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Discover the
"Other" Route 66
Riding the Old Spanish Trail

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THE “OTHER”

In U.S. motorized iconography, the legendary Route 66 opened in 1926, providing a unified roadway stretching from Chicago to Santa Monica, some 2,450 miles. By its creation, the myth of the endless straight road was born. Although the route officially disappeared in 1985, thousands still travel it every year looking to soak up some genuine Americana.

However, there's a much older, far less known historical path that runs from ocean to ocean, across eight states: *The Old Spanish Trail*.

I began the route in St. Augustine, Florida, a charming town that proudly boasts of being the nation's oldest city, founded in 1565 by the Spaniard Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (Florida ceased belonging to Spain in 1821). Continuing towards Tallahassee, I visit the *Hernando de Soto Winter Encampment Historic State Park*—named after explorer Hernando de Soto who wintered in this spot in 1539, celebrating Christmas here. He and 700 men had landed that same year near Tampa and over the next two years carved their way across 3,100 miles to discover the Mississippi River.

Next stop, Pensacola, where a sign informs that it's the oldest settlement in the United States, founded in 1559 by the Spaniard Tristan de Luna y Arellano, who attempted to establish the first permanent colony before a hurricane swept away the newly founded site. Spain fought a decisive battle in Pensacola in 1783, regaining Florida from the British. That battle was also crucial for the independence of the United

States because it strengthened the rebels, who stocked supplies along the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans. The hero of that victory was Bernardo de Galvez, governor of Spanish Louisiana and the only Spaniard to have a statue on display along Virginia Avenue (also known as *Avenida de los Libertadores*) in Washington, D.C.

Heading into New Orleans, a skyline bristling with skyscrapers appears at the end of the seemingly infinite Lake Pontchartrain Causeway Bridge. At first glance it's like any other city. But that impression lasts only until one leaves the interstate and gets lost in the French Quarter, one of the most architecturally captivating neighborhoods in America. New Orleans has personality—lots of personality. Houses with porches, balconies, railings, lanterns... you can feel an inner soul within these buildings and streets.

Along the famous Bourbon Street, the traveler may be surprised to discover street plates made with tiles from the Spanish town of *Talavera de la Reina*. Bourbon Street was originally *del Borbon* during the Spanish presence after 1763. The entire historic center is well stocked with ceramic plate antiquities reminiscent of old Spanish names.

Farther down the road, Texas is the second largest state in the Union after Alaska, and was under Spanish regency

ROUTE 66



by Miquel Silvestre

THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL



until the 19th century. A good proof of its Hispanic past can be found at Goliad, the third oldest town in the state, founded around the mission of *Our Lady of the Holy Spirit of Zuñiga* and a Spanish fort called Presidio Bay. South from there we find Laredo, a municipality of the province of Nuevo Santander, colonized by the Spaniard Jose de Escandon, first Count of Sierra Gorda.

Following the border with Mexico I cross the Pecos River and everything seems to change in this part of the west. Fewer people, fewer cars, and immense spaces. I arrive at Big Bend National Park, which takes its name from the 90-degree curve of the *Rio*

Grande—a huge 250-mile loop. The foothills of the Chisos Mountains can be seen in the background with the Emory Peak at 7,825 feet. The clouded horizon wears an unreal bluish tone. Distances are huge and social interactions are scarce. Perhaps that's why insanity seems so possible here, as exemplified by the Judge Roy Bean, self-styled "Law West of the Pecos." Elected Justice of Peace in 1882, his exploits included the likes of suspended judgments to sell liquor in his tent-saloon, fining a dead man, and holding a boxing match in the middle of the *Rio Grande*.

The trails of yellow dust get lost in the arid distance leading to the Mexican border. The park spans more than 1250 square miles across the



On the way to the Chiricahua National Monument, in Arizona.

void where only cacti and docile reptiles seem to make up the desolate ecosystem. But, in the cool of the night, the desert is revived by the nocturnal activities of rabbits, peccaries and coyotes.

The first European to travel this land was the Spaniard Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. He was part of the ill-fated expedition of Panfilo de Narvaez's from Florida. Shipwrecked in 1527, he was one of four survivors who walked 3,100 miles over the following eight years, naked and unarmed, surviving as slave trader and shaman to the indigenous people of the southwest before reconnecting with Spanish colonial forces in Mexico. To this day his adventurous account remains one of the most amazing stories in North American history.

In Alcalde, New Mexico, I visit the impressive statue dedicated to the last Conquistador, Juan de Oñate, who was the state's first governor and accomplished explorer of the Colorado territory in the 16th century. It's the largest equestrian statue in the world at 11 meters and 16 tons.

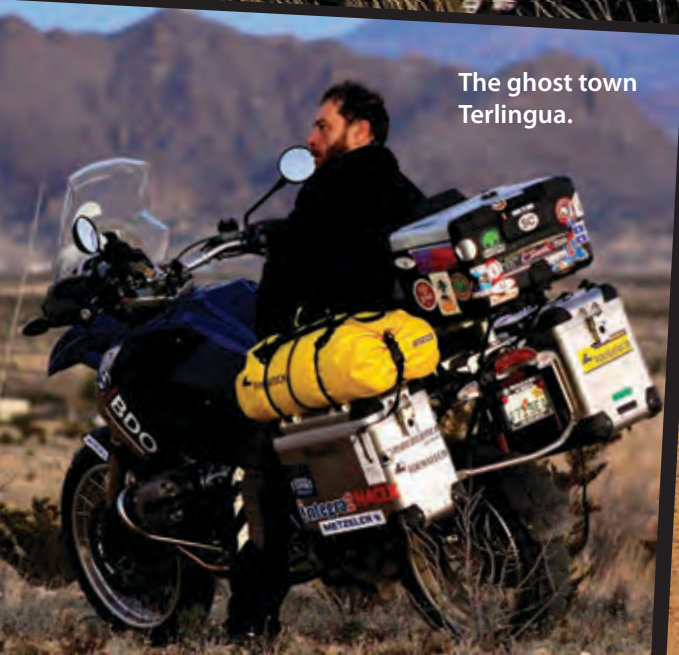
I resume my ride by way of a hidden local road

parallel to the Mexican border. Drivers suspiciously scrutinize the unknown rider. Among the dry bushes sways a rattlesnake and an old van spews black smoke as it passes at full speed. Border patrol officers, known as the dreaded "La Migra," stop trucks looking for illegal immigrants. The desert lays infinite under a reddish horizon.

Still in New Mexico, I ride among the earth-pounding oil wells in an arid territory that was once the Spanish province of Sonora. It's a bleak landscape of ghost towns, where almost on the border with Mexico lies Columbus, a tiny village that had its moment of fame when Pancho Villa raided in 1916.

Across the state line into Arizona is the *Chiricahua National Monument and Coronado Forest*, named in honor of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, a Spaniard from Salamanca who, from 1540 to 1542, at the age of 30, commanded an expedition across North America. He did not find the Seven Cities of Gold he was seeking, but he did find a real treasure: the Grand Canyon.

The road becomes an unpaved trail as I ascend 7,500 feet of a rocky and steep path that sometimes turns into thick mud. There is snow in the shady areas. After two hours of riding I arrive at a yellow dusty path that soon takes me back to the asphalt. In the south of the state are the cities Tombstone and Tucson, two names



The ghost town
Terlingua.



that bring to mind Western films. However, by the time John Wayne conquered the American Wild West on the big screen, this area had already been claimed by Spain. Tucson was founded by Hugo O'Connor, an Irishman who'd enlisted in the Spanish military, known as the "Red Captain" by the Indians because of his hair color.

Nonetheless, the true conqueror of this wilderness was Juan Bautista de Anza. Born in 1763, Anza was the first Caucasian to successfully travel overland in a 750-mile odyssey from southern Arizona to the Pacific Ocean in California. North America has recognized his feat by dedicating his name to the *Anza Trail* and the *Anza-Borrego Desert State Park*, the second largest state park in the continental United States.

From Borrego Springs I travel to San Diego, where I visit the first Franciscan mission founded in 1769 by the priest Fray Junipero Serra, the only Spaniard to have a statue in the city. In total there are 21 Spanish missions spread over 600 miles of what is still known as the *Camino Real* or the California Mission Trail. It's a wonderful experience to cover that route—a trail that winds through magnificent landscapes of dry deserts, lush forests, white beaches and fertile valleys.

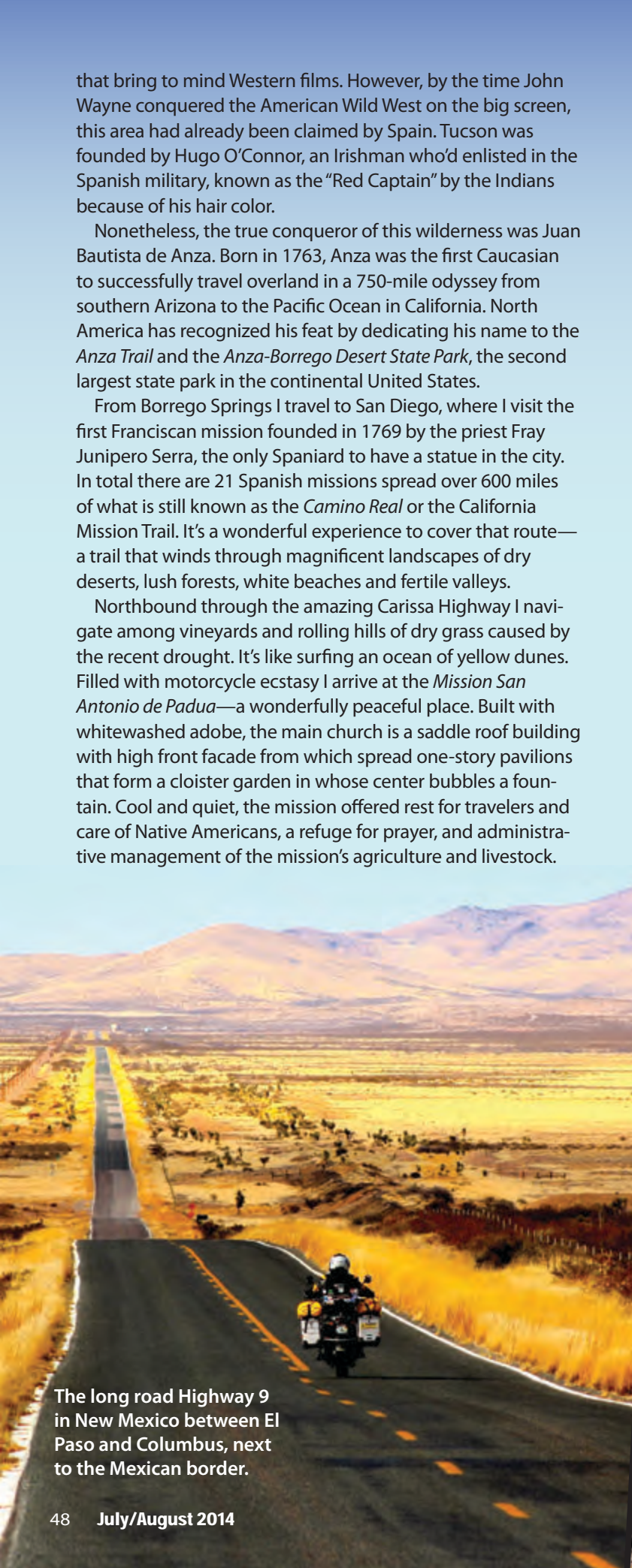
Northbound through the amazing Carissa Highway I navigate among vineyards and rolling hills of dry grass caused by the recent drought. It's like surfing an ocean of yellow dunes. Filled with motorcycle ecstasy I arrive at the *Mission San Antonio de Padua*—a wonderfully peaceful place. Built with whitewashed adobe, the main church is a saddle roof building with high front facade from which spread one-story pavilions that form a cloister garden in whose center bubbles a fountain. Cool and quiet, the mission offered rest for travelers and care of Native Americans, a refuge for prayer, and administrative management of the mission's agriculture and livestock.

I exit the mission and take the *Nacimiento Road*, a narrow path that runs through the foothills of a mountain leading me into the Big Sur area of the Pacific Ocean at sundown. In front of me unfolds California's Highway 1, one of the most beautiful roads I've ever seen. It clings to the ocean through miles and miles of curves, ups and downs, reminding me of the Mediterranean landscape of the French Riviera, or the Spanish Costa Brava, or the Costa Blanca.


At the end of this wonderful journey I meet my goal, exemplified by the proud *Golden Gate* that crosses San Francisco Bay. Its name originated on March 28, 1776 when the legendary Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza arrived here by land. I have just done the same, but on the back of a motorcycle—a journey with its own sense of overlanding explorer romance. Maybe that's why, deep inside, I too feel like a discoverer today. **ADV**

Miquel Silvestre is a Spanish writer and motorcycle world traveller. So far he has ridden across more than 80 countries and is currently following the route of former Spanish explorers for a project called Ruta de los Exploradores Olvidados—The Forgotten Explorers Route. Along with BMW Motorrad Spain, Miquel Silvestre is looking to resurrect the memories of many lesser known explorers—tracing the humble human stories of these great men.


MiquelSilvestre.com



The long road Highway 9 in New Mexico between El Paso and Columbus, next to the Mexican border.



The jump: Jumping for joy on Highway 170, Texas, from Presidio to Candelaria, where the road ends.



New Mexico seen from Arizona going up to Chiricahua National Monument.