

# the ROAD Less Traveled

OKLAHOMA'S DIRT ROADS AND BEATEN PATHS OFFER VIEWS, RIDES, AND ROAD TRIPS INACCESSIBLE TO MOST. BUT HOW TO GET STARTED OFF-ROADING? WHERE TO GO? HOW TO STAY SAFE? THIS GUIDE WILL HELP YOU HIT THE TRAILS.

By SUSAN DRAGOO

**A** DIRT ROAD CATCHES your eye while you're following the asphalt on the way to somewhere else. Where does it go? What could you see if you turned around and took the time to leave the pavement and follow that tree-canopied trail? There are nearly sixty thousand miles of unpaved roads across Oklahoma—more than enough to circumnavigate the globe twice. That's a lot of opportunity for exploring, and for the curious, there's plenty to discover. But prepare to get a little grime on that fresh wax job in the process.

First, a tutorial in terminology. There's a lot of four-wheeling in Oklahoma, often also referred to as off-roading. That could include use of all-terrain vehicles and highly modified Jeeps, trucks, cars, or motorcycles taken to a specific location like an off-highway vehicle park for tackling challenging obstacles, deep sand, and rocky or technical terrain. Then there's overlanding, which also is sometimes referred to as off-roading. Overlanding celebrates the journey, may be done on four wheels or two, and usually involves nights beneath the stars. Highly modified vehicles are not required, but high clearance and four-wheel drive or dual-sport motorcycles are a good idea. You might not want to take your Miata on the K Trail.

Our focus is on overlanding, taking us away from paved roads and population centers in stock or slightly modified vehicles to explore Oklahoma's back country in its scenic and historic glory. Granted, there are some nuances to such exploration—primarily involving access—but in the search for off-road Oklahoma, there's plenty of excitement to be had.

Whether you prefer the rugged forests of southeastern Oklahoma or the high plains of the northwest, Oklahoma's thousands of miles of backroads are calling.

SUSAN DRAGOO

# Know Before You Go



JERRY BENNETT

Sometimes, an open or unlocked gate suggests public access but doesn't really mean it. A thorough understanding of land access is essential before setting out for an off-road destination. While 95.4 percent of Oklahoma's land is privately owned, the other 4.6 percent includes more than a million acres managed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and nearly 300,000 acres of the Ouachita National Forest. With the

privilege of access comes the responsibility to know and follow area-specific rules and regulations, which typically are available online, but it's also wise to mine the resources of local knowledge, including county sheriffs, wildlife managers, the United States Forest Service, and outdoor recreation clubs.

If you have a flat tire on a rocky trail in the middle of nowhere, don't expect roadside assistance to be able to help. Know what kind of

terrain to expect and make sure your vehicle is prepared. Where the road surface is very rocky, robust all-terrain tires, aired down, will help prevent a flat. Having a fully inflated spare and the tools and know-how to change it are critical.

While good navigation software is today's gold standard, old-fashioned cartography in the form of gazetteers and motor vehicle use maps offer excellent planning tools and provide backup in case technology fails.

## SAFETY

**Red Dirt Jeep Club, Oklahoma's largest organization of Jeep off-roaders, requires the following for participation in club-sponsored group rides, but their guidelines are useful for anyone heading out on the trail, no matter what type of vehicle they're using. [Learn more at reddirtjeepclub.com](https://reddirtjeepclub.com).**

- The vehicle must be in full working condition with all-time and full-time four-wheel drive.
- Tow points on the vehicle's front and rear are required to facilitate safe attachment of recovery equipment if needed.
- Working seat belts are required for all vehicle occupants.
- A factory or aftermarket roll cage or normal roof and body pillars are required for safety. The lack thereof could spell disaster in a rollover situation.

## ESSENTIAL GEAR

**Having the right tools is an essential part of doing any job. The same goes for recreational off-roading. Be sure you're prepared with the following recommendations from Red Dirt Jeep Club.**

- **Basic First Aid Kit.** Along with standard first aid equipment, also carry a list of the vehicle occupants' allergies, medications, and emergency contact information.
- **Radio.** Communication with other group members is essential on trail rides. RDJC members primarily use short-range CB radios.
- **Fire Extinguisher.** Type BC minimum
- **Basic Recovery Kit.** Assuming at least one vehicle in the group has a winch, each vehicle should carry a tree-saver strap, tow strap, gloves, D-ring shackles, snatch block, and flashlight.
- **Tire repair kit, portable air compressor, and jack.** Use a hi-lift jack if the vehicle is equipped with a lift kit.





The Green Country Oklahoma Adventure Tour (GOAT) in northeastern Oklahoma is open to drivers, cyclists, and hikers.

SUSAN DRAGOO

## Green Country Oklahoma Adventure Tour (“The GOAT”)

**M**ANY OF OKLAHOMA’S roads are laid out on a grid of straight one-mile sections, remnants of surveys done for the land runs that began in 1889. But eastern Oklahoma, hilly and forested, is an exception. The county roads twist and turn with the terrain, their legacy that of old wagon, stagecoach, and military roads. In October 2019, Daniel Sawin, a UPS driver based in Vinita, assembled nearly five hundred miles of northeastern Oklahoma backroads into one big loop and called it the Green Country Oklahoma Adventure Tour, or GOAT.

About 70 percent of the route is unpaved. Though intended for dual-sport motorcycles, it’s accessible to most automobiles, taking in some of the area’s best scenery and several historic sites and offering plenty of camping along the way. Historic highlights include Sequoyah’s Cabin Museum, Cayuga Mission Church, and the Will Rogers highway marker east of Afton. The stretch of road along the Illinois River is one of the most appealing, and the route also takes the traveler to Disney, home of the GRDA Off Road Trails, a popular destination for four-wheelers. The

GOAT also intersects with the Oklahoma Adventure Trail and the Trans-America Trail. There are two versions: One is an adventure route for the more intrepid traveler, and the other one is easier and more focused on historic sites. Access points are many, but a couple of good ones are Tenkiller Ferry Dam and Natural Falls State Park.

### TRANS-AMERICA TRAIL

› [transamtrail.com](http://transamtrail.com)

### NATURAL FALLS STATE PARK

› 19225 East 578 Road in Colcord

› (918) 422-5802

› [TravelOK.com/state-parks/natural-falls-state-park](http://TravelOK.com/state-parks/natural-falls-state-park)

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## Cross Bar Offroad Park

**T**HEY CALLED HER the Queen of the Arbuckles. Diminutive and independent, Gertrude Sober was nineteen when her family came to Oklahoma Territory in 1889 and settled in Oklahoma City, where Sober worked as a clerk, stenographer, teacher, and secretary. Around 1901, Charles N. Gould, founder of the geology department at the University of Oklahoma, began conducting field trips to the Arbuckle Mountains, which then was a week-long journey by horse and wagon. Reports from those excursions reached Sober, and she decided to investigate, visiting the Arbuckles frequently on horseback, camping out or living in a log cabin while she was prospecting. One hot August day in 1909, Sober spotted what looked like zinc

in a fragment of rock. Her discovery turned out to be a major deposit of the mineral and resulted in a flurry of mining activity over the next few years. Later in life, Sober enrolled at the University of Oklahoma and in 1933 was the first woman to receive a geology degree there.

The remnants of Sober’s mining days still are evident in the Arbuckle Mountains, some of the oldest mountains in the United States, now worn to a maximum elevation of about 1,400 feet. Cross Bar Offroad Park, 6,500 acres of rocky trails and creek beds near Turner Falls, honors Sober’s memory with Gertrude’s Place, the site of one of Sober’s mines. Mine tailings, creek dams, and foundations dot the landscape as well. Look for



JAMES PRATT

the Goose Nest Mine and the Ben Franklin Mine. With camping and two hundred miles of trails, Cross Bar offers recreation for all types of vehicles. High clearance and four-wheel drive are recommended for the rough, rocky, often steep trails.

### CROSS BAR OFFROAD PARK

› 4550 Dolese Road in Davis

› (580) 247-7244

› [rideyourlifestyle.com](http://rideyourlifestyle.com)

**Cross Bar Offroad Park near Davis features a more than 7-mile trail that leads to Turner Falls.**

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**THIS WAS NO**  
*Man's Land,*  
*meaning it was*  
*public land*  
*in which no*  
*individual could*  
*own property.*

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Wide open spaces are the key  
feature of the Santa Fe Trail in  
northwestern Oklahoma.



SUSAN DRAGOO

## Mesas, Buttes, and the Santa Fe Trail

**O**NE OF OKLAHOMA'S most distinctive landscapes is tucked into its far northwestern corner. There, where the state reaches its peak elevation, buttes, mesas, cholla cacti, and sandstone formations create a vibe more desert than prairie. Until 1890, when the Panhandle was included in the creation of Oklahoma Territory, this was No Man's Land, meaning it was public land in which no individual could own property. But it wasn't empty. It was seasonally home to the nomadic Plains Indians, and the region saw steady traffic along the Santa Fe Trail. A major trade route from 1821 to 1880, the Santa Fe stretched nearly nine hundred miles from Franklin, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Cimarron Cutoff, first used in 1822, carried about 75 percent of the trail's traffic and traversed what is now the Oklahoma Panhandle. It was shorter than

the standard mountain route and cut travel time by ten days but was more dangerous because of the shortage of water and risk of attack by Plains tribes. The Cutoff crossed the Cimarron River and continued southwest to Cold Springs. Travelers stopped here to refresh, and nearby Autograph Rock still displays the names they carved into the bluff.

Today, gazetteers and USGS topographical maps show the trail's path across the western end of the Panhandle. It is easy to identify points where it crosses public roads. But in Oklahoma, there is no contiguous road following the trail, and all of it is on private property. The web of unpaved roads on detailed maps suggests ample access, but in fact, many of those roads are restricted by gates. Whether locked or unlocked, they are best left alone without permission from the property owner.

But there is hope for the intrepid Oklahoma explorer—and plenty of accessible dirt roads. Any expedition in the Panhandle should start in Boise City at the Cimarron Heritage Center. The director, Jody Risley, is a wealth of information and can direct visitors to accessible Santa Fe Trail crossing sites, including obtaining permission to see Autograph Rock.

One of those trail crossings is right on the New Mexico border, and a short jaunt north along a road skirting the border delivers the driver to the Black Mesa area. After

a night in one of the local guest houses or at Black Mesa State Park, the route should include a stop near Lake Carl Etling to explore some of the wild sandstone formations and then a winding route on dirt roads through canyons and buttes. From Kenton, travel east on Highway 325 to County Road 13/No100. Turn north and follow the unpaved road north 4.4 miles then turn east, nearly touching the Colorado border for 22.5 miles, and rejoining the pavement at U.S. Highway 287.

**SANTA FE**  
**NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL**  
➤ [nps.gov/safe](https://nps.gov/safe)



SHANE BEVEL

The forested Kiamichi Trail stretches 89 miles from Clayton, Oklahoma, to Mena, Arkansas.

## The K-Trail and the Ouachita National Forest

**T**HE MOUNTAINS, STREAMS and forests of southeastern Oklahoma are laced with the kinds of pathways that off-roaders crave. And much of the region is in the Ouachita National Forest, making access a breeze—mostly. National Forest boundaries usually aren't marked, and it's not always clear what roads are open, so obtaining a copy of the Forest Service's latest Motor Vehicle Use Maps is a good idea.

Perhaps the most iconic route in the area is the K-Trail. "K" stands for Kiamichi, and this trail traverses the

backbone of the Kiamichi range. In recent years, access has become increasingly difficult on the western end of the trail near Clayton. The safest bet is to join the trail at Indian Highway in Pushmataha County and follow County Road D1650/254 east into LeFlore County. Things change from time to time, so consult the local sheriff before setting out.

Sharp rocks and tight spaces are common. If you cherish your paint job, think twice before going, as needles from encroaching evergreens against metal can be chill-

ing, even though many of the scratches will buff out. Long mud puddles with invisible bottoms also can be unnerving, and some of the steep, rutted climbs will make you appreciate four-wheel drive. The highlight of the twenty-three-mile segment from Indian Highway to Three Sticks Monument at U.S. Highway 259 is the lookout tower atop Kiamichi Mountain, providing a good spot for a break during what can be a very slow trip. East of Highway 259 the road can be followed another twelve miles to the junction with County Road 295 and

north 4.5 miles to U.S. Highway 63. Start early and plan on completing the trail in one day, as you are not always on National Forest land, and rules for overnighting are unclear.

If that's overwhelming, milder routes are available. Take a ride on Holly Mountain Road to Eagle's Nest for a spectacular view of Broken Bow Lake or a short jaunt to a waterfall near the state park golf course. One nice area is around the Pashubbe Trailhead of the Ouachita Trail.

### GET THERE:

➤ To obtain Motor Vehicle Use Maps from the U.S. Forest Service, visit [fs.usda.gov](https://fs.usda.gov).

## Valley of the Wichitas

**T**HIS SCENIC DRIVE along the western edge of the Wichita Mountains and back east through a broad valley turns south through Meers and toward the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. The route starts on the blacktop at the western boundary of the Refuge, but from there, it stays mostly on unpaved roads. Derived from Edward Charles Ellenbrook's book, *Outdoor and Trail Guide to the Wichita Mountains*, it's best driven with his colorful narrative as a guide, though some of the historical sites he mentions are hidden or long gone.

Linked with the paved road through the Refuge,

the trail makes a meandering fifty-three-mile loop. Starting at the west gate of the Refuge, drive to where the pavement ends at Northwest 277th Street, continue north, jogging left a couple of times, then turn right on E1400 Road. The well-maintained dirt road boasts scenic views of mountains and ranch land. Continue to veer right until returning to pavement at State Highway 115, continuing into Meers, then back to State Highway 49, the road that runs through the Refuge. Stops include the Parallel Forest, Meers, Victory School, and a breathtaking view of Cut-throat Gap.

### WICHITA MOUNTAINS WILDLIFE REFUGE

- › 32 Refuge Headquarters Road in Indianola
- › (580) 429-3222
- › [fws.gov/refuge/wichita](https://fws.gov/refuge/wichita)

Overlanders will find beautiful drives throughout the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.



DAVID MCNEESE/OKLAHOMA TOURISM

## Wildlife Management Areas

### OKLAHOMA'S WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Areas are an often overlooked but abundant resource for wheeled exploring on unpaved back roads. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation manages more than eighty preserves across the state for

fishing and hunting, but other users are welcome. Many areas are closed from October 1 to February 15 except for hunting or fishing. While the roads on WMAs are meant to facilitate access for sportsmen rather than create entertainment for off-roaders, they do provide many miles of

backcountry opportunity, and most offer primitive camping sites. Some, like Hackberry Flat near Frederick and Red Slough near Idabel, are popular destinations for bird watchers and others interested in observing wildlife. In the spring, migrating shorebirds draw birders to Hackberry and, at Red Slough, bald eagles and alligators are among the attractions. WMA users need to either purchase a license for hunting or fishing or a Conservation Passport for access.

### GET THERE:

- › Learn more about wildlife management areas—including access rules—at [www.wildlifedepartment.com](https://www.wildlifedepartment.com).



LORI DUCKWORTH

While ATVs and off-road vehicles are not permitted at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, the area has plenty of dirt roads for adventurous drivers.

“  
THE WELL-  
MAINTAINED  
dirt road boasts  
scenic views of  
mountains and  
ranch land.  
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