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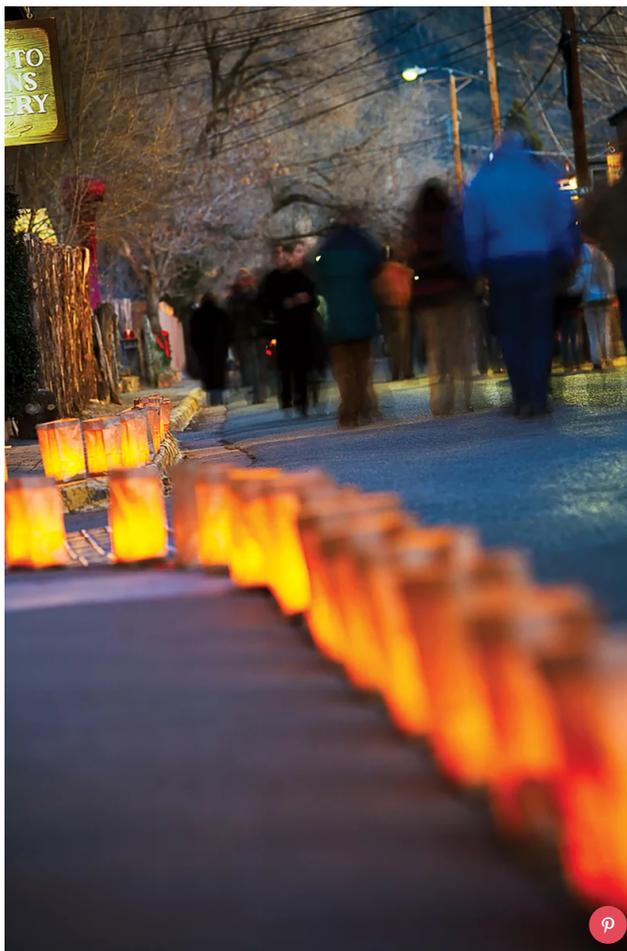
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Christmas in Santa Fe



Eric Swanson

A December visit renews the classic joys of the holidays

GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

It's easy to love Santa Fe during the holidays. Visit the historic Plaza on any chilly, clear evening from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, and I defy you not to be entranced by the silvery lights strung on every tree, sparkling against the dusk. In the last glow of the sunset, the adobe buildings lining the Plaza blush like schoolgirls.

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The farolitos, those luminous little bags of candles and sand that are lit by hand each night, flicker. If the ongoing drought isn't playing killjoy, confectionery snow will dust the tree branches and grass. The city has a hushed, reverent quality at this time of year, despite the hordes of tourists that show up for the festivities.

Santa Fe holiday

For more information about holiday events, consult the Santa Fe Convention and Visitors Bureau (800/777-2489). To get to the Railyard District, follow Paseo de Peralta to its intersection with South Guadalupe Street.

What to do

Farolito walk: Santa Fe's signature seasonal event is always on Christmas Eve. Start at the base of Canyon Rd. at dusk, follow the crowds, sip cider, and ooh at the farolitos.

Las Posadas: In the historic Plaza, a solemn, joyous reenactment of the journey of Mary and Joseph. 5 p.m. Dec 17; free; www.museumsofnewmexico.org or 505/476-5100.

Santa Fe Pro Musica at Loretto Chapel: Baroque music and Old English carols by Santa Fe Pro Musica fill the sanctuary and swell the heart at Loretto Chapel. 8 p.m. Dec 19-24, 6 p.m. Dec 21, 22, and 24; from \$15; 207 Santa Fe Trail; 800/960-6680.

Santa Fe Southern Railway: Four-hour round-trips, including a stop for lunch in Lamy (from \$37, \$23 ages 3-13) or 2½-hour "Hot Shots" without the Lamy layover (from \$33, \$19 ages 3-13). Santa and caroling on trips before Christmas. 888/989-8600.

Art: Nedra Matteucci Galleries is strong in Western artists (1075 Paseo de Peralta; 505/982-4631). See www.canyonroadarts.com for Canyon Road listings, including gallery specialties. In the Railyard District is Site Santa Fe (\$10, but free on Fridays; 1606 Paseo de Peralta; 505/989-1199).

Where to shop

Boots: Cowboy wannabes wait months and spend thousands for bespoke, handmade boots from Back at the Ranch Cowboy Boots (209 E. Marcy St.; 888/962-6687), a small, cheery shop near the Plaza.

Jewelry: The Native American Artisan Program's marketplace is in the portal of the Palace of the Governors on the Plaza (505/476-5112). And check out Cruz Gallery (616 Canyon Rd.; 505/986-0644).

Stocking stuffers: Jackalope features imports from China, India, and Mexico, as well as Southwestern items with a sense of humor. 2820 Cerrillos Rd.; 505/471-8539.

Where to eat

Harry's Roadhouse: A locals' favorite, with the best huevos rancheros in town: \$; 96-B Old Las Vegas Hwy.; 505/989-4629.

Tomasita's: The dining room overlooks pavement and the wait is often long, but the blue-corn chicken enchiladas with "Christmas chile" (meaning, in the local patois, red and green) are quintessential Santa Fe. \$; 500 S. Guadalupe St.; 505/983-5721.

Where to stay

La Fonda: The grande dame of the city's luxury hotels. Not cheap, but atmospheric, high-style, and home to the most vividly decorated hotel restaurant in the city: La Plazuela. From \$169; 800/523-5002.

Pueblo Bonito Bed and Breakfast Inn: An easy three blocks' walk from the Plaza, it has 18 rooms, most in adobe casitas and all with private entrances and kiva fireplaces. Luxurious but relaxed. From \$100, including full breakfast; 800/461-4599.

What Santa Fe offers holiday visitors and has given also to my small family, émigrés from the fast urban life, is a deep sense of abiding tradition. I vividly recall our first Christmas in Santa Fe, because I was about six months pregnant with our son at the time and seemed, somehow, particularly attuned to the beauties of the season. Probably because I was in no condition to hurry. With my pneumatic stomach, I waddled through the festivities. In Chicago, where we had lived until that summer, I would have been out of sync with the glitter, flash, rush, and sheer spectacle of a big-city Christmas (the lights of Michigan Avenue, the splashy animatronics window displays, the crowds!).

But as I lumbered slowly up Canyon Road that Christmas Eve on the traditional farolito walk, the season sang to me. The nighttime air was frosty and carried the sweet, sharp tang of burning piñon logs. My paternal grandmother had lived in New Mexico most of her life, and whenever we'd visited her from the Midwest, she'd had piñon fires burning for us.

I inhaled deeply and smiled. Around us, thousands of farolitos pinpricked the darkness, outlining the adobe buildings like sequins. Here and there, bonfires along the roadside created larger coronas. A murmuring, background sound of Christmas carols came from the people clustered around the bonfires. As we walked, lacy flakes of snow began to fall. My husband, Max, passed me a foam cup of hot apple cider from a cart outside of an art gallery.

I held it with one hand and draped the other gently over my swollen belly. "Merry Christmas, Junior," I whispered softly. "And many happy returns."

What surprised me about our next Christmas was that it was just as beguiling as this one, even though I was now carrying my extra weight, slumbering and sighing, in a sling across my chest.

Not much changes in the holiday celebrations here, which, nowadays, is no small thing. Take the decades-old farolito walk in the Historic District, a testament to the power of small lights to broach a greater darkness. It's also a not-half-bad time to practice caroling, since impromptu concerts break out up and down the avenue and participation is democratic, not limited to those who can, say, recall lyrics or carry a tune. You'll hear much wordless humming and feel a convivial, joshing, communal pleasure in the simple act of joining in.

For Santa Feans and visitors, the city answers two other vital seasonal needs: entertaining children during winter break and finding suitably creative Christmas presents. The Santa Fe Southern Railway's holiday trains should beguile most preadolescents: The four-hour rides to and from Lamy, through the lovely Galisteo Basin, include caroling and the Big Guy — aka Santa — himself. As for shopping, the city is strong in regional gift possibilities. Along the portal of the Palace of the Governors on the Plaza, Native American artisans display traditional arts and crafts: turquoise rings, earrings, and belt buckles. Or hit the wildly inventive Cruz Gallery: Give your teenage niece the sterling silver sea urchin earrings and happily watch her reassess your cool.

The city remains one of the nation's art capitals. Canyon Road has the greatest concentration of galleries, many showing traditional Western and Native American works. But a number of trendy, contemporary galleries have moved into the nearby Railyard District. The Railyard also is home to Site Santa Fe, a prestigious contemporary art showcase, which sells excellent art books.

Still, despite the gift-buying possibilities, the mood of Santa Fe this time of year is not primarily commercial but religious — no small part of its charm, whatever your spiritual leanings. The Catholic Church's influence is pervasive and indelible, intertwined as it is with the city's Latino roots and its long, occasionally bloody history of Spanish missionary conquest. Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at the grand Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi is, I've been told by Catholic friends, one of the most thrilling, solemn, and achingly beautiful remembrances of the child whose birthday this is.

For myself, I find less formal sacraments during the holidays in the silence among the pines on the mountains above town. There, especially in deep snow, the quiet has a kind of presence. It is enveloping, forgiving, and divine.

In all of this — the serenity of the mountains, the glories of Mass, the quiet, faithful ritual of lighting the farolitos each night — there's something ineffable. Christmas in Santa Fe has the blood and bones of the earliest Christmases. I know some residents and visitors alike complain that the city's traditions are becoming clichéd. And there may be a few too many red-chile wreaths and farolitos about the place. (Some of them now are faux-litos, made of molded plastic and lit by electricity. Please help us discourage this by pointing and sneering. Thank you.) But that's quibbling about the trappings of the celebration, not the substance.

Christmas still has meaning here. Last year, as we walked up Canyon Road on Christmas Eve, my son, now 8, swiveled his head from side to side, trying to count all of the farolitos. He quit around 160 (which was in the first block). Then we paused, Max, some of our friends, and I, beside a bonfire to hum along with a group singing "O Holy Night." People's faces glowed in the guttering light of the fire. The air was brisk, the bonfire welcome, the harmony exquisitely bad, and the spirit of the night ascendant. It was a very merry Christmas, and I expect another this year.