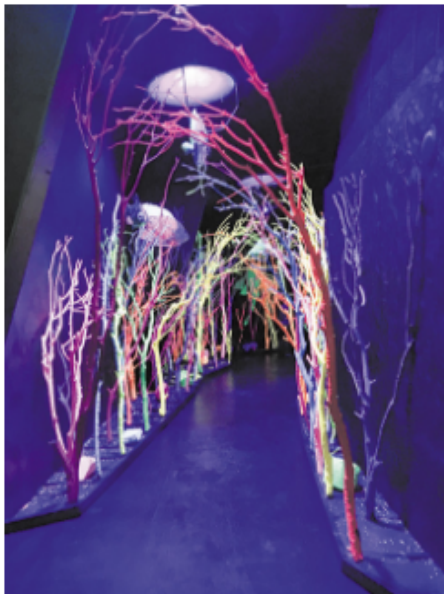


A mecca of progressivity in the Southwest, neighboring New Mexico is an oasis of beauty, culture and acceptance

Santa Fe



A neon forest is merely one of the amazing attractions inside Santa Fe's Meow Wolf art collective experimental installation.

While known internationally as a focal point for the artsy — the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum celebrates its 20th anniversary all summer long, and its open-air summer opera festival is one of the most acclaimed in North America — Santa Fe is more than turquoise jewelry, woven rugs and paintings of orchids and sunbleached skulls (although you can definitely find all of those in abundance). There's a strong hipster vibe that informs the way of life here — not just the central plaza where galleries and museums proliferate like mushrooms in the dark, but in many of the businesses and attractions.

Take, for instance, the art collective Meow Wolf. Located in a converted bowling alley, it's the spiritual child of *Game of Thrones* creator George R.R. Martin, who helped fund this strange, amazing space. The centerpiece is an interactive amusement park-like attraction called The House of Eternal Return — a full-sized Victorian house and grounds constructed inside the building, which boasts *Twin Peaks*-esque

phantasms, secret corridors, mysterious clues and *trompe-l'oeil* effects. You could come 20 times and never fully interpret and uncover the otherworldly, interstellar appeal of this weird and wonderful art experiment.

The chill atmosphere is reflected in how the city casually addresses LGBT visitors — in short, everyone is invited and accepted. (Its Pride, like Dallas', is held in September — this year, on the 15th and 16th.) One city rep noted to me — with some degree of pride — that last year, Santa Fe's last remaining gay bar closed. This was not a weakness of the gay community, he said, but a sign that whatever your orientation, you would feel entirely comfortable at any place. The welcoming vibe means nobody feels pigeonholed. (Many restrooms in hotels and other public spaces proudly welcome "all genders.")

For many progressives living in Texas, the 2016 presidential election resulted in a double gut punch: Not only did the nation turn to the fringe right, it left many feeling claustrophobic — even in a bluish city like Dallas — to be surrounded by Trumpeters. It was enough to make some want to escape to a haven of liberalism... without giving up entirely what makes Texas home. Ah, to dream.



The chile relleno exemplifies the modern urban style of Albuquerque's Zacotecas Tacos & Tequila.

But such a fantasy land *does* exist — and neighboring New Mexico is that oasis. Sandwiched between the right-leaning states of Arizona, Utah, Oklahoma and Texas (with flippable Colorado along its northern border), New Mexico has long stood out as a stronghold not just of progressivity, but of cultural awareness, natural beauty and the embrace of diversity from politics to sexual identity.

New Mexico is a peculiar gem of the union — a hybrid, in multiple ways: Immense (the fifth largest state by area), secluded (the entire population is about 2 million — by comparison, Dallas County's is more than 2.5 million), beautiful (it's more than desert) and culturally rich, it's also a free-thinking bulwark of be-yourself appeal. In fact, it offers so many experiences at once, you'll be tempted to make it a second home.

The state's reputation for openness extends beyond its desert landscapes. The presence of a large Native American heritage informs the widespread Earth-Mother attitude about nature — not just the environment, but the peoples as well. The indigenous population has long countenanced the "Two Spirits" tradition of sexual inclusiveness.

If you have an image in your mind of the 47th state, it's probably of sweltering heat along an ocean of sand, where cattle are herded through town squares and large cacti dot the land like bluebonnets along a Texas highway. But in fact, all of those clichés are wrong, or at least overstated: saguaro cactus are almost exclusively in Arizona; Albuquerque itself rarely hits 100 degrees, even in the summer; there are a number of national forests, and mountain enclaves can get downright chilly, even in the fall (there are several notable ski resorts); and you'll see more cowboys on Cedar Springs on a Friday night than in Santa Fe, one of the premiere artistic communes in America. New Mexicans want to dispel those outdated myths, while cultivating an appreciation for the richness of a state that manages to surprise at every turn.

Situated largely opposite the Texas Panhandle, and abutting the northern portion of Mexico's Sonoran Desert, the state is divided into relative population concentrations near the center (Santa Fe, the state's second-largest city at about 65,000, is about an hour away from Albuquerque), versus the more sparsely-occupied smaller communities in the southern half (Las Cruces, Roswell, Ruidoso) and destination resorts farther north (including the "Enchanted Circle" of Taos, Angelfire and Red River).

Of course, if you prefer some gay-exclusivity, on the edge of downtown is the Inn of the Turquoise Bear, a roomy gay-owned bed and breakfast catering to the LGBT market. The main structure, the Witter Bynner House, was designed by the celebrated architect Witter Bynner, who pioneered the Spanish Pueblo Revival style that distinguishes much of the architecture across the state. (The house is on the federal National Register of Historic Places, as well as an historic property recognized by the state and city.)

Santa Fe is as foodie a city as you're likely to encounter, which is especially evident in the local culinary specialties: pinon nuts, green chiles (and chiles in general), lavender and indigenous-style preparations.

Luminaria, the restaurant inside the Inn at Loretto, is one of the jewels of the city's dining scene, with high-end dishes like pan-roasted foie gras and duck confit wontons, Colorado lamb chops with porcini risotto, slow-braised buffalo short ribs and elk tenderloin. And while a restaurant named The Compound may sound homey, the dishes served here are of the fine-dining variety.

On the other side of the fancy scale, but no less appealing, The Shed has served up New Mexican food since it was, quite literally, a shed, starting in 1953. The enchilada plate and huevos rancheros are stars, but every dish looks tantalizing. Similarly, Tia Sophia's is an unmissable breakfast destination on the plaza, famed for its enormous breakfast burrito (the restaurant claims to have invented the term).



The Taos Pueblo, opposite, is perhaps the oldest continuous community in the U.S.

Kakawa Chocolate House is its own destination — a small building about half a mile from downtown where you can enjoy coffees, truffles and other handmade treats that are simply delectable. Both pinon and Mexican versions of coffee and hot chocolate are popular in Santa Fe (try a Mexican mocha at the homey Plaza Cafe).

Speaking of coffee, liquid refreshment is its own, separate reward here. More than 30 area bars and restaurants — among them, Coyote Rooftop Cantina, La Fonda on the Plaza, Luminaria, Secreto Bar and Lounge

and The Shed — participate. Buy a “passport” for three bucks, and you get a dollar off the specialty margarita at each stop on the trail, and a “visa” showing where you visited. You can only get two stamps per day, but that just encourages you to stay longer.

If tequila isn't your thing (sad!), you can sample a variety of other liquors at the hipstery Santa Fe Spirits Tasting Room. There, you can experience some amazingly locally-distilled gins, whiskeys, vodkas and brandies. And Albuquerque-based Gruet Winery serves a full slate of its exquisite sparkling wines at its tasting room inside the Hotel St. Francis.

The Hotel St. Francis is also a charming place to hole up. A boutique inn in the best sense, its cozy rooms provide for an intimate, almost European flavor. For more amenities, La Fonda and The Inn at Loretto are larger, full service hotels with modern amenities.