

# LOS CAMINOS DEL RIO

The wind rustles the leaves high in the trees and the setting sun casts long shadows along a series of small passages between crumbling stone walls. A buzzard takes flight from an old chimney standing alone against the blue sky, while goats roam through rooms and peek from open doorways.

The remote **Guerrero Viejo** is now a city of ruins. Once a thriving colonial Mexican town with a plaza and architecturally distinctive buildings, it was buried beneath the waters of the Falcon Reservoir in 1953 when the U.S. and Mexican governments dammed the Rio Grande. A continuing drought that began in the early 1990s receded the waters of the reservoir and the fork of the Salado River, revealing a portion of the city that had vanished for four decades.

Although somewhat somber, a visit to the ghostly town just south of **Nuevo Laredo** along Highway 2 is an ideal cap to a weekend's travel along Los Caminos del Rio — a heritage tourism corridor that skirts the U.S.-Mexican border.

"I own this town," said Eulogio Medeles Hernandez, Guerrero Viejo's only inhabitant, who lives in a stone house fitted with a generator for electricity. Hernandez, whose family lived in the town, now greets tourists and tends to a flock of goats that wanders through the empty buildings and drinks from a large puddle he fills occasionally in the mud street.

Most of the town's other residents and their descendants now live in Nuevo Guerrero, a city about 25 miles south that was created by the Mexican government for the displaced population.

But strong ties remain between the new city and Guerrero Viejo, which was formed in 1750 and has a long history of involvement in the sometimes volatile political struggles along the

border. Some 700 people recently turned out for a Mass at the old city's church—*Nuestra Senora del Refugio*—which appears remarkably intact. The structure's distinctive arches were one of the first remains to reappear as the reservoir waters dropped.



A nonprofit organization with donations from public and private sources restored portions of the church and has worked sporadically to post interpretive plaques in the plaza to help tourists learn more about the city. But many of the treasures remain hidden by nature and a lack of money for signage. Graceful stone arches lie buried in thick brush and the histories behind grand homes are left unknown to visitors.

The lack of formal tourist facilities is one appeal, however, since it leaves the visitor yearning to know more about the city.

"It's spooky," said David Salinas, a McAllen native who brought his family to visit the site. "But definitely inspiring."

For now, the waters have subsided, but they will return with the rains. Still, a large portion of the town was never submerged, so the buildings that remain visible will long hold the

remembrances and stories of the border.

## For the traveler

More than 230 historical sites are located along Los Caminos del Rio (Roads of the River) heritage corridor, such as the Palmito Ranch Civil War Battlefield near **Brownsville**, the historic Old River Pumphouse in **Hidalgo**, the suspension bridge and beautifully restored plaza at **Roma** and many more. The corridor weaves some 200 miles along the border through Webb, Zapata, Starr, Hidalgo and Cameron Counties along Highways 281 and 83 in Texas, and the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas along Highway 2 in Mexico.

Although it would take a lifetime to fully explore the area's history and culture, weekend trips can still capture many of the region's legacies, from the dozens of military conflicts to thriving river trade and agricultural heritage.

Where to start? See the THC web site at [www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us). The THC also has several publications detailing the corridor, including:

■ *Los Caminos del Rio: Legacies of the Borderlands* (free travel guide). Write to Los Caminos del Rio of Texas and Mexico, P.O. Box 415, Laredo, Texas 78042.

■ *Shared Experience: The History, Architecture and Historic Designations of the Lower Rio Grande Heritage Corridor* (\$15)

■ *A Shared Experience: A Teacher's Companion: Activities and Resource Book* (\$10)

■ *Architectural Legacies of the Lower Rio Grande* (video, \$10)

To order copies, contact Vince Martinez, THC Community Heritage Development Division, at 512/463-5861. ★



## IF YOU GO TO GUERRERO VIEJO

The shortest route is to cross the border at Falcon, Texas (about 70 miles south of Laredo) along the reservoir dam. Then take Highway 2 in Mexico north past Nuevo Guerrero. Travel north about 23 miles. Just after the Salado River, a large sign will mark a dirt road to Guerrero Viejo.

The nine-mile road northeast is navigable by cars in good weather, but it is extremely rough. No food, water, gas or facilities are available, and a gatekeeper on the road charges \$2 for passage.

Because the city is within the 20 kilometer limit of the interior, no vehicle permits are needed, but please contact the Mexican Tourism Bureau, Texas Office at 713/772-3819 for driving regulations.

*This article was written by Rob D'Amico, Medallion managing editor.*

*Photographs by Rebecca and Rob D'Amico.*



*Far left: Goats peek at visitors from behind a doorway in Guerrero Viejo.*

*Above and left: Portions of the Nuestra Señora del Refugio church had remained above the surface of the Falcon Reservoir, which eventually subsided to leave the entire structure on dry land (at left).*

## A DECADE OF WORK YIELDS SUCCESS IN BORDER CORRIDOR

Los Caminos del Rio began in 1990 to preserve the heritage of the Lower Rio Grande and educate citizens about this remarkable region.

In the 10 years since, the program has resulted in the preservation of numerous historic sites and in the development of a heritage tourism and educational drive that has brought thousands to the region.

Los Caminos del Rio (Roads of the River) now serves as an inspiration for visitors to travel the Lower Rio Grande and discover the people, sites and history of an area formerly overlooked by many historians and travelers.

### A Shared Experience

The cooperative effort between the United States and Mexico, with assistance from the Meadows Foundation of Dallas, initially resulted in the publication of *A Shared Experience*, a survey of cultural resources along the border that became the foundation for Los Caminos del Rio. The publication proposed linking cultural and natural resources extending from **Laredo** and **Nuevo Laredo** to the Gulf into a single, cohesive corridor focused on the shared heritage of two nations.

Former Texas Gov. Ann Richards, and later Gov. George W. Bush, endorsed the project and created an advisory task force — a team of experts from the Texas Historical Commission (THC), the Texas Departments of Parks and Wildlife, Transportation and Economic Development, as well as the National Park Service and various agencies in Mexico.

A regional group — Los Caminos del Rio of Texas and Mexico — was created to act as the grassroots advocate and to provide leadership to a volunteer base. As government involvement minimized, this binational nonprofit assumed full project management.

Over the years, barriers along the border were broken, and collaborations

sparked unprecedented attention to the region by media, philanthropic groups and governmental organizations that resulted in improvements totaling more than \$11 million. In fact, Los Caminos del Rio has served as a model for several heritage corridors now developing in other parts of the United States, Mexico and Canada.



### Accomplishments

Partnerships with local communities helped renovate the Capitol of the Republic of the Rio Grande in **Laredo**, Our Lady of Refuge Church in **San Ygnacio** and the Old River Pumphouse in **Hidalgo**.

Recognition was provided to Palmito Ranch Battlefield near **Brownsville**,

the Jesús Treviño Fort in **San Ygnacio** and the **Roma** Historic District as National Historic Landmarks, the

highest designation for historic properties in the United States. **Roma** is of



*Top center: Plaza at Villanueva de Carmargo in Mexico.*

*Above: Larry Ditto (left), formerly of U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and Agustin Celaya, President of Los Caminos del Rio of Texas and Mexico, with the plaque designating Palmito Ranch Battlefield as a National Historic Landmark.*

special note, as the Meadows Foundation and The Conservation Fund made possible an extensive restoration project managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The restoration is now attracting visitors to once abandoned buildings.

The second edition of *A Shared Experience* and a companion teacher's guide funded by Southwestern Bell Corporation helped educate students and led to a traveling history trunks program with the Institute of Texan Cultures. All of the information in the publications is now incorporated into the popular Armadillo World Wide Web, a site for Texas history at [www.rice.edu/armadillo/Past](http://www.rice.edu/armadillo/Past). The materials also became the source for *Rio Grande: La Frontera*, a PBS documentary produced by KLRU-TV in Austin and distributed nationally. A brochure for visitors, *Los Caminos del Rio: Legacies of the Borderlands* and a familiarization tour sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism of Mexico, helped create a popular tourism circuit in the corridor.

In addition to tourism, Mexico has joined forces with the United States for the restoration of the Roma-Miguel Alemán Suspension Bridge as a pedestrian crossing. The reforestation project at **Islote de los Castores**, a Mexican island on the river, was funded through North American Free Trade Agreement and undertaken by 800 volunteers from the United States and Mexico. And a major effort to rehabilitate key historic properties is now underway in Matamoros.

Mexico also has concentrated on the abandoned townsite of **Guerrero Viejo** (see pages 8 and 9) — now a heritage tourism destination. The local pride instilled by the attention brought to Guerrero has inspired former residents to create a nonprofit corporation to rehabilitate key structures in the city, such as Our Lady of Refuge Church. On Oct. 10, 1999, after two years of painstaking efforts by craftsmen to repair historic walls and arches, Mass was celebrated at the church for the first time since 1953.



## What remains to be done

Despite many successes, much work remains. Roma needs visitor amenities, visits to Guerrero require interpretation, teachers need additional training in local heritage, and the guess work must be taken out of travel with highway signage and a visitor services guide. Despite the needs, the work in Guerrero points to what is probably the greatest strength of Los Caminos del Rio — acting as a catalyst to instigate preservation by local communities. In complementing local efforts, community ownership is strengthened and cultural identity is reinforced. Thus, future visitors and residents continue to partake in a unique legacy bestowed by two nations. ★



*This article was written by Mario L. Sánchez, former director of the THC Heritage Tourism Program.*

*Photographs by Mario Sánchez.*

*Above: Los Caminos del Rio encompasses more than 230 historic sites along a 200 mile stretch of the Texas/Mexico border.*

*Left: Worshippers gather at the church in Guerrero Viejo to celebrate the renovation at an Oct. 10 Mass. The photo at far left shows the church in 1990.*



*Los Caminos del Rio... an inspiration for visitors to discover the people, sites and history of the area.*



*Right: The plaza at Roma has undergone extensive renovations, making the area a prime spot for tourists to the Texas border city. The photo above is before renovation. (Manuel Guerra Store, 1884)*