

fond of La fonda

6 insiders share insights and tips on the beloved Santa Fe inn as it celebrates its 100th year

BY PAUL ZIEKE

A century ago, the builders of what would become La Fonda on the Plaza issued a challenge to architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp. They asked him to create a hotel in the then-new Pueblo Revival style, which draws inspiration from traditional adobe architecture. Later, Mary Colter designed the hotel's interior, using Spanish and Native themes. The result has been a Southwest landmark ever since. Thousands of visitors come to the AAA Four Diamond property every year to experience what is often called the purest form of Santa Fe architecture. They come to see the building's hand-carved viga beams, the stained-glass skylights, and the 25-foot-tall cathedral ceilings. They also come to eat authentic New Mexican cuisine at the hotel's La Plazuela restaurant. And they come to enjoy a sunset drink at the rooftop Bell Tower Bar. As La Fonda celebrates its centennial, we asked 6 insiders to talk about this New Mexico institution and share their best visitor tips. Here's what they said.

ROBERT RECK





Ed Pulsifer

Director of sales

My role as unofficial hotel historian came about by accident. In 2013, after the hotel did a monumental room-renovation project, I got a call from the Newcomers Club of Santa Fe asking if they could get a tour. I led that one, and they asked for another, and then another. I learned more about the history of the hotel and the art in it.

People started asking about a docent program. I recruited 8 people from the New Mexico Museum of History and other places. They enlisted friends, and by 2015, we had 50 trained docents giving tours. Today, more than 7,000 people have taken our tours. The 60-minute program gives you a deep appreciation of this inn's history and its art.

My favorite place here is the Santa Fe Room, which was originally called the Indian Lecture Room. It has beautiful high ceilings and balconies up above where docents in the 1920s addressed guests attending Indian Detours, the hotel's very popular program of cultural tours that visited area pueblos.

Tip for visitors
Take one of our free art and history tours, which are open to anyone.



Carol Anglin

**Manager,
La Plazuela restaurant**

This building has a soul. It holds so many memories, so much history. For people in Santa Fe, everything special happened here: weddings, graduations, and celebrations of all kinds. I came to Santa Fe when I was 25 years old and immediately found La Fonda and got a job as a hostess. Later, I became a waiter and, eventually, a manager. What was initially just a job turned into a passion. Now, I've been here more than 30 years. I discovered how special this place is and what a part it plays in this community. When I first came to Santa Fe, it seemed like everyone I bumped into had worked here at least once.

Tip for visitors

Take advantage of Santa Fe's natural setting. In 10 minutes, you can be in gorgeous forests outside town.



Jenny Kimball

Chairman of the board of La Fonda

I first visited La Fonda when I was about 10 years old. My parents were close friends with Sam and Ethel Ballen, the owners back then. We came for Christmas, and we celebrated my birthday in La Plazuela restaurant. We returned year after year for vacations.

I've worn many hats in my almost 34 years at La Fonda. When I started, I was the hotel's lawyer working for a private law firm. Then, I became a part-owner in the early 2000s. In 2007, after Sam Ballen passed away, the board asked if I would be chairman of the board. I'm also still an employee because I manage our retail tenants and I oversee our art collection, my favorite feature at La Fonda. We've got everything from an 1800s portrait of a Mexican saint up to a painting done by a Native American in 2021. Some of our art was commissioned by the Santa Fe Railroad decades ago. The collection is unique.

Tip for visitors

If you want to get educated in Santa Fe silver, jewelry, or art, talk to folks at one of our retail shops.

They really know their stuff. Most are independently owned, mom-and-pop stores where the owner is usually behind the cash register.



Joseph Martinez

Maintenance engineer

For more than 50 years, my dad, Ernesto, worked here as a resident artist. He painted bedroom headboards and the hundreds of glass panels that decorate La Plazuela. A lot of people still ask about his work.

I used to paint, but I gave it up for lack of patience. I'm a carpenter by trade. I started working here in 1975. I've made frames for my dad's paintings here. I redid the plumbing in many of the rooms, as well as the electricity. A lot of rooms used to only have 1 or 2 outlets.

What makes this place special to me are the longtime guests, the people whose parents and grandparents stayed here. I've met guests who spent their honeymoon here and come back 50 years later to the same room.

Tip for visitors

Come during the holidays, when you can see the manger I built for our lobby Nativity scene as well as hundreds of farolitos, the glowing bags that I install on our exterior.



Lane Warner

Executive chef, La Plazuela restaurant

For most people, the last place you'd think of eating at is a hotel restaurant. But La Plazuela is different. If you miss this place, you're making a mistake. Our tortilla soup has been on the menu for more than 20 years, with the same dramatic presentation. Your waiter brings the soup with just the garnish, and the steaming hot broth is poured tableside.

I have a long history with La Fonda. I started as the executive sous-chef 29 years ago and was promoted to executive chef a few years later and have been here ever since. La Fonda is a special place to work. This company puts its employees first. If you take care of your employees, they'll take care of your customers.

Tip for visitors

Try our chiles rellenos. We get a lot of positive feedback on this dish.



Bill Hearne

Americana singer,
La Fiesta Lounge

In 1991, I was the resident music artist at the Alpine Lodge in Red River when it was sold. After my late wife, Bonnie, and I moved to Santa Fe, I got a call from a La Fonda manager who was a great two-stepper fan who told me, "I think you'd fit in great here." They said let's give it a try for 6 months and see what happens. We were a hit right away, and now it's been 30 years. It's been a wonderful ongoing relationship. We have a strong local following. The fans have been great during this pandemic, hanging in there. I don't do conventional covers. I'm into Southwestern, acoustic, sort of country-folk with a little honky-tonk two-step. That's my roots, in Texas.

People seem to like it.

What makes this place special? It hasn't gone corporate. It has a character and a vibe. It's classic Southwestern and classic Santa Fe. The lobby is incredibly beautiful, and I never get tired of it. I love to just sit and experience it. I meet so many fans here from all over the world.

Tip for visitors

Don't miss live music Sundays and Mondays in La Fiesta Lounge, whether it's me or other local musicians.

JULIAN GANS/COURTESY THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES (NMHM/DCA), #040752



La Fonda in the 1920s

Chronology

1607 Earliest date that an inn was located at this site.

1912 New Mexico becomes a state.

1922 La Fonda on the Plaza opens, designed by architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp, with interiors by Mary Colter.

1925 Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway purchases La Fonda. It leases the property to the Fred Harvey Company, famed for its Harvey House restaurants.

1926 La Fonda starts offering cultural tours of local pueblos in a program called Indian Detours.

1926-29 Architects John Gaw Meem and Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter oversee a major expansion of the hotel.

1943 Manhattan Project scientists hang around the hotel's bar while the first atomic weapons are being developed at Los Alamos.

1968 After years of decline, the Fred Harvey Company is sold. Hotel is purchased by Sam and Ethel Ballen, who restore the property.

2014 La Fonda is sold to current owners, Cienda Partners of Dallas.

2021 Terrace Inn renovation opens a "hotel within a hotel," featuring 15 luxury rooms complete with an exclusive rooftop retreat.



La Fonda on the Plaza
100 E. San Francisco
Street, Santa Fe
Lafondasantafe.com
(505) 982-5511
Rates start at \$359

AAA Explorer copy editor **PAUL ZIEKE** is a big fan of the green chile cheeseburger at La Plazuela.



WELCOME ABOARD EXPLORERS.

Steal away a day on the award-winning, historic Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. Climb aboard and leave your worries behind. From the open air gondola to the breathtaking views from your private window, this is a scenic train ride unlike any other. Join us for a day trip through the unspoiled Rocky Mountain West. Vibrant and beautiful as always. Depart from Antonito, Colorado or Chama, New Mexico. The modern world can wait while you take the ride of a lifetime.

BOOK NOW AT CUMBRESTOLTEC.COM 1-888-286-2737



Cumbres & Toltec
AMERICA'S MOST HISTORIC SCENIC RAILROAD