

Stylish Santa Fe



DOWNTOWN SANTE FE

By Sean McLennan

Before I came to New Mexico for the first time, the image that it conjured up was scorchingly hot, desolate, flat and bleak. I didn't think the desert was for me, and had it not been for professional considerations, I never would have visited Santa Fe—or anywhere else in the southwest for that matter. And I would have missed experiencing one of the most amazing areas the U.S. has to offer. Truly, if you've never

been to the American Southwest, you can't possibly imagine what it's like; if you don't think that you can find something of interest down here, you're wrong. New Mexico, especially, is one of the most culturally, geographically and culinarily diverse places in America.

Santa Fe, the capital, is the epicentre of New Mexico's converging influences. It's a small city, but it is home to a unique (and sometimes odd!) mix of people and professions from all backgrounds and walks

of life. Historically, the area was first populated by the local bands of native Americans who still comprise a significant percentage of the population. Many make their living as artisans and craftspeople, and Santa Fe is famous for its authentic native jewelry and pottery. Indeed, just north of Santa Fe, at Taos, is the oldest continuously inhabited *pueblo* (southwestern native community) in North America. The Tiwa people have been living in these traditional-style adobe stacked homes for more than 300 years, with little change to their lifestyles. The native influence on Santa Fe is most readily apparent in the architecture, which is almost entirely adobe.

Santa Fe was also the first place the Spanish settled as they travelled north from Mexico, bringing with them their culture, their cuisine and Catholicism. All of these combined with the local traditions to give birth to a unique society that can't be found anywhere else. The focus of New Mexican religion is the Virgin Mary in the persona of "Guadalupe," and it is her image that usually appears above the alter in Catholic churches. The mythology surrounding the Virgin has been largely drawn from the native earth goddess traditions, which seem to have given the people much more tolerant attitudes compared to other southern states.

must-see museum named after her, just off the historic plaza downtown. Canyon Road sports most of the art galleries in town—try to attend one of the "Art Walks," when the public is invited to meander along the street with complementary wine and cheese and peruse the art.

I don't want to give the impression that New Mexico is only for the artsy-types, though. About an hour from Santa Fe is Los Alamos, home of the U.S. Department of Energy's research labs and one of the largest scientific communities in the States. It is also home to one of the most influential inventions in the history of human civilization: the bomb. Although weapons research no longer goes on in Los Alamos, the town's history is readily apparent in everything from the science museum to the street names. It is certainly educational to visit Los Alamos, even if, like me, you have some trouble with the seeming reverence for this tool of mass destruction.

Today, there is all kinds of scientific research going on in New Mexico. The Santa Fe Institute (located in its namesake city) is devoted to the study of chaos and complexity—as a reference point, Jeff Goldblum's character in *Jurassic Park* was from SFI). In the middle of the San Agustin plains, about fifty miles west of Socorro, is

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THE VERY LARGE ARRAY

Any itinerary should include a stop at the "Santuario de Guadalupe" in Santa Fe (the oldest Virgin-centred church in America) and a trip to the "Santuario de Chimayo," a little north of Santa Fe. The Santuario de Chimayo is revered world-wide as a healing place; there are countless testimonies of individuals who miraculously recovered from afflictions after visiting the "Shrine" where you are invited to contact the divine through its sacred soil. You are even encouraged to take some away with you. It's a compelling place—even for the a-religious.

Of course, the entire southwest, including New Mexico and Santa Fe, is permeated with the image of the cowboy, but in Santa Fe it is probably less reflected in local ranching than it is in the local art. Drawn by the eclecticism, Santa Fe has become an artists' haven. Probably the best known figure of this region is Georgia O'Keefe, whose work is celebrated in a

the Very Large Array—a total of twenty-seven radio telescopes spread out in a 'Y' over a twenty-six mile diameter area. This spectacular assembly monitors deep space and, as another reference point, made a prominent appearance in *Contact* with Jodie Foster. Many researchers have branched out into the private sector as well with their own start-ups, creating a considerable technological boom in New Mexico.

If cutting edge science isn't enough to get you excited, then maybe science fiction is. Roswell, site of the infamous UFO sighting and setting of the now-defunct WB teen drama of the same name, makes for a bizarre day trip. The entire town is now dedicated to alien life in all its glory, including a museum commemorating one of the most well known (if not completely validated) government conspiracies of all time. (Sadly, you're more likely to spot a

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ADOBE ARCHITECTURE

real alien here than any of the television series' photogenic stars.) Hopefully *Roswell: the Musical* will still be running when you visit!

I was quickly dissuaded that New Mexico was desolate and bleak. Nor is it flat. All of New Mexico developed geologically on an active fault (that has long settled) and consequently there are mountains everywhere—the bottom tip of the Rockies, in fact. But the mountains of New Mexico bear little resemblance to the mountains of Alberta and British Columbia. They are relatively short and rounded, but very steep and often surrounded by huge mesas (broad flat plains at high altitudes)

that in turn drop off at huge cliffs and canyons. Santa Fe is nestled into one such mountainous region and the residential areas that drift up the hills provide a breathtaking view of the city and storms that move in from the southwest.

Moreover, New Mexico isn't as hot as one might think. Summer daytime temperatures probably push the bounds of comfort, but at night (because of its high altitude) temperatures plummet, so be sure to have a warm sweater or jacket on hand. And—surprise, surprise—in the winter New Mexico gets quite a lot of snow! Santa Fe and Taos are both famous for excellent skiing.

New Mexican food is to die for (I hope you like it *hot*). Although there are some obvious similarities to Mexican cuisine, it is sufficiently distinct to warrant its own classification. Very quickly you will discover that everything is bathed in chile and you will always be asked for your preference: red, green or both (I suggest that you ask for "Christmas"). Which is hotter, the red or the green, is dependent on all sorts of factors, including the amount of precipitation that year, the season and how individual restaurants prepare it. Sophisticated visitors and connoisseurs will ask the server about their chile. In Santa Fe, there are some culinary musts: the Santacafe—Santa Fe's finest—go for lunch if you're on a budget; Tecalote—famous throughout the area for its fabulous breakfasts; and Baja Taco—what Taco Bell

should be: cheap, fast, and utterly mouth-watering. Finally, I recommend the Plaza Cafe, a '50s-style diner on the downtown plaza that serves some mighty fine dishes; it was easily my favourite.

If you decide a trip to New Mexico, I think I've made it clear that you'll want to centre your visit in Santa Fe. Although Santa Fe does have an airport, if you removed the control tower, it would be smaller than my parents' house and it is only serviced by white-knuckle, eighteen-seat, prop-plane commuter flights from Denver (which can be quite an adventure in and of themselves...). If you fly, you'll likely fly into Albuquerque and then head to Santa Fe. A car in New Mexico is a must; if you fly, then rent one. There is so much to see just a short car ride outside of Santa Fe aside from what I've already mentioned: White Sands National Monument—a 210-square mile expanse of snow white sand dunes (also location of the first nuclear explosion); Chaco Canyon—a World Heritage Site and home to 1000-year-old ruins of the centre of the Anasazi civilization; the Blue Hole—a naturally occurring eighty-foot-deep well of ice-cold water in the middle of the desert, which is popular for scuba-diving; Petroglyph National Monument—centuries-old drawings carved into volcanic rock; Bandolier National Park—famous for ancient cliff dwellings. This is before you get into such standards as camping and white-water rafting on the Rio Grande! It's *inconceivable* that you might get bored.

Accommodations in Santa Fe are as diverse as the population. If you've got some extra space on that credit card, the Anasazi Inn and the Santa Fe hotel are top-of-the-line, but there's also a youth hostel and cheap summer housing at St. John's College, as well as everything in between.

Despite a quite large GLBT population, there isn't much geared explicitly towards the gay community in Santa Fe (or anywhere outside of Albuquerque, for that matter) and it doesn't have much to offer as far as a "scene." There *is* one dance club, Paramount, and it's a popular hangout, but not by any means exclusively gay. That being said, there isn't anywhere that you could call exclusively *straight*, either! The people of Santa Fe seem so accepting that there doesn't seem to be a need for exclusivity. Walking the streets of Santa Fe, it seems that the entire city has been sprinkled with a little "fairy dust," and it's easy to feel at home.

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does Web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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