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# CHAPARRAL GUIDE

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**SIERRA COUNTY  
STATE PARKS  
RECREATIONAL  
PARADISE  
OF THE SOUTHWEST**







ELEPHANT BUTTE LAKE

# Elephant Butte Lake State Park

Elephant Butte Lake State Park, or simply put “The Butte”, sits in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south central New Mexico and is the largest lake in the state. Although this 40 mile long reservoir’s main function is to provide water to south central New Mexico and Texas farms, Elephant Butte Lake serves as the state’s preferred water sports destination and offers just about every form of water recreation including water skiing, boating, fishing, scuba diving, canoeing, sailing, jet skiing and many, many more. The lake has sandy beaches, which are great for camping, full-service marinas, picnicking areas and electric hook-ups for RVs and trailers. Many of the campsites have shelters and grills. Showers are located at various areas of the park.

If water sports are not your thing, “The Butte” has many natural trails just waiting to be explored. The visitor’s center contains historical

exhibits of the geology, history and ecology of the area.

Recreational and fishing supplies are available just miles away in the town named after a game show – “Truth or Consequences”, or TorC, as area-residents have adapted to calling it, is a quaint town with lots of history. Located just five miles from Elephant Butte Lake State Park, TorC offers some of the nicest shops with one-of-a-kind gifts and souvenirs. TorC also offers many hotels, an historical museum, art galleries, a public swimming pool, dog and cat kenneling, hot mineral baths, massage therapists and many, many more opportunities and accommodations to make your vacation in the area more pleasurable and memorable.

### How the Park Got its Name

Elephant Butte Lake is named for a rock formation that many say resembles an elephant. The rock formation is actually the core of a dormant volcano. This rock formation sits as an island in the lake just north of the dam, which the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation began constructing in 1911 and completed in 1916. However, there were actual elephants in the area in ancient times. Fossils of a primitive ancestor of today’s elephant, the stegomastodon, have been found within the parameters of the lake.

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## Caballo Lake And Percha Dam

Sierra County is not only home to Elephant Butte Lake State Park, it is also home to Caballo Lake State Park and Percha Dam State Park. Caballo Lake is New Mexico’s second largest lake and is located just 14 miles south of Truth or Consequences. The lake holds 346,000 acre-feet of water.

The main entrance to the park sits on the west side of the lake and is equipped with picnic tables, shelters and grills that are scattered throughout the camping area. A playground with a basketball court is located at the Riverside Campground. Just south of the Riverside Campground is an RV rally site, which provides space for about 250 RV units, equipped with a dump-station, group shelters and landscaping.

Fishing on the Caballo is most enjoyable as long as you have a pole, some bait and a New Mexico Fishing License. The lake holds several species of fish, including catfish, walleye, northern pike, white bass and many more. The lake is also great for swimming, boating, water skiing, hiking, relaxing and has plenty of fresh air and blue skies.

Percha Dam State Park is located just south of Caballo Lake and is a quiet and serene getaway with plenty of shade given off by the tall cottonwood and Russian olive trees. The ever-so- popular Rio Grande River surrounds the park.

The park offers beautiful scenery, picnicking, hiking and fishing. The park also contains handicap-accessible campsites with showers and toilet facilities. RVs are always welcome, however only six campsites have electric hookups and there are no dumping stations in the immediate area. Swimming is prohibited, as the force of the Rio Grande waters flowing over the Dam are fierce.

Anyone is welcome to enjoy the nature, history and culture of southwest New Mexico, but it is asked that you not disturb the natural, historical and cultural sites. It is also asked that visitors not remove, destroy or deface anything on the site, as strict laws prohibit such things.

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# Entire Truth or Consequences Valley Once Covered by Water

Centuries ago the entire valley in which Truth or Consequences is located was covered by a great body of water.

The now placid Rio Grande which meanders along the southeastern fringe of the city was once called by early Conquistadores “El Rio Bravo del Norte,” (the fierce or savage river of the north). Barricaded from its onward rush by Carrie Tingley Mesa and the foothills of the Caballo Mountains, the mighty waters eventually eroded a channel through which the river now flows.

As the turbulent river deepened the channel, the level of the waters fell. Seepage, evaporation and a minimum of rainfall have combined to make the natural footing where the city now has been built.

Vapors rising on the northern shore of the lake where the city now lies, during the colder season of the year, caught the attention of hunters who bathed in the warm waters and found them beneficial to the relief of many ailments.

The exact date when primitive man first began to utilize the hot springs will probably never be determined; however, deep mortar holes in the boulders north of Main Street, and fire scarred rocks in the same area, indicate that the springs were visited by aborigines.

In 1605, Santa Fe was chosen as the seat of the Spanish government. At this time the route from the new capitol to Paso del Norte (El Paso, Texas) leading over the Jornada del Muerto (the journey of death), was designated as the Camino Real (King’s Highway). The government was over-thrown in 1680, and it was not until 1692 that the Spaniards succeeded in reconquering the territory.

It was during this period that the Santa Rita copper deposits were exploited and the ingots transported by mule and burro pack-trains through Palomas Gap, seven miles south of

Truth or Consequences, where they met the main caravans to Mexico City and Veracruz. This pass had been used for ages by the Indians in their annual migration to the buffalo hunting grounds of the prairie.

The mission of Las Palomas was established to provide shelter and protection for the men and animals of the pack trains when they were unable to ford the Rio Grande during flood stage. Often the trains would be forced to wait for weeks.

The houses were built around a large plaza, presenting a continuous wall, with one large gate through which the animals could be driven for safety in case of Indian attacks. The men would then guard the roofs to prevent the enemies from scaling the walls.

Palomas Ojo Caliente, or Palomas Hot Springs, as it was then known, eventually became an important trading post. Passing this trading post, and on through Palomas Gap, went caravans on their way to Mexico, taking sheep, hides, pelts, ores and other native products. On their return, the caravans were laden with supplies and provisions for the missions, settlers, and garrisons. The trips were fraught with danger, both from lack of water and numerous Indian attacks. It was for that reason that the road came to be called “the journey of death,” Jornada del Muerto.

During this time the Indians used the Hot Mineral Springs to treat their wounds as they hid in the marshy banks of the river. It is said that what is now Water Tank Hill was once used as a frequent look-out post by the Indians to spot a foe or a victim.

When the United States gained possession of the territory from Mexico in 1846, progress made rapid strides. However, the trepidations committed by hostile Apaches in the southwestern section hampered progress in this area.

Records of the War Department are filled with

accounts of bloody engagements and battles. One particularly bloody battle was fought on March 30, 1854, on upper Animas Canyon. The troops had been besieged by bands of hostile Indians for several days prior to a pitched battle which was held at the head of the canyon. Traces of stone barricades and breastworks are still visible where the soldiers took their battle positions. During the battle it was reported that 22 soldiers were killed. The number of Apaches slain is unknown.

Nearly every mining camp or town of any importance had its own volunteer regiment to cope with the Indian attacks. Several forts were constructed by the government, mainly as bases of operation. Fort McRae, now covered over by waters of Elephant Butte Lake, and Fort Ojo Caliente at the head of what is now known as principle strongholds to protect this area. The post office at this fort was called Cherryville, and it was here that Indian agent, John P. Glum, captured Geronimo. Geronimo was soon released to again go on the warpath killing many more people in the territory.

During the early part of 1877 rich floats of gold ore were found along the Percha Creek. Twelve men placed twelve names in a hat to choose the name of the town where the miners and prospectors were flocking. “Hillsboro” was the first name drawn, and this town 32 miles west of Truth or Consequences, colorful in mining history, still bears the name and was once the county seat of Sierra County.

In the 1880’s Sierra County was a part of Socorro County. This was during the days of mining booms. Travel by horseback or buggy was slow. In the small communities in which mines and claims changed hands almost daily for fabulous prices, a clamor for a separate county arose. It required trips of several days for

See **WATER** on Page C6

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BIRDSEYE VIEW OF CABALLO LAKE STATE PARK

WATER

*Continued from Page C5*

the miners to visit the county clerk’s office in the county seat in Socorro. On petition of the citizens, the legislature in 1884 created Sierra County from parts of Socorro, Dona Ana and Grant counties.

According to records, this period of Sierra County’s mining camps reads like a page out of the Arabian Nights. About one fourth of the 12x12 foot boulder of malleable silver ore, found in the Bridal Chamber Mine of Lake Valley, netted 70,000 ounces of pure silver. Lake Valley’s smelter melted over eight million dollars worth of silver for shipment to the Denver, Colo. Mint. A railroad spur was built from Nutt Station to Lake Valley to transport all the treasure.

Two years after the railroad first entered the Territory, approximately 800 miles of travel was provided by 38 different stage lines, largely serving the mining centers that were then flourishing.

A visitor to Kingston paid \$5.50 for a round trip in the “Mountain Pride” operated by L. W. Orchard from the Santa Fe railhead at Lake Valley. He was allowed 50 pounds of baggage, but paid ten cents a pound for extra weight. The rails reached Lake Valley from Rincon in 1884 and ventured no farther.

The Percha District, extended about 10 miles across the headwaters of the Percha in the Black Range, opened when the first strike was made in 1881. The Solitaire Mine marked the northern boundary with the outcrop assaying sixty percent silver. One specimen of solid silver was found that weighed over 100 pounds.

The Bullion was one of the rich mines near where the town of Kingston blossomed forth in 1883. At a depth of 166 feet, a rich vein was struck in the Bullion which yielded \$5,000 in less than 24 hours.

Favorable to the prosperity of the county was the Sherman Act of 1890 fixing the amount of silver to be purchased by the treasury at four

million dollars per month.

Then came the crash of 1893, the repeal of the Sherman Silver Act. Banks, mercantile houses, mining companies, hotels and all other enterprises went down in a heap. Merchants closed their doors. The fires in the smelters ceased to burn. No longer could the throbbing of the stamps in the mills be heard.

The bonanza was ended. Today in Hillsboro, Lake Valley, Kingston and in the Caballo mountains, traces of the great strike still remain as skeletons of the golden gas light era of Sierra County.

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405 San Mateo: 3 bedroom 2 bath manufactured home on 1/4 acre lot, fenced back yard, RV Parking. Mature trees, covered front deck. \$82,000. MLS 20182216.

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