STANDING atop the windy limestone hill, I let my eyes wander from the stone walls of the San Buenaventura mission to the dry plains stretching into the horizon. Multitiered cumulus clouds occupying a distant quadrant of the sky threatened not a drop of rain.

Save for the drought-resistant vegetation -- pinyon pines, prickly-pear cactuses and desert four-o'clock wildflowers with their brilliant displays of magenta blossoms -- the landscape around the Gran Quivira ruins has changed little since they were abandoned more than three centuries ago.

For about 50 years in the 17th century, Gran Quivira was an outpost for the Spanish Empire, an unlikely point of contact between Old and New World cultures on the frontier of what was then New Spain.

These days, Gran Quivira and its sister sites in the Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument in central New Mexico, Quarai and Abo, form a remarkably well-preserved triad of ruins that provide visitors with insight into the origins of the Southwest.

It is well known that New Mexico is rich in ruins, with sites like the multistoried masonry pueblos of Chaco Canyon and the Gila Cliff Dwellings. Faced with the array of choices when I visited in August, I did not know where to begin.

I decided to focus on the abandoned pueblos and missions near the Rio Grande, places that captured the austere beauty and complex underpinnings of early European forays in the New World.

The ruins in the Salinas Valley and those at two other sites, the Pecos National Historical Park, southeast of Santa Fe, and the Jemez State Monument, southwest of Los Alamos, were each striking in their own way, but I was most impressed by two sites, Gran Quivira and Quarai (pronounced KWA-rye.)

Each is in a remote location that made me wonder what motivated human beings to settle there. Their stone walls are evidence of colonial ambitions that were quickly undone by some of the very forces, like the horse, that Spanish authorities had released onto the surrounding scrublands and mountains. No wonder these limestone and sandstone structures have inspired awe in travelers for centuries.

"An edifice in ruins, it is true, but so tall, so solemn, so dominant of that strange lonely landscape, so out of place in that land of adobe box huts, as to be simply overpowering," was how Charles F. Lummis described Quarai in "The Land of Poco Tiempo" in 1893. "On the Rhine, it would be a superlative, in the wilderness of the Manzano it is a miracle."

The dry summer heat notwithstanding, exploring the ruins on foot was easy thanks to walking paths and self-guided tours from the National Park Service. Some trails, including a few at Quarai, were closed because of recent flooding, but most remained accessible. I virtually had the place to myself the day I saw the site, the only other visitors a couple crisscrossing New Mexico on Harley-Davidsons.

Approaching the ruins of the mission at Quarai, near Punta de Agua, a small village of adobe and trailer homes, I was lulled by the soft wind blowing through the old cottonwoods surrounding the site. I wondered why such a tranquil place was abandoned.

About two centuries before Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the Louisiana Purchase, the viceroy in Mexico...
City sought to increase the colonial influence in New Mexico by issuing an order in 1609 to concentrate Indians into settlements with a strong presence of the church.

Construction of the church at Quarai, the site of a community of Tiwa-speaking Indians, did not begin until 1626, under the supervision of Fray Alonso Benavides, but when completed in 1630 it was an expression of Spanish power. Quarai became the regional seat of the Inquisition and focal point of the rivalry between church and military.

Long after its abandonment in the 1670's amid persistent attacks by Comanches and Apaches swooping in on horseback from the eastern plains, Quarai remains imposing.

Part of the church's original flagstone floor still exists, and above are sockets that once held vigas, or roof beams, and painted corbels, the supports for the beams that spanned the church and supported the ceiling. The sandstone church still has walls that were once more than 40 feet high.

I exclaimed in amazement at what I saw and was surprised by the echo. The acoustics are superb; de Profundis, an a capella ensemble from Albuquerque, presents medieval and contemporary music each September in the church.

The remains of stone walls surrounding the church were once a large village of some 600 Tiwa-speaking people. That number remained steady during the Franciscan occupation lasting through the late 1670's, according to the archaeological consultant John P. Wilson, despite the rapid decline in the number of Pueblo Indians in New Mexico -- from 34,320 to 17,000 -- in the same period.

The kiva, the underground ceremonial chamber, was built to allow cool air to descend through a ventilator shaft while warm air and smoke rose out a hatchway. It was tolerated by colonial authorities and remains important in pueblo culture today.

I marveled at the ingenuity of the kiva's design, so close to the mission, a structure that seems ostentatious in comparison even long after its abandonment. The Tiwa's ability to incorporate Catholic practices into their belief system while adhering to their sacred rituals in part explains why their language is still spoken at the pueblos of Isleta, Picuris, Sandia and Taos.

Visiting the Salinas ruins was a lesson not only in history's tug on the present but also in economics. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of shells, dried buffalo meat and flints that were traded for items such as maize and salt. The Indians there were middlemen between settlements to the west and the Great Plains tribes before the Spanish arrived.

The expedition of Francisco Vaszquez de Coronado in 1540 to New Mexico was an early but unsuccessful effort to find the land of Quivira, fabled for it riches. Still, the allure of Quivira remained, and its name was eventually given to the settlement on the hill that I visited on a hot August day.

From its perch 6,600 feet above sea level, Gran Quivira reminded me of the ruins of the Moorish fortress Alcazaba in southern Spain. After the army of King Ferdinand took control of Alcazaba in the late 15th century, it built a church within its walls. The strategy was repeated at Gran Quivira, with a mission of blue-gray limestone.

However, the Spanish seem to have had less success in Gran Quivira than in Quarai, as shown by the construction of a second church at the pueblo in 1659 that was never completed.

Unlike Quarai, near the village of Manzano, Gran Quivira is almost as isolated as in its flashpoint days. A solar-powered ranger station and visitor center are the only evidence of modern contact.

Ruins of the two churches, San Buenaventura and San Isidro, stand near a mound with evidence of pithouses from A.D. 700 and relatively more recent limestone remains of a small settlement. Evidence of communal life at the pueblo is seen in the shared-wall design of the excavated rooms.

Archaeologists say much of village life, like chores and gossiping, took place on the roofs of these rooms, though it was hard to picture Gran Quivira as anything but a refuge from the elements. The precarious nature of living on the margin of the world impressed me as I wandered through the small labyrinth of limestone walls.

Arriving at Gran Quivira from Mountainair along Route 55, a two-lane paved road that was almost empty, I was also reminded how immense the West is and how much larger it must have seemed, minus asphalt and four-wheel-drive, to the Tompiro Indians who settled here and the Spaniards who came to subdue them.

Colonial authorities wanted Gran Quivira because of its strategic location near large salt flats. They needed salt to process silver discovered in Hidalgo del Parral, in northern Mexico. Hence the name Salinas, Spanish for a place where water evaporates to leave salt. The Indians were forced into labor, gathering salt into leather bags that were then taken south to Hidalgo del Parral in caravans. But this salt-based trade did not last as a combination of exploitation, disease and drought overwhelmed Gran Quivira. In
1668, four years before its outright abandonment, about 450 people died of starvation in the pueblo.

As David Grant Noble wrote in his book "Ancient Ruins of the Southwest," some people migrated to more stable pueblos along the Rio Grande while others went south to join communities in the El Paso area, their culture absorbed into the places where they sought refuge.

The Spanish also suffered. The meticulously coordinated Pueblo Revolt of 1680 killed more than 400 Spaniards, including 21 of New Mexico's 33 missionaries. Thus ended Spain's early foray, its lonely churches left to crumble.

Rivaling the ruins were the scenic roads that connect them to other parts of New Mexico. The 25-mile trip from the town of Mountainair to Gran Quivira was especially striking as the high desert landscape unfolded around me.

One day after trekking in Gran Quivira, I drove into Albuquerque as the sunset produced an explosion of orange and yellow color above a shimmering cityscape. The city's laid-back comforts were welcome. After a walk under a canopy of cottonwoods near the Rio Grande, I had delicious huevos rancheros at El Patio, a charming restaurant near the University of New Mexico.

Later, friends took me to listen to live jazz at an outdoor bar alongside the old Route 66, where we drank cold beer on a balmy summer night and absorbed the sounds of bossa nova. It was hard to recall the New Mexico of salt caravans and Comanche raids, of colonial ambition and Indian revolts.

If you go to Salinas Pueblo

Information

Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument, Post Office Box 517, Mountainair, N.M. 87036-0517; (505) 847-2585, www.nps.gov/sapu.


Jemez State Monument, Post Office Box 143, Jemez Springs, N.M. 87025; (505) 829-3530; www.nmculture.org.

Lodging and Dining

La Posada de Albuquerque, 125 Second Street, (800) 777-5732, (505) 242-8664, www.laposada-abq.com, in the heart of Albuquerque, is a charming base for exploring ruins in central and northern New Mexico. Built by Conrad Hilton, a New Mexico native, in 1939, the 113-room hotel combines Southwestern detail with a laid-back atmosphere. Doubles: $120.

El Patio, 142 Harvard Street, Albuquerque, (505) 268-4245, offers feisty and inexpensive interpretations of New Mexico food on a funky outdoor patio in the neighborhood adjacent to the University of New Mexico. The huevos rancheros ($5.50), with generous helpings of green and red chilies, were excellent. Lunch and dinner daily; a three-course meal for two with drinks is about $25.

Club Rhythm and Blues, 3523 Central Avenue, Albuquerque, (505) 256-0849, on old Route 66, is the place to hear jazz and blues artists. Drinks, $3 and up; cover, $3 to $15. Open Monday to Saturday, from 8 p.m.


The Sad Cafe in Ribera, (505) 421-3380, a few miles north of the monument, offers a variety of cuisines, including pan-Asian, Cajun and southern Italian. The sliced tomato and local goat cheese omelet ($5) is a good bet. Dinner for two: $40. Breakfast and lunch Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; breakfast, lunch and dinner Friday and Saturday. SIMON ROMERO

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GRAPHIC: Photos: The ruins of a church, which was never completed, at Gran Quivira. The church interior at the Quarai ruins at Salinas Pueblo Missions. (Photographs by Jim Wilson/The New York Times) Map of New Mexico shows surrounding area.