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## Had a close encounter?

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Justin M. Norton/Associated Press | MetroWest Daily News

Is "The Truth" located in this remote city in New Mexico?

Driving alone down a stretch of desolate highway en route to Roswell, I begin to understand why conspiracy buffs have long argued that aliens crash-landed in the desert here a half-century ago.

Darkness engulfs desert fields. A misshapen yellow moon hangs in the sky. Husks of abandoned buildings litter the roadside. Has an alien invasion already taken place? I notice a blinking light in the sky but quickly discern it's an airplane.

Being out here by yourself is enough to make you think twice.

"I do know this. There are other things out there in the universe," said John Turner, 78, who was working the desk of the International UFO Museum and Research Center on Roswell's North Main Street when I visited.

I have secretly wanted to visit Roswell since I was a boy. What I got during my brief visit something I've contemplated doing for years was a lesson in how a small city in the middle of the American southwest became enshrined in American pop culture.

The 60th anniversary of the so-called "Roswell Incident" will be marked July 5-8 at the city's annual UFO festival. City officials say 50,000 people are expected for the event, which will include lectures, book-signings, tours, entertainment, and, according to the organizers, perhaps an alien abduction or two.

Long-term plans are underway as well for a UFO-themed amusement park, complete with an indoor roller coaster that would take passengers on a simulated alien abduction. The park, dubbed Alien Apex Resort, could open as early as 2010. The city has received a \$245,000 legislative appropriation for initial planning, but the park would be privately built and managed.

The original Roswell Incident occurred in July 1947, outside the city. A rancher named W.W. "Mack" Brazel went to check on some sheep after a night of storms. He claimed he found some strange debris. Neighbors told Brazel he might have pieces of a flying saucer.

On July 8, 1947, a local military office issued a press release saying that pieces of a "crashed disk" were recovered. A story featured on the front page of the Roswell Daily Record claimed a flying saucer was captured (the paper is now reproduced and sold to tourists). Other news agencies picked up on the event albeit in a cursory fashion.

A revised release was soon sent out that said the material was a weather balloon. But stories about requests for tiny coffins and a nefarious plot began to emerge and Roswell went from small town to Alien Capitol.

While what exactly happened more than a half-century ago in the desert remains murky. But it did inspire me to drive hundreds of miles across the desert to a town of roughly 45,000 people.

After a fitful sleep at the Best Western, I rubbed my scalp to search for any curious implants or scars, and headed out early to spend the morning downtown.

I was greeted at the UFO Museum (a former movie theater) by an alien dummy wearing a Santa Claus hat. The light posts on the streets of Roswell feature alien heads wearing Santa Claus hats. The creatures look utterly incapable of such malevolent acts as abduction and brain surgery.

The museum takes visitors through a timeline, beginning with newspaper clips and printed affidavits from many who claim to have intimate knowledge of the crash. For an extra donation, visitors can take an audio tour with a decidedly low-tech cassette Walkman.

The convoluted timeline of what happened after "The Roswell Incident" shows just why there are so many conflicting stories about the event.

The museum freely mixes documentary materials and kitsch. Among the displays are explanations of crop circles and an exhibit detailing how Roswell has been portrayed in pop culture.

It's curious how aliens are almost inevitably depicted by those who claim they've been visited by extraterrestrials as diminutive with oval heads, green skin and doe-shaped eyes.

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The museum's most popular and photographed exhibition is purely fictional: the set of an alien autopsy from the 1994 television movie "Roswell." The vivid exhibit, in which doctors prepare to examine an emaciated alien corpse, is on a permanent loan to the museum.

The gift shop takes up a good chunk of the first floor and offers every conceivable extraterrestrial gift: alien plush dolls; alien shot glasses and magnets that say "I BELIEVE." A wide selection of books and documents on the Roswell incident is also for sale.

There's also a research library for those inclined to further study the alien phenomena.

"We'll tell people the story of what happened and tell them to make up their own mind," Turner said.

Downtown Roswell is a hub of alien-themed shops. There's the Not Of This World coffeehouse and the Cover Up Café. Even businesses like banks have cardboard cutouts of aliens in the windows.

One shop worth a visit is the Alien Zone, roughly a block away from the museum. For a small fee, visitors (the human kind) can see an exhibit called "Area 51" that features displays of roughly 3-foot-tall alien models in very human poses.

One display shows an alien in a sauna reading a newspaper; another features a forlorn-looking alien lounging in a jail cell in pinstripes. The main exhibit features an "alien autopsy" complete with an alien baby fetus in a glass jar in the background and another life-size model of an alien stumbling from a crashed space ship.

There's plenty else to do in Roswell. But even city officials now seem to know why many people trek across the desert for a visit. The city's Web site says: "Roswell has something to offer all of our special visitors, whether from this planet, or from a distant galaxy."

#### **If You Go...**

ROSWELL, N.M.: <http://www.roswellnm.org> or 877-849-7679. The 2007 Roswell UFO Festival, July 5-8; <http://www.roswellufofestival.com>. Located about 200 miles from Albuquerque and from El Paso, Texas.

INTERNATIONAL UFO MUSEUM & RESEARCH CENTER: 114 N. Main St., Roswell; <http://www.iufomrc.com/> or 800-822-3545. Adults, \$5; ages 5-15, \$2. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

AREA 51 EXHIBIT AT THE ALIEN ZONE: 216 N. Main St., 505-627-6982. Open daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., \$2 a person (8 and under free).

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