

Tinkertown

Unique Folk Art Museum Engages Kids, Adults Alike

By EFRAIN VILLA



Caine Villa spots show horses at Tinkertown's big top circus. Photos by Efrain Villa.

"In two years, I'm gonna get a motorcycle," Caine announces.

I look in the rear-view mirror and see him craning his neck from his car seat, his stare fixated on the motorcade of Harley Davidsons rumbling past us on the Turquoise Trail Scenic Byway. As soon as they are out of view, Caine giggles and resumes his interrogation, "Are we there yet?"

"Yeah, actually we are!" I say.

"Tío, how old will I be in two years?" he asks, as I park the car near Tinkertown Museum's closed gate.

"You'll be six."

Just a 20-minute drive away, Albuquerque's temperature today is in the 70s, but at this altitude patches of snow still speckle the Alpine forest shade. I unbuckle Caine and put on his jacket before helping him out of the car.

Penny, Tinkertown's friendly resident dog, is the first to greet us. Mari Anderson and her husband, Fritz Damler, quickly follow behind Penny with outstretched hands and big smiles. They have agreed to give my nephew and me a sneak preview of the new dollhouse exhibit debuting on April 1, the museum's season opening.

Caine catches a glimpse of horses in the corral and gently pulls on my hand. "Tío, can we go see the horses?"

"Sure," I say, "but first let's check out what's inside. OK?"

He grins, nods in agreement, and bounces with excitement as Fritz unlocks the door. "What does that say?" Caine asks, pointing at a sign.

"It says there's a 42-foot wooden sailboat inside, and that this is New Mexico's highest port," I reply.

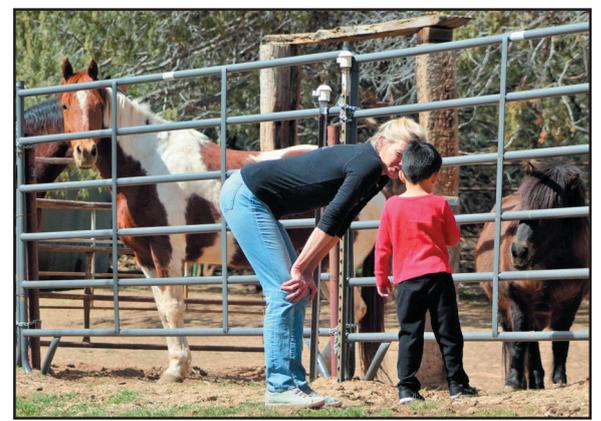
"What's a port?"

"Where you park boats."

Before we follow Fritz inside, I survey the surroundings. Approximately 51,000 glass bottles make up the main building and surrounding walls. Wagon wheels, old highway signs and metal cutouts of fantastical, winged creatures adorn a gateway emblazoned with the words: "Live life as the pursuit of happiness."

In essence, this museum is one man's tribute to those words. Ross Ward's work started as a hobby, which led to a traveling carnival gig as a painter. He spent more than 40 years painting, carving, etching, molding and assembling his collection of art and architecture — now known as Tinkertown Museum. His philosophy on how it all came to be can be summarized in one of the many sayings scribbled on the museum's walls: "We did all this while you were watching TV."

The museum first opened its doors in 1983 and welcomed 943 visitors that summer. Last year, a record-breaking 26,000 patrons came to experience the wonders of this imaginative creation. Although semi-secluded in the beautiful



Mari Anderson and Caine Villa get to know a family of horses at Tinkertown's corral.

Sandia Mountains, the quirky roadside attraction has been prominently featured on television shows, international publications and countless blogs. It has also been known to be frequented by celebrities filming in New Mexico. Carla Ward, Ross' widow, is clear to note that at Tinkertown they "treat all guests as celebrities and all celebrities as guests."

We step inside and Caine wastes no time engaging in one of his favorite activities: pressing buttons. He watches intently as a tiny carving of a little girl begins skipping rope within a sprawling, miniature Western town. Moving down the corridor, he finds and presses another button, which animates a chef that frantically chases a chicken in circles.

As more figurines come alive, Fritz and I talk about his brother-in-law's artistic aims. "Ross' vision was to make sure this place became a part of this community and the mountain setting is an important part of his work here," he says. At one point, there was talk of moving Tinkertown to Albuquerque's Tingley Beach and Biopark area, but funding fell through. Fritz assures me it all worked out for the best. "Context in art matters," he adds. He should know; he is an accomplished writer, guitar maker and artist.

As we continue our tour, Fritz flips a switch and teeny hand-carved performers in an elaborate big-top circus scene begin twirling, jumping and dancing to music. I stand there spellbound, until the miniature show horses remind Caine of my earlier promise. "Can we go see the horses outside now?" he asks.

I remark to Fritz that this trip might end up being like one of those situations in which a lot of thought is given to a child's gift, but the child ends up rejecting the toy and playing with the empty gift box instead.

Fritz laughs and says, "Sometimes this place seems more suited for the child in the adult than for the actual child."

We quickly move through the exhibit containing Theodora R, the wooden boat that Fritz sailed around the world on a ten-year odyssey. Fritz jokes that the resting place of his beloved Theodora R has been an economic boon. "It's basically like owning a rental property, but without needing tenants."

Caine shows no interest in the boat. By contrast, I'm outright fascinated by Fritz' stories of adventure and misadventure on the high seas. "Sailing is about keeping your boat alive when it's clearly obsessed with committing suicide," Fritz says.

Caine asks Fritz if the boat has any horses. I sigh and suggest we take a look at the new dollhouse so we can conclude the interior portion of the visit and move on to seeing horses; creatures with which I've never been entirely at ease.

To call the dollhouse a dollhouse is like calling the Taj Mahal a modest residence. It's more like a doll mansion, complete with chandeliers, grand staircases, ornate furniture, fireplaces, pianos, harps, guitars, luxurious rugs, and even a tiny Christmas tree decorated with miniscule ornaments. The seven-foot long, five-foot tall structure was originally hand-built by Ross in 1974 over an eight-month period and sold to an Albuquerque woman. Upon her death last year, her family decided to donate the dollhouse back to Tinkertown. Volunteers worked over the winter to make sure it would be ready for the spring opening.

Caine, takes one look through the glass window, determines that there are no horses anywhere near the vicinity of the dollhouse, and looks back to me expectantly.

A little later, I recount my doubts about whether Caine was too young to appreciate Tinkertown to Autumn Pearson. She's an artist, teacher and special education professional in the Sandia Park community in which Tinkertown is located. "Well, it's not quite a children's museum,"

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Many of Ross Ward's handcrafted dioramas have automated components.

she says. "But it's also not an adult's museum. It's something in between."

Pearson has been taking students of all ages on field trips to Tinkertown for more than 10 years. "The little ones sometimes only like pressing buttons," she says, "but I think that's really important for kids because it gives them control and empowers them by letting them be part of the exhibit. You never know what will end up inspiring them."

She adds that high school students really benefit from seeing, firsthand, the principles of design and composition found in the museum space. "I like that it shows how someone who isn't a famous artist found in textbooks still uses the basics," she says. "Tinkertown is a treasure for teachers and parents to use as a teaching tool. It's science,

art, sustainable development, New Mexican history – any subject, really."

On the drive home, Caine asks me to pass him his juice bottle, which has rolled underneath my seat. I pull over, find the bottle, and hand it to him. I ask him what he thought about Tinkertown. He begins talking about how amazing the horses were and then takes a big swig of his juice bottle before asking, "How many more bottles of juice do I have to drink to build a house?"

Pearson's words begin to ring true, "You never know what will end up inspiring them."

What to Know When Visiting:

Website: tinkertown.com

Museum Hours: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m., last admission sold at 5:30 p.m.

The museum closes for the winter in November.

Prices: Adults: \$3.50, Seniors: \$3, Ages 4-16: \$1, Under 4: Free

Handicapped Parking: Located next to the museum entrance. For those in wheelchairs, admission is free.

Directions:

From Albuquerque – Take Interstate 40 east to exit 175. Turn north on Highway 14. Travel six miles up the mountain through Cedar Crest and turn left on Highway 536, the road to Sandia Crest. Tinkertown is 1.5 miles on the left.

From Santa Fe – Take Interstate 25 south to exit 276 and follow Highway 599 north to Highway 14. Stay on Highway 14 for approximately 40 miles and turn right on Highway 536, the road to Sandia Crest. Tinkertown is 1.5 miles on the left.

The museum can take a few minutes or many hours to explore, depending on your interest. The gift shop offers a scavenger hunt style game to further engage young patrons during their visit – Field Guide to Tinkertown. It can be purchased at the gift shop or downloaded from the museum's website under Fun Stuff.

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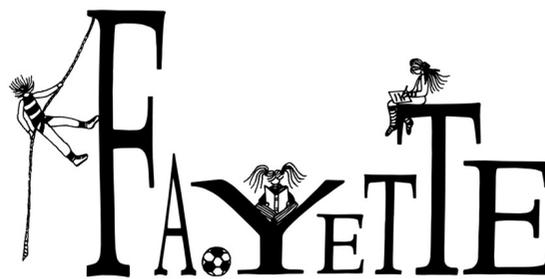


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