

Exploring ancient civilization

The Mogollon community long ago was perhaps more developed than the hills of southwest New Mexico are today—pretty much a win-win for a weekend road trip. **STORY AND PHOTOS BY TYSON HUGIE**

Imagine how simple life must have been 700 years ago. I recently walked in the literal footsteps of the Mogollon (moga-yon) people—a band of indigenous tribes who lived off the land through subsistence farming during that era and who left behind a glimpse of what their lives consisted of. Being without cell signal for five hours gave but a very small taste of what it would have been like to be more in tune with nature. And I liked it.

The southwestern US is home to some of the best-preserved historic ruins, thanks to predictable weather patterns and remote geography. Almost exactly 110 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt set aside about 530 acres in southwest New Mexico as part of a National Monument that today sits about 40 miles north of the town of Silver City. For us Arizonans, that makes it a pretty accessible overnight road trip destination. And recently, per suggestion of (and in partnership with) *Driven for Drives'* Jason Pawela, I checked it off my list.

I broke free from the Phoenix urban grid a little after 3pm on Friday to make my eastward trip toward the New Mexico state line. As was to be

expected, I had to fight my way out on I-10 in commuter traffic but eventually was able to set the cruise on my 1992 Acura Integra GS-R (in Aztec Green, appropriately for an indigenous civilizations tour) at 75 miles per hour. I made just one stop, at Love's in Benson, for fuel and a stretch of the legs. The final 50 or so miles from I-10 at Lordsburg into Silver City were lonely and even a little creepy. My "Christmas tree" of dash lights (ABS, check engine, high beams, and cruise) were the only lights I saw, aside from vivid constellations under the night sky—highly visible thanks to the area's lack of light pollution.

Saturday morning brought us crisp 45 degree temperatures and blue skies. I met up with Jason, James L, and James Z for a hearty Comfort Inn breakfast (complete with green chile on the side—totally a New Mexico thing!), and then we rallied our vehicles for the weekend's drive: a 2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio, a 2004 Mazda 6 and the Integra.

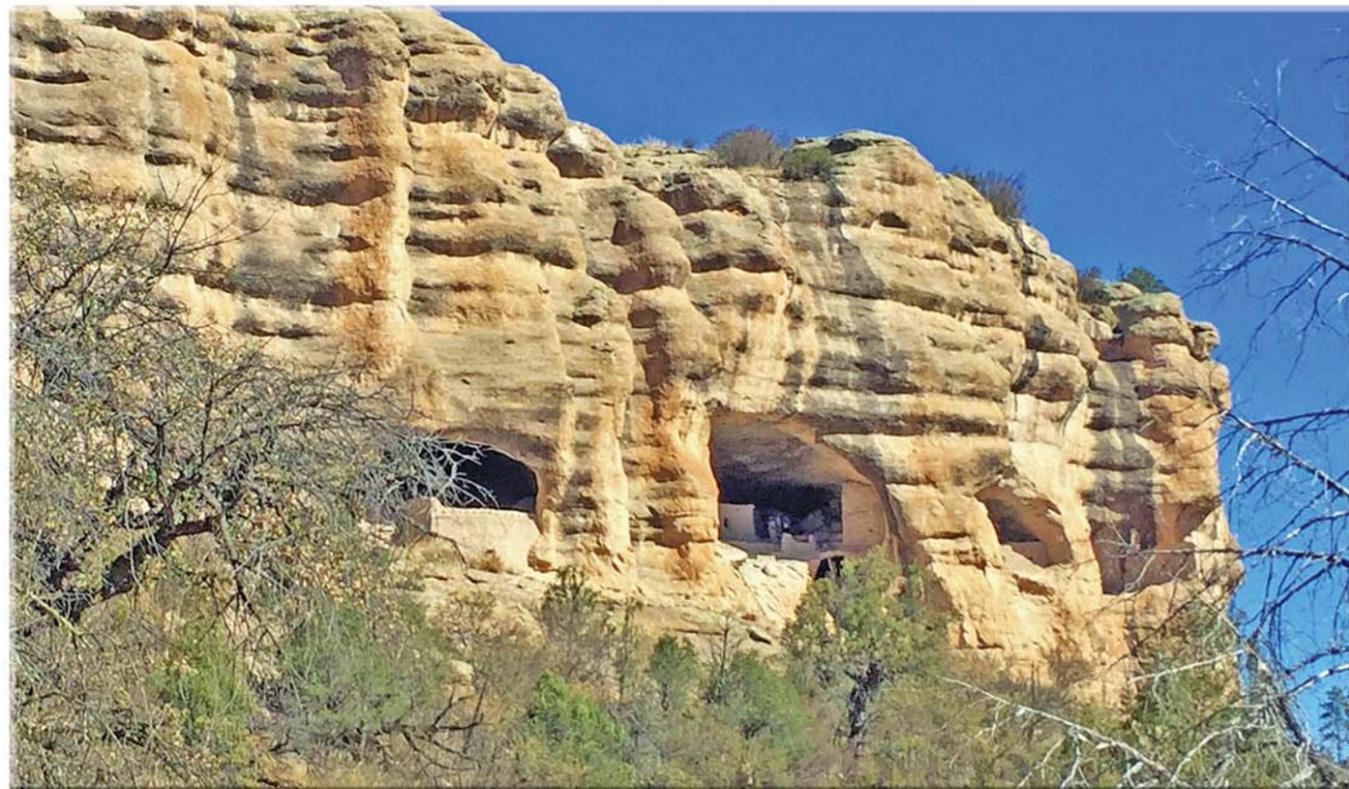
It took only a few minutes to lose cell service as we headed north on twisty Highway 15. For only a 2-liter motor, the Alfa's 280-horsepower 4-cylinder



develops oodles of power, and James was right on my tail. I swapped keys with Jason for a few miles and was impressed at how smoothly his ("new") Mazda 6 handles, given its 180k+ miles.

It's a good thing I was a driver, because I wouldn't have lasted five minutes as a passenger with these curves. For about half that stretch, the road is narrow, with blind corners and no painted centerline. NMDOT basically says "Good luck!" and to allow for plenty of travel time (they said two hours) between Silver City and the ruins.

After a brief intro at the Visitor Center, which probably looks today about the same as it did in the 1960s, we headed to a parking lot and trail-head two miles up the road. The dwellings in the area were believed to have been occupied around the year 1275 and are still remarkably well preserved. The Gila River running nearby was the Mogollon peoples' source of life. By 1874, when explorer Henry Weatherbee Henshaw discovered



The crew's 2004 Mazda 6, 2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio and 1992 Acura Integra GS-R at an overlook along narrow and twisty, but smooth and scenic Highway 15 north of Silver City, New Mexico. // (Still) standing on a corner in Dragoon, Arizona. // Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument Visitor Center. // The crew reaches their destination. // Maximum fall colors had passed, but a few patches were still vivid. // Enduring round holes in cliff dwelling walls once supported vigas, big logs that in turn supported the roofs. // Rattlesnakes are protected in Dragoon (not sure about dragons). // Lunch at Nancy's Silver Café in Silver City, NM. // Dragoon Road, I-10 Exit 318, is a classic blue highway leading into Dragoon.

and wrote about the ruins, some parts had been damaged. But ever since President Roosevelt's decision to make it a National Monument, preservation has been vigilant—we weren't even allowed to take liquids other than water on the hike, and we were asked not to touch any of the walls with our hands.

To access the site, we had to hike a one-mile loop which crosses several footbridges. There was a small brook running underneath them, and the sound of waterfalls made it a therapeutic experience. A steep incline further down the trail took us up the cliffside, then we walked through a series of five different "rooms," each one laid out with a unique floor plan. What struck me was the savvy use of space and the distinct feeling of temperature and brightness in each room. The south-facing openings were optimal because they would allow sunshine to enter and heat up the rooms in the winter time, but kept them shaded during the summer when the sun is higher in the sky.

Much of the Mogollon peoples' lives remains a mystery, and part of our tour consisted of a Q&A session with ranger Connie, who took the time to point out a few key features and ask us what we thought they were. They included a grinding stone, pictograph images painted on the walls, and architectural features of the caves. Today, there are wooden stepladders leading to the various rooms, but some of the original infrastructure—including rooftops over some of the rooms—are now gone. It took us about an hour to hike the circle.

The return drive to Silver City was again spirited in nature, and we made good time thanks to being a little more familiar with the terrain by now. Lunch was at Nancy's Silver Café in historic downtown, where the three-taco plate was just what the doctor ordered to satisfy those hunger cravings. We parted ways by midafternoon, and I sailed off into the sunset—literally, squinting at it the whole way—returning to Phoenix. I did make one stop along the way, in a town called Dragoon, perhaps in hopes that was misspelled and I'd see a fire-breathing dragon. I did see a sign welcoming rattlesnakes, so maybe there was a Gila monster in town. But no dragon. ■

