

New Mexico: Authentic cuisine, historic landmarks and more

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It's not new and it's not Mexico, but New Mexico is definitely hot -- as in popular. Even better, the "Land of Enchantment" offers something completely different for New Yorkers -- pre-Columbian Indian pueblos, 300 years of colonial Spanish history (and 60 of American territorial), 12,000-foot mountains, hundred-mile vistas, trendsetting Southwestern style, and its own distinctive -- and literally "hot" -- regional cuisine.

While you could spend weeks exploring America's fifth-largest state by area, its top three destinations -- Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos -- are conveniently strung together in the north

central part of the state, roughly three hours apart.

Dining tip: New Mexico actually has an official state question -- "red or green?" -- which refers to the kind of chili sauce you prefer. For many, the best answer is "Christmas," i.e., equal portions of each.

All accommodations listed below are in the adobe style and all restaurants specialize in New Mexican cuisine.

Albuquerque

Situated largely on the east bank of the Rio Grande, Albuquerque's rise to prominence began with the arrival of the railroad in 1880, was reinforced with the construction of Route 66 in the 1920s, and reinvigorated by the post-WWII technology boom (locations from "Breaking Bad," which was filmed here, notwithstanding). The high desert setting at the base of 10,678-foot Sandia Peak remains timeless, but 21st century Albuquerque is mostly new (at least by New Mexico standards), albeit in a funky, retro way.



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WHAT TO DO Albuquerque's scruffy Old Town doesn't dazzle, but the neighborhood contains a number of museums worth lingering in, especially the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History (505-243-7255, cabq.gov/museum), the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center (505- 843-7270, indianpueblo.org), the Turquoise Museum (turquoisemuseum.com), 505-247-8650, and the

American International Rattlesnake Museum (505-242-6569, rattlesnakes.com). Nob Hill, Duke City's most trendy and colorful neighborhood, lies along Central Avenue (old Route 66), just beyond the University of New Mexico, while out near the airport is the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History (nuclearmuseum.org, 505-245-2137). (It was in New Mexico that the nuclear age began 70 years ago this summer.) Today, Albuquerque's near ideal wind conditions and abundant sunshine make it the world's hot air balloon capital. Less adventurous types can take the world's longest single-cable tram to the top of Sandia Peak (sandiapeak.com, 505-856-7325).

WHERE TO STAY Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm (4803 Rio Grande Blvd. NW, lospoblanos.com, 505-344-9297) is something both old and different near the river north of Old Town. Of roughly the same vintage, but now much modernized, is downtown's Hotel Andaluz (125 Second St. NW, 505-242-9090, hotelandaluz.com), one of New Mexico native Conrad Hilton's first constructions.

WHERE TO EAT The carne adovada at Mary and Tito's Café (2711 Fourth St. NW, 505-344-6266) has been packing tourists and locals in for 50 years. Across from UNM, the no-frills Frontier (2400 Central Ave., 505-266-0550) offers a wide variety of traditional favorites.

INFO visitalbuquerque.org

Santa Fe

New Mexico's historic and artsy capital lies nestled in the western foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains only an hour north of Albuquerque via I-25. Founded in the early 1600s, Santa Fe served first as the Spanish colonial capital and then as the U.S. territorial capital. History abounds here, but much of the seemingly uniform adobe architecture dates from the Pueblo Revival period of the early 1900s and a conscious effort to make "The City Different" appealing to tourists. (It worked.)

WHAT TO DO Santa Fe's well-maintained 400-year-old plaza area will not disappoint, especially the Palace of the Governors (505-476-5100, palaceofthegovernors.org), St. Francis Cathedral and the Loretto Chapel with its "miracle" 720-degree unsupported staircase. Across the river lies the modernistic state capitol and Canyon Road, Santa Fe's half-mile-long gallery/restaurant row. But you'll need a car to get to El Rancho de las Golondrinas (505-471-2261, golondrinas.org) a 200-acre living history museum, the open-air Santa Fe Opera or up into the Pecos Wilderness or Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

WHERE TO STAY To be near the plaza, try either La Fonda (100 E. Francisco St., lafondasantafe.com, 505-982-5511) or the Indian-themed hotel Chimayo (125 Washington Ave., hotelchimayo.com, 505-988-4900). If you don't mind commuting in, check out the classic 1930s El Rey Inn (1862 Cerrillos Rd., elreyinnsantafe.com, 505-982-1931).

WHERE TO EAT Situated downtown in a historic adobe, The Shed (1131/2 E. Palace Ave., 505-982-9030) has been around for more than 60 years. Further afield is Horseman's Haven (4354 Cerrillos Rd., 505-471-5420), famous for its undummed-down chilies.

INFO visitsantafe.com

Taos

Seventy miles further up in the mountains, Taos comes off as a smaller and less gentrified Santa Fe. To be sure, this former frontier outpost never enjoyed much prosperity until it was "discovered" by artists and writers in the early 1900s. Fifty years later, it was rediscovered by hippies and other utopians, and, more recently, by wealthy out-of-staters. These days, surprisingly diminutive Taos is a little of all four, but with some truly large-size natural attractions nearby.

WHAT TO DO Taos' rebuilt plaza dates only from the 1930s, but its fascinating 1,000-year-old pueblo claims to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in the country. Almost as famous -- thanks to Ansel Adams and Georgia O'Keeffe -- is San Francisco de Asis Church, with its mysterious Shadow of the Cross painting. For a little frontier history, check out the Kit Carson Home and Museum (575-758-4945, kitcarsonhomeandmuseum.com) and the 1820s La Hacienda

de los Martinez (taohistoricmuseums.org, 575-758-1000). For nature writ large, head west to the 800-foot-deep Rio Grande Gorge (white-water rafting available) or northeast to Taos Ski Valley and New Mexico's highest peaks.

WHERE TO STAY For upscale in-town, it's La Fonda de Taos (108 S. Plaza, 575-758-2211, lafondataos.com) or the Historic Taos Inn (125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, 575-758-2233, taosinn.com). For a vintage motel, try El Pueblo Lodge (412 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, 575-758-8700, elpueblolodge.com).

WHERE TO EAT Colorful Day of the Dead-themed Orlando's (1114 Don Juan Valdez, 575-751-1450) serves up lively traditional favorites, while Michael's Kitchen (304-C Paseo del Pueblo Norte, 575-758-4178), with its Western decor, does hearty breakfasts, lunches, and dinners.

ROAD TIP If returning to Albuquerque, consider taking the Turquoise Trail National Scenic Byway (turquoisetrail.org) south from Santa Fe, which passes through the former mining towns of Cerrillos, Madrid and Golden.

INFO taos.org

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