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REINVENTING QUESTA, NEW MEXICO

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27 VOTES SO

Surrounded by natural beauty, this New Mexico town is trying outdoor recreation on for size.

In 2008, Saint Anthony’s Church in the heart of Questa, New Mexico, partially collapsed. An adobe structure, it had stood in the town’s historic plaza since the mid-1800s. For the town of about 1,700 people—many of them descendants of the region’s original Native American residents as well as Spanish and Hispanic settlers—rebuilding the church became a labor of love. Multiple generations gathered each Saturday for more than six years, using methods from their various ancestors to restore the church to its original state. The townspeople handmade the new stained glass, recreated fixtures and, with the help of the U.S. Forest Service, selected and felled trees for the new structure. Today it stands as a symbol of their resilience and dedication to keeping the town alive.

When Questa's main employer, Chevron Mining Inc., closed down its molybdenum mine in 2014 as moly prices dropped and operating costs went up, the town once again joined together and began planning a new way of life.

The mine originally opened in 1916, and Molycorps Minerals purchased the operation in 1950. Chevron took over in 2005. During its heyday, the mine released numerous hazardous substances from slurry spills and seepage into the water table, including arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, lead, manganese and zinc. In 2016, the EPA declared the area a Superfund site, and Chevron reached a \$143 million settlement with the Department of Justice, the EPA and the state of New Mexico to restore the region's groundwater and natural resources.

With seed and ongoing money provided by Chevron to the tune of over \$7 million, the town created the Questa Economic Development Fund (QEDF) comprised of local government officials, an attorney and community members, and looked to the future. No one had to look far, however, as Questa sits in one of the most scenic corners of the state. Surrounded by protected wilderness, the town lies about 20 miles north of Taos and 12 miles west of the resort community of Red River. It's also a gateway town to the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (<https://www.blm.gov/visit/rgdnnm>), a natural playground with two wild rivers, the Rio Grande and Red, and acres of stunning lands. Members of the QEDF saw potential in developing a new economy based on outdoor recreation (</blog/tag/outdoor-recreation-industry>).

A molybdenum mine was once the primary source of income and industry for Questa (pop. 1,700). With its closure, the community got creative about planning their next phase. (Photo Credit: Emily Wilde)

While the prospect is undeniable, Questa has an uphill climb to become a tourist

destination. Remediation work is well under way, but not yet complete. Convincing locals to buy into the outdoor recreation vision hasn't always been easy—for generations, most made a good living from the mine. And marketing a small, unknown town in such close proximity to well-recognized destinations as Taos and Red River is no small feat. But Questa has rebuilt more than a church over the years.

“We’re pretty good at out-of-the-box thinking here,” says Real. “We’ve had generations of settlers who have had to persevere through big challenges.”

Local buy in

Chris Michael, a 46-year-old who was laid off from his sub-contracting job after the mine closed, is one of the many locals who have bought into the town's new economic model. Today he's a stay-at-home dad and the operator of Rio Grande del Norte Outfitters. He guides groups and individuals on fishing trips in both local lakes and along the Red River, using the tagline “chasing trophies.”

From Michael's viewpoint, one of Questa's gems is the nearby Rio Grande Gorge within the national monument, an 800-foot-deep canyon through which the mighty river rapidly flows. “I love to take people down there to fish,” he says, “but many are afraid of the hike in.”

When he does get visitors on board, however, Michael treats his clients to a variety of native cutthroat and wild brown trout. At \$325 for two people on a six-hour excursion, Michael provides an affordable experience compared to larger, more commercial offerings. “That's two-for-one compared to what you get in neighboring communities,” he says.

Michael works hand-in-hand with the QEDF and Trout Unlimited to market his services. “I do get calls from out-of-state tourists wanting to try,” he says. “We have a diverse fishing landscape and I work with both spinners and flies, depending on what the customer wants.”

The nearby Rio Grande Gorge within Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is a playground for anglers. (Photo Credit: Emily Wilde)

The QEDF established an annual fishing derby (<https://visitquesta.com/events/>) that's become a popular draw and helps introduce locals and out-of-towners alike to the angling riches of the area. "It's been a hard sell because of the [mine-related] river contamination," admits Real, "but we've been improving the shorelines of the local lakes

The various restoration projects also mean jobs. “Many of the skills people have from mining transfer over well to restoration,” says Rachel Conn, projects director at Amigos Bravos (<https://amigosbravos.org>), an organization dedicated to clean water in New Mexico. “In addition, there are grants to train locals in other skills needed for restoration.”

Bill and Kimber MacDonald also believe in Questa’s potential for outdoor recreation. The two created and direct the Pick Your Poison trail races (<https://www.pickyourpoisonrace.com/>), 5K and 10K events held in October for the past three years. Avid recreationists themselves, the MacDonalds work in the local school system and, along with the QEDF, saw the opportunity for trail racing. “The distances may be short, but these are challenging courses that drop runners into the gorge and then back out,” says Bill. “We’ve learned a lot about organizing an event since starting, and the QEDF has been a good partner in helping us with event organizing and getting [the] word out about local lodging.”

The first year the event drew about 25 people and has since grown to 74. “We partner up with an Octoberfest event in Red River, and we try to encourage participants to stay over and enjoy all that Questa has to offer,” says Bill. “We point people in the direction of local rentals, lodges and camping.”

To that end, several locals are trying their hand at short-term vacation rentals and finding it a good source of added income. Julie Gonzalez, 60, owns an auto shop and is raising both children and grandchildren. “I’ve put my daughter’s house on the market as a [vacation rental] so that I can keep it in the family,” she says. “I just started in September, but I’ve had pretty regular bookings.”

Just as the local event operators drive business to home rentals, Gonzalez makes sure her guests learn about the nearby recreation opportunities so that they don’t just head out to the bigger, better-known neighboring towns. “Most of them come to ski, hike or see the sights, and they’ll ask for recommendations on where to go,” she says. “We’re an undiscovered area for people to enjoy, so I’ll help them learn what’s available.”

In the state of New Mexico, outdoor recreation accounts for 99,000 direct jobs and \$2.8 billion in wages and salaries, according to the Outdoor Industry Association. (Photo Credit: Emily Wilde)

As of 2018, New Mexico's outdoor recreation industry created 99,000 direct jobs and generated \$9.9 billion in consumer spending, according to the Outdoor Industry Association (<https://outdoorindustry.org/state/new-mexico/>). It's uncertain what

Questa's eventual contribution to that economy and its growth might be. "There's a lot of energy in the local community to do this," Axie Navas, the state's newly appointed first outdoor recreation division director, says. "If the community is involved, we are there for them."

The coming year will offer a full slate of outdoor events. Starting with the Rio Grande Cutthroat Fish Festival on March 28, the calendar includes the fishing derby and trail races, plus a century bike ride, a new gravel race, and harvest and holiday festivals. There are also new trails under development between Questa and Red River that Questa will market for mountain biking.

Like any community looking to draw visitors, one challenge will be slow growth. "The trick is pacing and making sure it lays the right foundation so that locals can continue to get a slice of the tourism dollars," Navas says. "There's also the issue of not overwhelming the environment. When it comes to infrastructure, conservation and growth need to work hand in hand."

For now, Questa's biggest challenge remains getting the word out and drawing those tourists. But Real believes in his town. "It's tough to bring people around to an entrepreneurial mindset after so many years of big company employment," he admits. "Locals want to stay in Questa, however, so we're pulling together and figuring it out."

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A passionate outdoorist, Amanda is a health and fitness writer whose work has been featured in *Outside*, *The Washington Post* and many others.

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Great article, Amanda! Thanks for bringing some light to Questa. My team was lucky to produce a piece about this awesome town this past summer. Check it out here: brianchorski.com/newmexico

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Tommy Lyles · 4 days ago (<https://www.rei.com/blog/news/reinventing-questa-new-mexico#comment-12789>)

Thank you to the REI Co-op for posting this article and drawing attention to Questa's untouched recreational opportunities. As the article states, Chevron's remediation work is well under way, and we are proud to partner with the Village of Questa, the Questa Economic Development Fund, US Forest Service, New Mexico Game and Fish and Trout Unlimited as we transition Questa to a diverse and sustainable post-mining economy.

Our support for economic development is yielding results. Progress to date includes significant improvements to Eagle Rock Lake and restoration of the Red River's natural trout habitat. Questa is on track to become one of the top fishing destinations in New Mexico. Chevron is also proud to support a local lodging initiative to make more short-term rentals (including AirBnB) available for visitors to Questa.

Thank you again for highlighting the beauty and recreational opportunities of the Questa area, the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, and the Carson National Forest. As members of this community, we look forward to welcoming other REI "Opt Out"iders, like ourselves, to explore this amazing area of the Enchanted Circle.

Follow our local monthly paper to find out about events and activities in the area: <http://questa-nm.com/newspaper/>. (<http://questa-nm.com/newspaper/>)

Thank you

Christian Isely (Questa Economic Development Advisor) and Tommy Lyles (Corporate Affairs Manager)
Chevron Environmental Management Company

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