

THE HEART OF RATÓN

Often seen by travelers as a gateway to New Mexico, Ratón's best-kept secrets cannot be glimpsed at 70 mph from Interstate 25. Slow down and stop in at a Downtown where the old-fashioned never went out of style.

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM KELLER



Downtown's architecture and signage hark back to bygone eras. The 1882 Marchiondo Building (facing page, top) went up when the Santa Fe Railroad was completed, across what is now Ratón's historic First Street. Facing page, below: Mauricio Lemus came from California in 2006 to open The Sands Restaurant. Right: Opened in 1930, the 520-seat El Ratón Theatre is a historical gem that features updated digital projection and sound and popular balcony seating.

AS I ENJOY THE EVENING BREEZE from a tree-shaded bench near the gazebo in downtown Ripley Park, Ratón strikes me as a throwback to another era. The dusty rock building across the street was Ratón's first residence, built in 1880, when the town was founded to serve the new Santa Fe Railroad. I can see down First and Second Streets to the magnificent two-story buildings created during Ratón's heyday, when jobs in the local coal mines attracted thousands of European immigrants; these days the historic buildings house shops owned by local families. The railroad bridge behind me is quiet; not far beyond is Interstate 25, unseen and, gratefully, unheard.

Few travelers find this Ratón. Exiting the Interstate at the Clayton Highway, they stop at the fast-food joints of Motel Row. Local merchants would love to draw them the extra mile to the Ratón Downtown Historic District, and someday the town may come up with an effective plan to show them the way, but in the meantime, the mañana philosophy prevails. Perhaps that's why Ratón remains undiscovered by lovers of the arts and the outdoors, why its downtown has stayed below the radar of cognoscenti who long ago discovered New Mexico's other small-town treasures.

I take my guests to Ratón's northernmost exit, the 454, at the foot of Ratón Pass, where instead of neon bustle we see only Rocky Mountains. Two minutes later, we emerge downtown at Ripley Park. It's the perfect introduction.

As is the Melody Lane Motel. My wife



and I discovered this 1950s motor court when we planned our first Ratón visit back in 1997. The hotel map showed many dots bunched together, but the Melody Lane stood a mile apart. Then there was the musical name. We couldn't resist.

It was the motel's steam baths that hooked us and keep bringing us back; eight of the 27 rooms come equipped. Take a steam before bedtime and you'll sleep like a baby; follow a morning steam with a brisk shower and you won't need your morning coffee.

If you do insist on coffee, however, skip the no-frills continental breakfast of the Melody Lane and walk through Ripley Park to Enchanted Grounds Espresso Bar & Café on Park Avenue, to find coffee drinks and enticing homemade breakfasts that will amply fuel a downtown walking tour.

The National Register of Historic Places lists 70 buildings within five blocks. I start at the Ratón Museum, with its extensive collections of local history and New Mexico art. Curator Roger Sanchez provides a Walking Tour brochure, and shows me New Mexico's first automobile license plate, with the number 100-R (R for Ratón) embossed on black leather-covered metal, issued in Ratón in May 1913. He explains how railroad workers named the town in Spanish for the various critters they saw in the Ratón Pass.

Many visitors mispronounce the name. The local pronunciation is rah-TONE.

Roger conducts tours during Ratón's annual Art of the Great Outdoors series, a September festival that features a street fair, dances, art shows, and more. The city's 93-year-old golf course, tucked up against Ted Turner's Vermejo Park Ranch property, hosts a tournament. There's also a baseball tournament (Ratón is a baseball town), a fly-fishing derby, organized hikes at Sugarite Canyon State Park, plus the Capulín Volcano Run (half-marathon, and 10- and 5-kilometer races around the volcano).

From the museum, I walk to the Santa Fe Depot on First Street, deserted except in the late afternoon, when Amtrak's eastbound and westbound trains arrive. Here's where Ratón was born, around the new depot built where railroad tracks were laid atop the old Santa Fe Trail. Earlier nearby settlements, Willow Springs and Otero, were abandoned because Ratón had the new railroad and good water. Even today, Ratónians brag of having the best water in New Mexico, piped down from the high mountains at Lake Maloya and Eagle Nest Lake.

Sharing the depot property and its Spanish Mission Revival architecture is the old Wells Fargo Express Company building, now occupied by Old Pass Gallery and the Ratón Arts & Humanities Council. Monthly exhibits showcase the work of local artists such as watercolorist Marv Newton and pastel artist Cindy Montoya.

Across wide First Street from Old Pass Gallery, three shops form an irresistible triumvirate of treasure hunting. Charlie Walker's antique shop, The Tool Shed, specializes in antique farm tools. Janet and LeRoy Valencia's The Pack Rat Gifts is chock-full of ceramics, dolls, kitchen and bath items, cookbooks, and Ratón and New Mexico souvenirs, plus Janet's own soaps and candles alongside LeRoy's handmade pine benches, boxes, tables, and cabinets.



NEED TO KNOW: RATÓN

LODGING

Melody Lane Motel, 136 Canyon Rd. Request a room with a steam bath in this vintage motel; the best rates are obtained by calling. (575) 445-3655; budgethost.com

DINING

Enchanted Grounds Espresso Bar & Café, 111 Park Ave. Get your caffeine buzz on before touring the town; WiFi. (575) 445-2219

Pappas' Sweet Shop, 1201 S. Second St. A local institution for three generations; breakfast, lunch, dinner, bar. (575) 445-9811

CULTURE

The Ratón Museum, 108 S. Second St. Town history as a mining, railroading, and ranching center is told through artifacts and photographs. (575) 445-8979; ratonmuseum.org

Shuler Theater, 131 N. Second St. City-owned historic landmark. (575) 445-4746; shulrtheater.com

El Ratón Theatre, 115 N. Second St. This art-deco gem from the '30s shows first-run movies from Thursday through Sunday. (575) 445-7008; elratontheatre.com

SHOPPING

The Tool Shed, 138 S. First St. Specializing in antique farm equipment. (575) 445-5300

Solano's Boot & Western Wear, 101 S. Second St. Excellent selection of boots, belts, hats, etc. (575) 445-2632; solanoswesternwear.com

Santa Fe Trail Traders, 100 S. Second St. Reasonable prices on everything from Nambé bowls to Navajo rugs. (575) 445-2888; santafetrailtraders.com

RECREATION

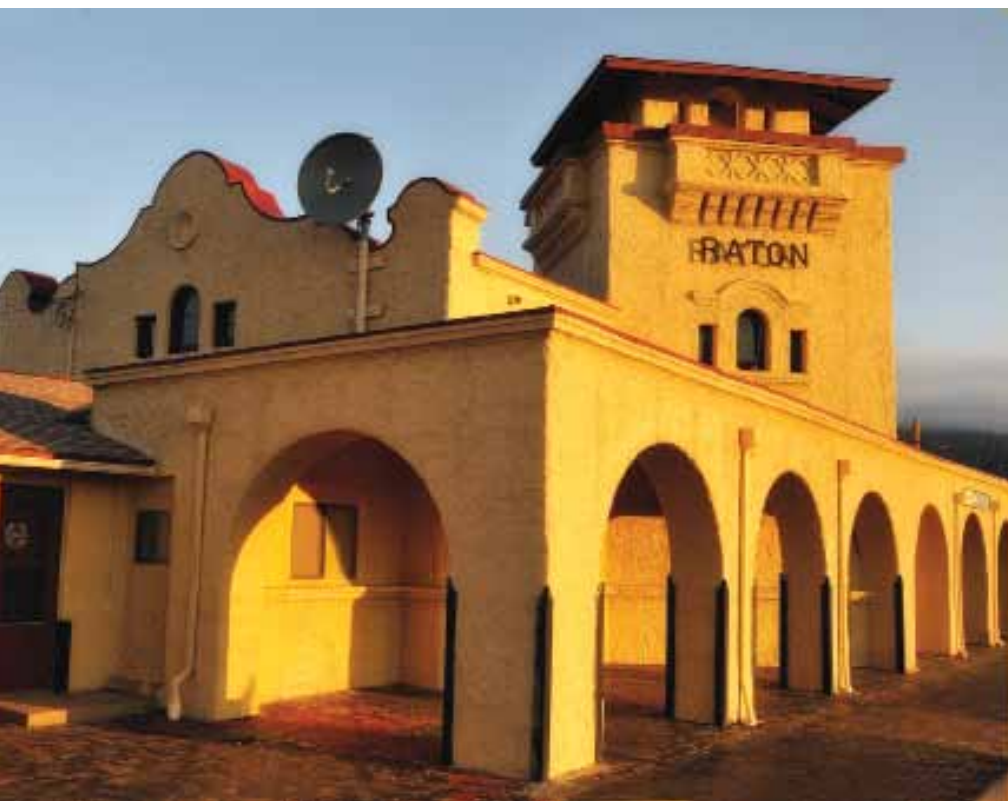
Ratón Country Club, 510 Country Club Rd. Founded in 1919, this nine-hole course is tucked up against the Rocky Mountains. (575) 445-8113; ratongolf.com

Sugarite Canyon State Park. Camping and boating are features of this park on the Colorado border. (575) 445-5607; emnrd.state.nm.us/PRD/Sugarite.htm

NRA Whittington Center, 11 miles SW of downtown, this center holds competitions and classes in all shooting disciplines. (575) 445-3615; nrawc.org

The Station, 815 S. Second St; Frank Ferri keeps his vintage cars at this restored gas station, where he plays host to visitors who want to stop by and shoot the breeze with an affable local denizen. (575) 445-9103

For further information: Visit raton.info, or consult the NM Visitor Information Center, 100 Clayton Rd.; (575) 445-2761



The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad built its Ratón Depot in the Mission Revival style in 1903. The line is now operated by Amtrak, and summer is the busy season, when travelers flock to the Philmont Scout Ranch and the NRA's Whittington Center. Located in the heart of the historic district, the depot is mere steps from Ratón's other architectural treasures.

Janet loves First Street: "My favorite time is summer, when Boy Scouts come in droves, traveling between the depot and Philmont Scout Ranch. There's a wonderful farmers' market, too, right outside under the trees on Saturday afternoons, usually with live music."

Next door, I find sister-in-law co-owners Brenda and Michelle Ferri in The Heirloom Shop, whose aisles evoke time travel. Typewriters, cooking utensils, table settings, furniture, and bath items take me back. Yes, I'm old enough to remember when some of these items were the state of the art. An upstairs loft looks like a teen's bedroom—my bedroom—circa 1968.

Downstairs, I meet Brenda's dad and learn that the vintage 1947 gas station just south of downtown is his playhouse. Frank Ferri works on his cars in the beautifully maintained building, whose sign simply proclaims THE STATION. His 1942 Chevy, 1947 Hudson, and Brenda's 1968 Charger compete for space with extensive Elvis Presley and Coca-Cola collections. "It's an old man's hangout," Frank smiles. "Guys bring their cars down and we barbecue."

For lunch, I drive to the Clayton Highway and All Seasons Restaurant, where Kelly and Jeanette Fissel met as new, young employees 35 years ago. In 1992, they bought the business. For breakfast and lunch seven days a week, the place is packed for its great burgers, enchiladas, and, especially, the weekend breakfast buffet.

Kelly says the key to success has been putting in the time. "We're always here. This business gets in your blood. It's the people, both the employees and the customers. Some of our customers are so regular that if one misses a couple days, we start to call around to make sure they're OK." Several employees have stayed more than 30 years.

Ratón's longevity record, though, goes to Mike Pappas, who has run Pappas' Sweet Shop since 1954. His immigrant father, Dimetrios Papadomanokalis, founded the popular restaurant in 1923 with savings from working the coal mines, making goat cheese, and, possibly, a little moonshining. A former Ratón newspaper columnist and mayor, Mike literally wrote the book on Ratón: his *Ratón: History,*

Mystery, and More is available all over town. When I stop in, he autographs my copy with the sentiment: "Enjoy Ratón's history. Lots of fun stories in this book, and some sad ones." Alongside tales of coal camps, bordellos, and a lynching, I listen to Mike tell the story of his father's emigration from Greece, and how he came to Ratón and opened his candy store, which evolved into this restaurant.

I walk off my lunch downtown, enjoying Ratón's big two-story library, built circa 1917, and the fascinating art-deco Colfax County Building (1936). My favorite stop is Solano's Boot & Western Wear, founded by Andy Solano in 1956 as a small shoe shop, but now staffed by three generations of Solanos and taking up half the block. Andy's still there, working on shoes, boots, and leather goods in his shop at the back of the store. People bring him work from near and far, one customer remarking, "They don't make 'em like that anymore."

This makes Andy symbolic of Ratón: resolutely old-school, hard-working, persistent, and understated.

Walking back to Melody Lane, I ponder tonight's entertainment options. A block from Solano's is Theater Row, home of the art-deco El Ratón Theatre (1930), which is owned by four local couples and shows first-run, digitally projected movies Thursday through Sunday. Nearby is the Shuler Theater (1915), a venerable

RATÓN REMAINS
undiscovered by lovers of the arts
and the outdoors, below the
radar of cognoscenti who long ago
discovered New Mexico's other
SMALL-TOWN TREASURES.

vaudeville-show house that stages 60 live performances annually in a lovingly restored theater with impressive hand-painted historical murals and backdrops. Depending on the offerings, a two-night stay might prove irresistible.

Downtown Ratón feels not just 175 miles north of Santa Fe, but 75 years behind it. New visitors will feel as if they've made their own discovery, down a path less traveled to a simpler time. ❖

Tim Keller is featured in "Storytellers" (page 7).



Clockwise from top left: KRTN radio is the heartbeat of Ratón, and for over 40 years, Bill Donati has been beloved throughout town as the ubiquitous voice of "Billy D."



Solano's Boot & Western Wear, founded in 1956, is a longtime attraction in the downtown business district. Patriarch Andy Solano still works daily in his workshop at the back of the store, and visitors enjoy the vast stock of cowboy boots and hats, wild rag scarves, jeans, and other western wear. The tops of the walls are surmounted by worn cowboy hats donated by area ranchers over the decades.



This vintage gas station marks the southern entry to the Ratón Downtown Historic District, and is a gathering place for locals. It's also a good place to talk about old cars and Elvis.

