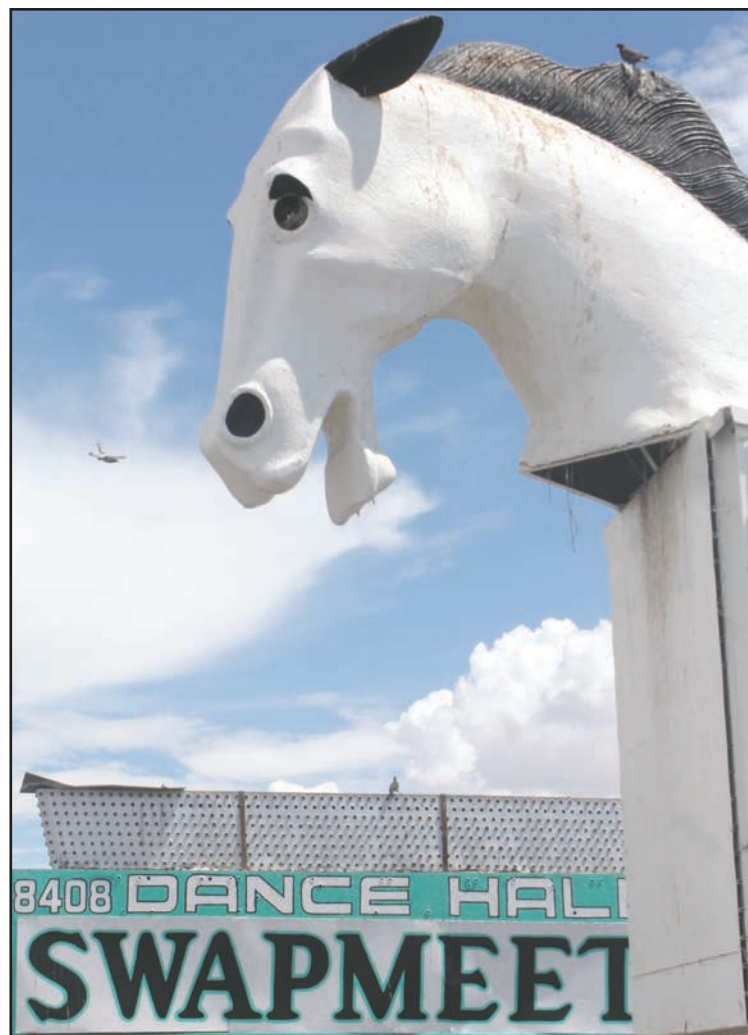




Ascarate Park lies on north end of the Lower Valley.

Photo by Lisa Kay Tate



"The Bronco" is a familiar landmark.

Photo by Lisa Kay Tate

More than Missions

Exploring El Paso's Lower Valley

Story by Lisa Kay Tate

The Mission Trail is one of El Paso County's greatest treasures, and the Lower Valley missions and Tigua reservation are some of the area's most visited sites for good reason.

However, there's a little bit more to El Paso's Lower Valley. The Lower Valley and its surrounding neighborhoods are home to numerous cultural and natural sites, unique local businesses, well-used park areas, and some favorite shopping areas and roadside landmarks.

El Paso Scene asked a variety of area residents what some of their favorite "off-mission" sites were in the Lower Valley. This list is far from a comprehensive, but a good beginning point to encourage readers to begin their own exploration of the historic area that stretches from Fox Plaza and Ascarate Park at its north end to San Elizario, Clint and Fabens to the south.

Fox Shopping Center and Mercado

Where does the Lower Valley officially begin? There's no precise definition, but the major intersection at Paisano and Alameda (now home to one of the city's largest roundabouts) is as good a starting point as any.

There you will find Fox Plaza, home to one of the area's most popular Sunday flea markets, which also hosts live entertainment, movies and other special events year round.

There is also an inside mini-mall area with 30 specialty shops and additional vendor spaces. The Mercado itself has more than 50 shops.

Plaza Property Manager Jeannette Negrete said the market has become a very familiar part of El Paso's retail landscape. "One of the reasons we are successful is

we have become a household name," she said. "The market has been going on for 40 years now, and the shopping center has been here for 55 years."

The market has 400 vendor spaces, with an average of about 300 to 350 of the spaces occupied each weekend. The market is also more than just a large mass of vendor booths, Negrete said, as it has all the trappings for a fun weekend field trip. The vendors are joined by family games and carnival attractions like a carousel and mechanical bull, and live music and entertainment.

"This is not just a place to come buy stuff, it's a place to take the family and come and spend some time," Negrete said.

Ascarate Park

Just down the road on the north side of the Lower Valley is El Paso's largest public-use recreational park, Ascarate Park on Delta Drive.

Country residents voted in favor of a special tax in 1937 to create the park, which was built with the help of more than 200 workers of the Civilian Conservation Corps and finished in 1940. The park is named after a pioneering ranching family.

The park covers 400 acres with an 18-hole golf course, pro shop and family-owned restaurant; a 48-acre lake with a boardwalk, boat rentals and aquatic center; community garden; playground facilities, sportspark, trails and picnic areas and recently added a splash park. Admission to the park is free on weekdays, with \$2 to \$5 a carload entrance fee on weekends and holidays.

From 1960 to 2006, the park was home to Western Playland Amusement Park, which relocated to Sunland Park, N.M.

The park is the site of several 5K races and fishing events, and hosts a variety of youth sports such as Aqua Posse's annual swim meet, Kid's Fishing tournaments, and Greater Tee golf events. Special events include the Sun City Fair each spring, Sun City Music Festival the first weekend in September, summer movies on the lake, and Christmas lights during the holiday seasons.

The park's more than 70 years of history in the area was commemorated with a historical marker in 2015.

El Paso County Commissioner for Precinct 2 David Stout emphasized the park's significance to the city to local media at the time of the marker's dedication.

"Ascarate Park is a huge part of El Paso," he said. "I have spoken to a number of people who remember coming here when they were children and are now bringing their children. Ascarate Park is part of everyone's history and this marker is just a great addition to showcase that history."

Bronco Swap Meet

It is hard to get more nostalgic and eclectic than visiting one of El Paso's largest weekend flea markets.

The 9-acre site at 8408 Alameda has more than 300 vendors, both indoors and outdoors, selling everything from antiques, collectibles to original art and food items. People often visit with families just to spend a day walking around a colorful, lively environment.

Even today, the big Bronco head, first created in 1950 for the Bronco Drive-In Theater by Luis Jimenez Sr. (the father of the sculptor who created "Los Lagartos" at San Jacinto Plaza), is a familiar icon for

area residents, even those who never visited the market.

The Bronco Drive-In had its grand opening on Oct. 14, 1949. The single-screen drive-in, which had a 600-car capacity, closed its doors in 1975 as a theater but has endured much longer as a flea market, with the old Bronco head still very much intact. It's open 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily Tuesday through Sunday. The Bronco Dance Hall is also on the former theatre's site.

Area resident Suzanna Corazon said there are many great finds at the market, including handmade items.

"I remember coming up here with some friends, buying these cool special made shorts and clothes this one lady used to make," she said. "There is more out here than you would expect."

The Brass Shop

Many of the Lower Valley's locally owned and operated businesses have been part of the area for several years.

One example is The Brass Shop, 7360 Stiles Drive, a spot that may not be on every tourism brochure but is often recommended by anyone who has been there.

The shop was founded by El Paso entrepreneur Bob Herndon in 1976, and his family has kept it going since his passing in 2012. The official name of the store is Herndon's Wrought Iron Furniture, but area residents affectionately just call it "The Brass Shop."

The large store, which features brass, wrought iron and aluminum furniture and other items, is a photo opportunity in itself, with its expanse of brass and novelties.

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