

Fodor's Choice New Mexico

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New Mexico's natural beauty immediately captivates those who see it, and its elusive, indefinable character enriches those who take it to heart. Spacious skies and vistas, bewitching plays of light, and a sense of purity have attracted travelers, settlers, artists, and scientists, who have come in search of treasures tangible and intangible.

Albuquerque, the state's largest city, is the gateway to New Mexico and is its business and educational capital. Its residents—like its architecture, food, and art—reflect a confluence of Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo culture. Santa Fe, on a 7,000-foot-high plateau, is one of the most visited small cities in the United States, with an abundance of world-famous museums, one-of-a-kind cultural events, art galleries, and distinctive restaurants and shops. Taos, 65 miles north, is a comfortably rustic town with cottonwood-shaded streets and adobe buildings as well as a surprising mix of sophisticated galleries and restaurants. However, it's by venturing out of New Mexico's major towns that you come to appreciate the state's exceptionally diverse scenery, from dramatic river gorges with sheer basalt walls to the evergreen- and aspen-covered slopes of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Within an hour's drive of Albuquerque, Santa Fe, or Taos are nearly a dozen Indian pueblos; the countryside that inspired Georgia O'Keeffe's artwork; some of the West's finest ski resorts; an abundance of prestigious wineries; several villages famous for both contemporary and traditional arts and crafts; and some of the best hiking, rafting, fly-fishing, and biking terrain you'll ever lay eyes on.

In New Mexico you can immerse yourself in a culture with ancient roots and a landscape with seemingly infinite vistas. This combination of history and natural beauty frames any visit to the state, and you're bound to leave with the feeling that you've been somewhere very far from home—without the worries of international travel. Welcome to the Land of Enchantment.

HISTORIC SITES

The entire state can feel like one massive archaeological dig, with its mystical Native American ruins and weathered adobe buildings. Stately plazas laid out as fortifications by the Spanish in the 17th century still anchor many communities, including Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, and Taos. And side trips from these cities lead to ghost towns and deserted pueblos that have been carefully preserved by historians. Here are some of the top draws for history buffs.

One of the best-preserved and most fascinating ruin sites on the continent, the ancient **Chaco Culture National Historical Park** in Chaco Canyon was home to the forerunners of today's Pueblo Indians more than 1,000 years ago.

Santa Fe's **San Miguel Mission** is a simple, earth-hue adobe structure built in about 1625. It's the oldest church still in use in the continental United States.

A United Nations World Heritage Site, the 1,000-year-old **Taos Pueblo** has the largest collection of multistory pueblo dwellings in the United States.

The oldest public building in the United States, the Pueblo-style **Palace of the Governors**, anchors Santa Fe's historic plaza and has served as the residence for 100 Spanish, Native American, Mexican, and American governors. It's now the site of one of the state's newest attractions, the **New Mexico History Museum**. The sleek facility behind the palace tells the rich and complex story of the state's founding through an incredible collection of artifacts that, up to this point, made brief appearances only in temporary exhibits at the

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WORD OF MOUTH

"On the way from ABQ to Santa Fe we stopped at Tent Rocks...LOVED this place. Very low key, no rangers. You are on your own. We brought sandwiches and ate at a picnic table, then hiked both the slot canyon and the other trail....Highly recommend this place, it is eerie and beautiful." –emd3

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Palace of the Governors. The 20,000-square-foot facility uses interactive, state-of-the-art audio and visual technology to bring New Mexico's heritage to life.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

With nearly 50 peaks towering more than 12,000 feet, New Mexico is a wonderland for people who love the mountains. The southern spine of the Rocky Mountain range runs right through the center of the state, looming over Taos and Santa Fe. The stunning Sandia Mountains face the city of Albuquerque, and similarly beautiful peaks dot the landscape as far south as Alamogordo.

Whether you're high in the mountains or low in a dramatic river canyon, hiking opportunities abound. Six national forests and 34 state parks cover thousands

of acres around New Mexico, and the state's many Native American ruins are also laced with trails.

Several first-rate ski areas have been carved out of New Mexico's mountains, including **Taos Ski Valley**, **Angel Fire**, and **Ski Santa Fe** to the north, and **Ski Apache** in Ruidoso. The ski areas also make for great mountaineering during the warmer months. In New Mexico you can always find temperate weather somewhere in the state. Consider the following areas for an engaging ramble:

About midway between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, **Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument** is so named because its bizarre rock formations look like tepees rising over a narrow box canyon. The hike here is relatively short and only moderately challenging, offering plenty of bang for the buck.

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CHILE FEVER

Nothing sets New Mexican food apart from other cuisines so distinctly as the chile pepper, permutations of which locals will heap upon just about any dish, from blue-corn enchiladas to turkey sandwiches.

Chiles have long been a staple of both Hispanic and indigenous cuisine in the region, and they come in two varieties: red and green. Depending on the restaurant, or even the particular batch, green or red may be the hotter variety. Servers always ask which kind you'd prefer, and if you can't decide, try them both by answering "Christmas."

The village of Chimayó produces some of the best red chiles in the state, while the small town of Hatch, down near Las Cruces, harvests the best green chiles. You can often find fresh-roasted green chiles at fairs and festivals, or even by the side of the road, especially during fall harvest time.



One of the more strenuous hiking challenges in the state is **Wheeler Peak**. The 8-mile trek to New Mexico's highest point (elevation 13,161 feet) rewards visitors with stunning views of the Taos Ski Valley.

From the northeastern fringes of Albuquerque, **La Luz Trail** winds 9 miles (with an elevation gain of more than 3,000 feet) to Sandia Crest.

Gila National Forest's short **Catwalk Trail**, in the southwestern corner of the state, is a metal walkway that clings to the sides of the soaring cliffs in White Water Canyon.

THE CRADLE OF CREATIVITY

New Mexico attracts all kinds of vibrant spirits, whether to visit or relocate, but the state is an especially strong draw for artists.

With more than 200 esteemed art galleries, Santa Fe has the third-largest art market in the country, trailing only New York City and Los Angeles. Even if you're not in the market to buy, it's worth visiting some of Santa Fe's notable galleries just to admire the art. Tree-shaded and narrow **Canyon Road**, which meanders gracefully up a hill on the east side of downtown, contains dozens of the city's galleries—it's great fun to stroll here, ducking in and out of shops, especially on Friday, when many galleries have openings. As you might expect, it's easy to find Southwest, Spanish colonial, Native American, and other art related to the area, but Santa Fe long ago broke out from its regional aesthetic and now represents artists of all genres and styles, from early-20th-century impressionism to African ethnography.

The much smaller town of Taos claims a similarly exciting though considerably condensed gallery scene, and the state's largest city, Albuquerque, is no slouch when it comes to the arts. It's home to New Mexico's showpiece, the **National Hispanic Cultural Center**, and galleries have popped up all over the city in recent years.

Although New Mexico's prestigious gallery scene is concentrated in its cities, many of the most talented artists live in small, scenic villages and work out of their home studios. Some of these studios are open year-round, but the best way to visit them is to participate in a **studio tour weekend**. Most occur from early fall through December, with others taking place in spring. During tour weekends, the private studios in a given town open their doors to visitors—it's a great time to converse with artists, shop for their creations, and get off the beaten path. Some particularly noteworthy studio tours include those in **Galisteo** (late October), a funky village near Santa Fe; **Silver City** (late May), which combines its studio tour with a rollicking blues festival; **Ruidoso** (mid-June), whose cool-climate **Art in the Pines** event features 25 artists; and **Abiquiu** (mid-October), where **Georgia O'Keeffe** lived and some 70 artists participate.

DINING

New Mexican cuisine is a delicious and extraordinary mixture of Pueblo, Spanish colonial, and Mexican and American frontier cooking. Recipes brought from Spain via Mexico were adapted for local ingredients—chiles, corn, pork, wild game, pinto beans, honey, apples, and piñon nuts—and have remained much the same ever since.

ALBUQUERQUE, SANTA FE, AND TAOS

Albuquerque's dining scene has been evolving for the past 10 years. In Nob Hill, Downtown, and Old Town many hip new restaurants have opened, offering swank decor and artful variations on modern Southwest, Mediterranean, Asian, and other globally inspired cuisine. A significant Vietnamese population has made that cuisine a star, but Indian, Japanese, Thai, and South American traditions all have a presence, making this New Mexico's best destination for ethnic fare. Albuquerque standouts include: **Sophia's Place** (☎ 6313 4th St. NW ☎ 505/345-3935),

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WINNING WINERIES

New Mexico's soil and climate are perfect for varietals such as pinot noir, chardonnay, and cabernet sauvignon. Half of the two dozen vineyards in the state have tasting rooms. Albuquerque's **Gruet Winery** ranks among the nation's most esteemed producers of champagne-style wines, and others around the state—**Black Mesa**, **La Chiripada**, **Casa Rondena**, **St. Clair**—have garnered awards. You can sample local vintages during several popular festivals. The **Southern New Mexico Wine Festival** in Las Cruces and the **Albuquerque Wine Festival** take place in late May. Las Cruces hosts the **Harvest Wine Festival** over Labor Day weekend, which is when Bernalillo holds its **New Mexico Wine Festival**. Other communities with events include Ruidoso (mid-June), Santa Fe (early July), and Alamogordo (late September).



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Artichoke Café (☎424 Central Ave. SE ☎505/243-0200 🌐www.artichokecafe.com), and **Barelas Coffee House** (☎1502 4th St. SW ☎505/843-7577).

So-called Santa Fe–style cuisine has so many influences that the term is virtually meaningless. Traditional, old-style Santa Fe restaurants serve New Mexican fare, which combines both Native American and Hispanic traditions and is quite different from Americanized or even authentic Mexican cooking. Many of the better restaurants in town serve a contemporary style of cooking that blends New Mexican ingredients with those of interior and coastal Mexico, Latin America, the Mediterranean, East Asia, and various parts of the United States. Restaurants with high-profile chefs stand beside low-key joints, each offering intriguing variations on regional and international cuisine. Restaurants here are increasingly committed to using local ingredients, from meats to cheeses to produce. Best bets in Santa Fe include **Cafe Pasqual's** (☎121 Don Gaspar Ave. ☎505/983-9340 🌐www.pasquals.com), **La Boca** (☎72 W. Marcy St ☎505/982-3433), and **The Shed** (☎113½ E. Palace Ave. ☎505/982-9030).

Taos is a great place for New Mexican fare prepared with locally grown chiles and homemade tortillas, but the town also draws raves for outstanding contemporary restaurants with award-winning wine lists. Pan Asian and Middle Eastern flavors are influences in the increasingly sophisticated cuisines finding their way to this small town with a big attitude. Try **Lambert's of Taos** (☎309 Paseo del Pueblo Sur ☎575/758-1009) and **Joseph's Table** (☎108-A S. Taos Plaza, La Fonda Hotel ☎575/751-4512 🌐www.josephstable.com).

BEYOND THE CITIES

Somehow, just about any meal tastes a little better when it follows a long road trip through magnificent scenery. North-central New Mexico has no shortage of tantalizing road food—simple and honest New Mexican fare, diner snacks, juicy burgers, and the like. But in these parts you can also find one of the Southwest's most acclaimed restaurants, **Rancho de San Juan** (☎U.S. 285, 3½ mi north of U.S. 84 ☎505/753-6818 🌐www.ranchodesanjuan.com), along with several other fine eateries.

In the northwest there are also lots of reputable homegrown establishments. The B&Bs here serve uniformly delicious homemade breakfasts. Western favorites like rib-eye steak and barbecue pork and chicken are common menu items, breakfast burritos are ubiquitous, and, as elsewhere in New Mexico, topping everything is red and green chile sauce. Other local specialties include Navajo fry bread, which can be served plain, topped with honey and powdered sugar, or taco-style with meat, beans, lettuce, and cheese; and mutton stew such as you'd be served on a pueblo's feast day. Delicious bread and pies, baked in beehive-shaped outdoor *hornos* (ovens), are sold at roadside stands at some pueblos.

There are outstanding restaurants in Truth or Consequences and Silver City, in the southwestern part of the state. Mexican food is an almost sure bet in this area, especially if you're a fan of the locally grown green chiles (for some reason red chiles are less compelling here than they are up north). You won't get far before you realize that barbecue joints and steak houses are almost as numerous here as Mexican restaurants. Las Cruces has several tasty ethnic-food restaurants in the university district; again, generally at very reasonable prices.

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