

ADVOCATE

Why Are There No Gay Bars in Santa Fe?



A gay traveler finds unexpected treasures in New Mexico's capital — which do not include go-go boys.

On a recent Friday night in the historic downtown district in Santa Fe, N.M., a well-heeled crowd of predominantly silver-haired gay men filled the lobby of the Hotel St. Francis. The crowd mingled among the Franciscan décor of the lobby — a metal chandelier, crosses, and a baptismal font, in homage to the city's patron saint.

Among the holy relics, guests traded the news and gossip of the day: the return of the shirtless Tongan flag-bearer to the Olympics; **Tom Ford's nearby ranch, listed for sale at \$75 million**; rumors of snow. Hors d'oeuvres were passed. Drinks were mixed from the adjoining Secreto Lounge. The bar boasted wines made from ancient recipes as well as "garden-to-glass" cocktails like its Smoked Sage Margarita, which earned it a coveted place on Santa Fe's Margarita Trail.

This patina is one of the reasons this group, **Friends of Dorothy**, chose **Hotel St. Francis for its monthly gathering**. Called Friday Night With Dorothy, the traveling event is an opportunity for queer Santa Feans to gather and reconnect among the city's tony and historic establishments. March's event will take place at Casa España — once the home of a fur trader, now a nightclub operated by the Heritage Hotel. Other hosts have included the Inn and Spa at Loretto, whose adobe architecture is inspired by the nearby Taos Pueblo; Museum Hill Café, an upscale restaurant between the **Museum of Indian Arts and Culture** and the **International Folk Art Museum**; and Bar Alto, which has breathtaking views of the city from the Drury Plaza Hotel.

There are many queer people in Santa Fe. Its mayor, Javier Gonzales, is gay, and the city was the site of one of the nation's first fully operational LGBT retirement communities, RainbowVision, where out tennis legend Billie Jean King visited in 2006 to christen its fitness center. Since the recession, **the community, now the Montecito**, is under new management but is still proudly LGBT-inclusive, with many queer residents as well as staff supporting them.

In 2011, Santa Fe was named the second gayest city in America by *The Advocate*, which declared, "This is where seasoned gays come to center themselves, but not in a boring way." Queer retirees have flocked to this city, drawn to its openness, its desert beauty, its history, and its art. This is no new phenomenon. A recent exhibition at the New Mexico History Museum, **"Voices of Counterculture in the Southwest,"** traced how the Beat Generation and voices from queer poets like Allen Ginsberg led a countercultural pilgrimage to America's oldest (and highest, at over 7,000 feet) capital. With the assistance of Native Americans and the hallucinogenic properties of peyote, these transplants founded communes, practiced free love, and sparked an era of activism that still animates the region.

The art scene is also a draw for queer young people. **Santa Fe's summer markets** — the Santa Fe Indian Market, the Spanish Market, and the Santa Fe International Folk Art market — attract artists and buyers from the world over, leading **UNESCO to declare it the first Creative City of Crafts and Folk Arts**. George R. R. Martin, of *Game of Thrones* fame, is also a resident and local patron. **His wildly popular installation, Meow Wolf**, employs hundreds of artists to transform a local bowling alley into a fantastical museum hybrid that transports guests to different worlds. That's not to mention **Canyon Road, a stretch that boasts over 100 fine art galleries**, as well as the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Art is so bountiful in Santa Fe, it can be purchased from the blankets lining the Palace of the Governors or at **La Fonda on the Plaza**, an iconic hotel where an artist in residence transforms the lobby into a studio every Thursday through Saturday.

Yet despite this thriving creative scene, which calls to mind other queer retreats like Palm Springs, there are no gay bars in Santa Fe. This hasn't always been the case. For years, RainbowVision served as an unofficial LGBT center for Santa Fe. Before it declared bankruptcy in 2011, it hosted regular drag shows and dance parties after Pride, where the community would celebrate with the seniors at its Starlight Lounge and Cabaret. This changed when the facility transitioned to a more mainstream crowd. But the Montecito still holds its queer history in the names of its various rooms: Garbo's Restaurant, Radclyffe Hall, Capote Library, and the Oscar Wilde Room. Moreover, King's tennis racket and shoes still hang in the fitness center.

Downtown Santa Fe was a thriving scene for gay bars in the '80s and '90s, with popular venues like the Drama Club, the Cargo Club and the Paramount drawing locals and tourists alike. But these nightclubs waned with the new millennium. When the Rouge Cat, a gay nightclub, closed in 2013, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, a local paper, **questioned whether this would “signal end of city’s gay nightlife.”** Sources blamed the city’s aging population, the economy, and risks of drunken driving.

This hypothesis was tested when the Blue Rooster opened in 2014. At the time, it was declared one of the 200 best gay bars in the world by *Out Traveler*. However, the bar shuttered one year later. It struggled to find a gay audience, said Doug Nava, its former owner, who found it tended to draw more of a straight crowd. “A lot of people kept saying, ‘You need to brand yourself as not just being the gay bar,’” Nava told the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. “But you know what? This is a diverse city. It’s a gay destination. I’m not ashamed of saying it was the gay bar. Why?”

Santa Fe **is hardly the only city where gay bars struggle to keep their doors open.** Across the country, these establishments have shut down for a variety of reasons: the queer population is dispersing from city centers, the rents in gentrified gayborhoods are becoming too costly for some businesses, and hookup apps have shifted cruising culture to digital spaces.

But in Santa Fe, the consensus among those gathered at the Friends of Dorothy event is that the gay bars have become unnecessary when acceptance is so high. Gay people feel welcome wherever they go. So why limit one’s options?

There are other factors at play. Welde Carmichael, an actor who played Felix in *The Normal Heart* at the Santa Fe Playhouse, has observed a generational divide. Many younger queer men do not identify with the “gay” label of the older generation; they may be more fluid in their sexuality and less inclined to frequent exclusively gay haunts. Carmichael also pointed out that Santa Fe is not where you will find the “go-go boys” of other cities. The city has a slower pace, and the bars tend to wind down before midnight — although a few downtown nightclubs still attract patrons of all orientations.

But after a long weekend in Santa Fe, this writer observed that looking for an all-night party misses the point in the City Different. Santa Fe and its surrounding countryside are bursting with beauty and adventures that don’t require a DJ. Explore a UNESCO Heritage Site like the **Taos Pueblo**. Enjoy a spa day at **Ten Thousand Waves**. Behold the mountains’ majesty from the slopes of **Ski Santa Fe**. Learn to make chocolate at **Cacao** or cook Native American cuisine at the **Santa Fe School of Cooking**. Taste the culture at the many standout restaurants like Tomasita’s, Cowgirl BBQ, and the Compound. Pray at the nation’s oldest church, the **San Miguel Chapel**.

Don't worry about where you can't go; look forward to where you can. As Georgia O’Keeffe once said, “When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it’s your world for the moment.”

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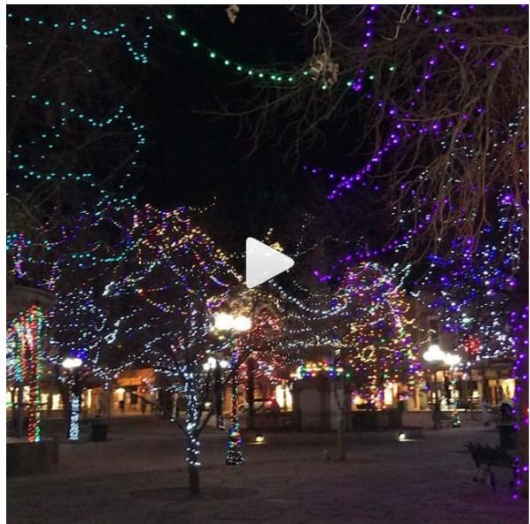


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outtraveler #BillieJeanKing was here! The out tennis legend christened the gym at the Rainbow Vista (now The Montecito), one of the country's oldest #LGBT-inclusive senior care facilities. Her racket and shoes remain at the fitness facility named for her. @cityofsantafe #santafe

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