

# TURN OFF THE TV, THERE ARE ARCHES TO EXPLORE

*Larry Beck finds and  
shares natural wonders  
for everyone to enjoy*

By Margaret Cheasebro  
Photos by Whitney Howle

At a glance, Larry Beck can spot what might be an arch, a weathered hole in the rock. It's a skill he's developed over years of searching for arches, mostly in northwest New Mexico.

Though he winters at an Arizona RV park, in the summer and early fall, Larry parks his fifth wheel at Wines of the San Juan, where he's an accountant. He travels through nearby canyons in his archmobile, a pickup and camper, looking for arches.

"I have quick access to the canyons around here," he said. "I explore each canyon methodi-

cally. There's hundreds of square miles of these sandstone canyons. They're everywhere. You can usually find at least one arch in every canyon."

## **Over years finds 350 arches**

While exploring Pump Canyon not far from the winery, he found 30 arches. Over the years he's discovered about 350 arches. He photographs and documents each one with directions for how to get there, including both UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) and longitude/latitude coordinates. After he records

them on his websites, the arches pop up on Google Earth.

"I never claim I'm the first to see an arch," he said. "I say I'm the first to document it. It would take several lifetimes to explore every inch of this country. It's so vast."

Ed Kotyk, projects manager for the city of Aztec, also enjoys looking for arches. He has documented many of them on the city of Aztec's website. "Larry is so knowledgeable about the arches," Ed said. "He's the master in terms of arches."









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### **President of NABS**

Larry is president of the Natural Arch and Bridge Society (NABS), and he maintains two websites on Flickr and Panoramio, where he lists the arches he documents: [www.flickr.com/photos/archseeker](http://www.flickr.com/photos/archseeker) and [www.panoramio.com/user/5191059](http://www.panoramio.com/user/5191059). NABS also has a website at [www.naturalarches.org](http://www.naturalarches.org), where people can learn more about arches. The organization has about 140 members, and one of those members is trying to document all the arches in the world.

Larry's efforts are more local. On his

websites he's trying to document the arches in New Mexico.

"The thing about Panoramio is when people go there to look at an arch, it records it, so I can see the number of views an arch has had," he said. "Some of those arches have views up in the thousands. Somebody is looking at them, which I think is great."

### **College presentation draws interest**

There's enough local interest that in 2014 when Beck made a lunch-time presentation at San Juan College during which he showed slides of arches, 50 people attended. Based on the interest from the presentation, he taught one evening class followed by an all-day field trip to his 10 favorite arches during the summer of 2015.

"I love to show people the arches," he said. "Anything that gets people out hiking — that's what I like to encourage. Turn off the TV, get off the couch, and get out and exercise. The gas well roads here give unique access to these canyons. That's the beauty of it. Short hikes and short walks, by and large."

### **Likes to hike**

Hiking has been important to Larry ever since his family moved to Española from Wyoming when he was 10 so his dad could open a NAPA Auto Parts store there.

"It's the best move we ever made," Larry said. "I love New Mexico."

After Larry graduated from Española High School in 1964, he attended the University of New Mexico and studied accounting. He took a break from the university when he joined the Army as a counter-intelligence agent. He served for three years. He spent his last year as part of a seven-man advisory team in the central highlands of Vietnam, for which he was the intelligence agent. Once out of the Army he returned to UNM on the GI Bill and graduated in 1973 with an accounting degree. He worked in accounting for a CPA in Albuquerque and later as an accountant and internal auditor for a savings and loan.



## He and his wife move to Durango

When he and his late wife, Nan, married in 1978, they enjoyed spending weekends in the Four Corners area and eventually moved to Durango in 1981. They lived there 20 years.

One day while Larry was at work as the controller for the Southern Ute Indian Tribe in Ignacio, Colorado, a conservation officer told him about a rainbow shaped arch in Cox Canyon just south of Colorado in New Mexico.

"Of course I had to go look for it," Larry recalled. "That got me hooked. Cox Canyon is beautiful. It's in the San Jose Formation, 65 million years old, and very conducive to forming arches."

The Cox Canyon Arch is also called Rhodes Arch after rancher Edith Rhodes, who lived in the canyon for years, and Anasazi Arch. It's one of the most beautiful arches Larry has ever seen.

## Wife develops breast cancer

Life took an unexpected turn when Nan became ill with breast cancer in 2002. She decided to take her stand against the disease in Hawaii, and Larry made trips there to see her and help her out until he sold their house in Durango. Then he left his job in Ignacio and joined Nan in Hawaii during the last year of her life. She died in 2004. Watching the disease ravage her body took a toll on him.

"I thought I'd take some time off when I got back here," he said. "I sold everything. I said I'm having an RV. I don't want any yard work

or anything. I just want to look for arches."

Recently, Larry explored Chokecherry Canyon, also known as Glade Canyon. "I've gone out there and documented about 40 arches, both on the north and south side of the highway going from Aztec to La Plata," he said. "That's a beautiful canyon. I didn't realize there was so much rock out there."

He named one of the arches there for Nan. She spotted it in 1994 when they rode mountain bikes. It's known as NM-450 Nan's Arch.

## Explores Blanco Canyon

Lately, he's been focusing his exploration on Blanco Canyon which feeds into Largo Canyon, which he called the biggest canyon in this area.

He gives the best arch he finds in each canyon the name of that canyon, such as Gobernador Canyon Arch. Many of the other arches he identifies by number because he can't think of enough names for them all.

He has made unexpected finds while searching for arches. "Awhile back I found a beautiful 30-foot rock art panel in Gobernador Canyon," he said. "I found a beautiful arch and documented it from above. Then I went around below it to get a picture and, darn, if there wasn't this big panel of rock art there!"

He reported the find to Larry Baker of Salmon Ruins. "I know the people at Salmon Ruins take people out to see the ruins and rock art, so I knew they'd be interested," he said.





### **Stumbles across rattlesnakes**

Rock art isn't all he's found. He's also stumbled across rattlesnakes. Often they're coiled in the sand. Most of them don't bother him. He gives them a wide berth.

"I always use two wooden hiking sticks," he said. "I have one in each hand. They help me go up and down the ledges, because I have to climb a lot to get up to the arches. I can use them to prod if I'm in grass, around brush or piles of rocks and dead wood, anywhere a snake might be." It's not like the snakes are everywhere, but I assume they are because I don't want to find one."

When he's in his archmobile, which gives him all the comforts of home, he often follows oil and gas roads in his search for arches. He parks safely away from the wells because some of them produce poisonous gases. Then he hikes up the canyon, following the wash as he looks for arches. But once in awhile he makes an exception to that rule.

### **Finds arch near well site**

"I found one arch right next to a well site," he said. I pulled up, parked and looked up, and there it was up on the ridge. I couldn't believe it. It was so pretty, I camped there so I could get a picture of the sunrise on it." The arch is NM-100 Arco Encantado which means

enchanted arch.

It's rare to find an arch at a well site, he said. "Some of them you just stumble across when you're out hiking or walking the rim."

At Wines of the San Juan, he keeps a map on the wall that shows each canyon with identified arches in it. A book beside it contains photos of each arch. There's also a pamphlet people may take with them to go on a self-guided 10-arch tour into Manzanares Canyon.

"People come to the winery all the time and say, 'I need something to do. What do you recommend?' Well, here it is. Go out and look at some arches," Larry said.

### **"Take a Hike" DVDs**

He also makes DVDs, called "Take a Hike," that feature several different canyons. They're available at the winery.

Marcia Arnold, co-owner of Wines of the San Juan, is happy to have Larry stay there during the summers. "He is very enthusiastic, meticulous and passionate in his search for arches," she said. "He is a great all-around person."

### **A few scary situations**

When Larry goes looking for arches, he usually travels alone, and he's found himself in a few scary situations. After climbing up a



sandstone ridge to access an arch, which was in the rim, he photographed and measured it. From there, he thought he saw a better way down.

“About half way down, I had to slide down some rock,” he said. “I couldn’t go back up at that point. I had to take a run, plant my foot in one spot and jump across this gap. It was 20 feet down to boulders. Nobody in the world knew where I was, and there’s no cell phone service there. I made it successfully, but I learned a lesson. Go back down the same way I went up!”

Another time, he was about 10 miles up Largo Canyon when he spotted an arch. He could see it from below, but he wanted to access it from above. “There was a little gap that I had to climb up to get there,” he said. “Coming back, it was straight down like 50 feet to rocks. I couldn’t step down because there was a gap in the rock, so I had to jump and my back was bothering me from a motorcycle injury. I finally got enough courage to jump. When I landed, I just hit and rolled. I was all right, but I laid there for awhile and thought, ‘You dumb idiot!’ There wasn’t anything extraordinary about the arch. It wasn’t big enough to risk my neck for.”

## He’s an arch-oholic

Still, the lure of arch hunting draws him back to the canyons. He carries his cell phone on a clip under the dashboard of his archmobile, and he listens to Sirius XM Radio as he drives up and down highways and gas well roads. “I guess I’m an arch-oholic,” he said. “There’s no known cure. The only treatment is to find another arch.”

When he’s not looking for arches, he plays

the guitar and sings with his cousin, Rodger. “I do a lot of ’50s doo-wop songs, country western stuff, folk music, and old surfer guitar songs,” he said. Sometimes when he takes NABS members out on arch tours, he’ll strum a few chords.

## Besides music, enjoys soccer

He also enjoys watching soccer games. He played intramural soccer when he was a UNM student. After he graduated, he started the Albuquerque Soccer League so he could keep playing. It grew fast and soon included a

women’s division, now part of the New Mexico State Soccer Association and affiliated with the United States Soccer Federation. At one time, he played on his men’s team and coached both a ladies team and a team of 8-to-10-year-olds.

“I’m a fan now,” he said “I just watch it, especially when the World Cup’s on.”

But arches are his main focus.

“I want to find as many arches as I can while I’m healthy,” he said. “There are no guarantees for anyone. I want people to go out and visit the arches. That’s my mission.” **M**