted, I joined R.C. Brown, the governor's driver, as he drove Richardson by car to the top of Museum Hill in Santa Fe.

"I'm a pottery man, and this is my favorite museum," Richardson said, as I followed him into the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. "I like Indian art the best, and Barbara [his wife] and I own a Fritz Scholder painting and a T.C. Cannon."

Shelby Tisdale, the director of the museum, greeted us and applauded Richardson's good taste. "Scholder and Cannon were the beginning of the modern movement, away from traditional works on paper," she explained. Scholder, who's considered the first Native American artist to portray the "real Indian," produced paintings, lithographs, photographs and sculptures and influenced a generation of contemporary native artists.

One of his best-known students was Cannon, who helped expand the boundaries of Indian art by painting Native American themes and people in a bold, contemporary, vividly colored, highly decorative style. Cannon was killed in a car accident in 1978.

"I also collect R.C. Gorman," Richardson said of the Native American lithographer and master of unique, fluid, contemporary American Indian portraits whose accessible style makes them immediately identifiable.

"He was a personal friend. He did fund-raisers for me," Richardson said of Gorman. "We'd raffle off some of his prints when I was a nobody running for Congress in 1982."

Native artworks

The museum exhibits about 12,000 years of Native American history, has world-class historic and contemporary collections and is integral to the story of New Mexico native art.

Richardson was like an excited kid as he pointed out some of his favorite pieces. "Look at this Maria," he said, referring to an elegant black-on-black pot adorned with a bird motif, made by world-renowned Maria and her husband, Julian Martinez of San Ildefonso Pueblo. She is credited with reviving the ancient art of traditional Pueblo pottery as it teetered on the edge of extinction. Today, her works sell for thousands of dollars and have inspired new generations of native potters.

"I love the blackness and the traditional shape of the pot," he said. "It's so black, so perfect."

I trailed Richardson as he entered an exhibit room called "A River Apart." The name, he said, referred to the Santo Domingo and Cochiti pueblos, separated by the Rio Grande. They are among 19 Indian pueblos or communities spread throughout the state. (Many welcome tourists, except on certain ceremonial days.)

"These two pueblos are very special to me," he said. "The first bill I passed in Congress in 1983 was to return land to Cochiti that was improperly taken by the federal government. Both pueblos are close personal and political allies of mine."

Besides collecting Indian art, the governor also loves attending Catholic feast days at the pueblos. "And I almost always go to Acoma for Christmas," he said of the pueblo built atop the 367-foot butte about 50 miles southwest of Albuquerque.

Richardson's face lighted up in front of a case that displayed clay "storyteller dolls," dating from the 1880s to the 1920s, that depict the oral, tale-telling tradition of native people and honor the storytellers. The smallest ones are a few inches high and the largest can be close to a foot tall. "They tell a story about life, culture, nature, and they do it vividly," he said. "They don't have to shout it or write it down -- just look at the storytellers, their eyes, their mouths. You can guess at the thousand things they are doing and thinking."

He paused for a moment, reflecting on his childhood in Mexico City. "My mother and grandmother told me religious tales about the saints and Mary Magdalene and mythical stories in Spanish," he said. "They were good storytellers. My grandmother was very religious and made me go to church almost every day and to confession. I'd say to her, 'Grandmother, give me some time to sin!'"

As we headed to the jewelry exhibit, I noticed his simple silver bracelet, an elegant piece made of three rings. "I wear a bracelet every day," he said. "Usually leather and turquoise. And I'm also wearing this," he added, showing the silver Navajo cross with turquoise inlay hanging from his neck.

He pointed at a huge, stamped silver concha belt from the 1970s. "It shows their character, their religion, their strength, their beautiful skills, their silversmithing, their elegance and sense of aesthetic," he said of the craftsmen. Concha or concho belts were originally made by the Navajo, but today other tribes make them as well. These often-exquisite belts showcase fine Native silversmithing and often are decorated with turquoise or other stones.

Glancing at his watch, he realized it was time to take off for Tesuque Village Market, where a friend was meeting him for lunch. Somewhere on the 20-minute trip to this low-key deli/grocery/restaurant north of Santa Fe in the village of Tesuque, he put on a creamy off-white shirt that he wore, loose and unbuttoned, over his blue T-shirt.

The friend turned out to be Val Kilmer, the Juilliard-educated actor whose film credits include "Batman Forever," "Top Gun" and "The Doors." His local credits include a paternal grandfather who was a prospector in New Mexico. New Mexico's First Lady Barbara Flavin Richardson also joined us.

Kilmer, an avid wildlife enthusiast, owns a ranch in Pecos about 25 miles east of Santa Fe. He laughingly described his 60,000-acre spread as covering the distance from Century City to the Santa Monica Pier.

Our lunch was surprisingly laid-back for a funny, smart, literate, self-effacing, conceptual artist, writer and blond movie star and a bearded, mustached man, a five-time Nobel Prize nominee. The duo shares an interest in and passion for films and the film business. Kilmer has helped promote the film industry in New Mexico, and Richardson is said to have helped generate \$3 billion in film-related revenue and has had 135 films shot in the state during his tenure.

[Single page](#) | 1 2 >>

[More New Mexico Stories >>](#)



Where am I?

Toto, we're not in Egypt anymore. But we are standing before a sphinx, surrounded by thousands of fascinating old graves.



Iconic destinations

"Hobbiton" and other spots to visit drawn from pop culture.



[Asia/South & Southeast](#)

[Submit a Photo or Video](#)

News	Entertainment	Living	Multimedia	Top Blogs	About
Local	Television	Travel	Video	L.A. Now	Corrections
Nation	Movies	Health	Photos	Dish Rag	Readers' Rep
World	Music	Food	Data Desk	Hero Complex	Print Edition
Business	Arts & Culture	Home	Your Scene	Top of the Ticket	Help
Technology	Celebrity	Image	Times on Twitter	Lakers Blog	Contact Us
Sports	The Envelope	Magazine	RSS	Pop and Hiss	About Us
Opinion	Calendar	Books	Newsletters	Show Tracker	Place an Ad
Columnists	Company Town	Autos	Kindle	Travel & Deals	Subscribe
	TV Listings	Hot List	E-edition	Gold Derby	Site Map
	Movie listings	Horoscopes		Booster Shots	

Terms of Service | Privacy Policy
 | Baltimore Sun
 | Chicago Tribune | Daily Press | Hartford Courant | LA Times | Orlando Sentinel | Sun Sentinel | The Morning Call | The Virginia Gazette
 Los Angeles Times, 202 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, California, 90012 | Copyright 2009

A Tribune Web site