

# New Mexico: an enchanted land from the El Topo movie

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**I**N NEW MEXICO the car number plates tell you where you are straight away. It's The Land Of Enchantment and contrary to what many people think it's not in Mexico. It's a State of the United States sharing a border with Colorado.

New Mexico's capital, Santa Fe, is about an hour's flight from Denver, an easy flight from San Francisco.

Santa Fe's high altitude, piercing sunlight, crisp, clean air and low rainfall make it a favourite stopover especially for those in search of peace and quiet. Yet, for one reason and another, New Mexico doesn't rate highly with tourists from overseas. This has obvious advantages for those who want to get off the beaten paths.

Santa Fe streets are lined with low adobe houses, so thickly coated with whitewash they seem to be sculptured into the footpath. Window boxes, ablaze with petunias and geraniums, pierce the regularity of white walls.

The handiwork of American Indians, turquoise jewellery, wood carvings, exquisite embroidery, hand-dyed and hand-woven cloths in earth and sunset shades, occupy shop windows.

The architecture is light years, culturally and aesthetically, from neat Mid-West, hip West Coast and intense East. Buildings are usually no more than three storeys high. There's hardly any outdoor advertising in sight. It could be 1750 except that in places cement has replaced adobe.

Santa Fe is the oldest capital and the second-oldest city in the United States. The Spanish colonists established themselves there in 1610 but the American Indians have lived there for almost 3,000 years. When the Spaniards settled there it was to take advantage of the indigenous population's wares - corn, cotton, vegetables, precious stones, wool, skins, silver and gold. In fact, this was just another stop-off in the Spanish search-and-destroy campaigns in the names of El Dorado and Christ. The Spaniards also imparted more sophisticated weaving and building techniques.

Take a Greyhound bus out of town and the road winds through cottonwood trees, past peach, apricot and apple orchards which line the water courses. The sphynx and adder shaped mountains shimmer in the distance. They're volcanic in origin and they're as hot as they look with their hot springs and sulphuric gases.

This is the land of the mirage, the illusion, the vision and the surreal. Portraits of Christ, crucifixes and roadside shrines are as much a part of the culture as Indian-owned mineral, oil and uranium fields. Forty-five per cent of the United States' uranium resources are found in New Mexico but for the present, religion is the real thing. New churches pop up like hallucinogenic mushrooms and the mesal cactus.

One minute there are people scratching around in their backyard and next they've happened upon what they regard as a fragment of a cross or the remains of a saint in the backyard veggie plot. Before you know it, permission is granted to build a church. The neighbours, not to be outdone, will speedily unearth the remains of Christ in their backyard. Another church will ensue. This is the crossroads of religion and superstition and everyone wrings everything they can out of it.

New Mexico is a favourite with movie stars, film makers and artists. Dennis Hopper lived there, in true Easy Rider style, on one of the Taos (buffalo plain villages), commuting by low rider. Burl Ives was a regular sight cycling through Santa Fe. And, of course, the scenery out-Hollywoods Hollywood.

Tepees dot the landscape but these days you can bet your last silver dollar they don't belong to Indians. They're hippy homes.

It might look like a Western frontier town but instead of horses outside the bar it's Ford pick-ups, four-wheel-drives and there are more hippies in beads and lace than cowboys.

Somehow it all looks like a scene out of El Topo, the surreal spaghetti Western movie.

The multi-turreted adobe houses surrounded by ancient shade trees, draped in bluebell vines, contrast with the roadside chilli houses, the drive-in-drive-out hamburger diners. In autumn the countryside is transformed into a spectacular blaze of colour as the poplar trees turn yellow, pink, red, purple and finally shed their leaves.

## New Mexico is ideal for someone looking for something different. BERWYN LEWIS writes:

Originally, Indian buildings had no windows or doors. Entry and exit were gained via a ladder through the roof. The ladder was pulled up for safety. The only breaks in the walls were arrow-sized slits. These days they might have windows and doors but as an added precaution everything is trimmed with blue to ward off evil spirits. When one of these heavy oak doors swung open on its mammoth iron hinges to reveal the dim interior of the average adobe home the romance was instantly destroyed. Inside, the Indian housekeeper was busily using the vacuum cleaner.

The Spaniards introduced Roman Catholicism to New Mexicans. Not that there was anything new about monotheism to Indians. The Great Force, their god, was absorbed into Christianity but Indians today still believe the river is the "window to the world" and it is sacred because this is where their spirits reside.

New Mexico's countryside teems with wildlife, not all of it friendly. Coyote, bear, mountain lion and lynx are not averse to dining out on the occasional human, domestic dog or cat. Elk, deer and the rare buffalo have better taste.

The little Spanish villages nestle together around the reservoirs and rivers, the inhabitants crowding their churches with statues, flowers, candles and incense and filling their graveyards with elaborate and interesting headstones which tell about the past.

## INFO

**AFTER** leaving your Qantas, Air New Zealand, Pan Am or Continental Airlines flight to either Los Angeles or San Francisco you can catch a domestic airlines flight to Las Vegas and Albuquerque.

Their fares are as follows: San Francisco to Las Vegas \$59 one way; San Francisco to Albuquerque \$144 one way; Los Angeles to Las Vegas \$43 one way and Los Angeles to Albuquerque \$130 one way. All except the last fare listed are Visit USA fares. These are available to international travellers in the US on presentation of their international ticket and are a 30 per cent saving on the usual economy fare.

The standard economy fare from Sydney to Los Angeles or San Francisco is \$1,240 one way, double for return. Seasonal advance purchase fares, which are considerably cheaper and payable 30 days in advance, are available.

Every village outdoes the last with strange and hair-raising local horror stories. Here the Infanta walks the village at midnight and steals your shoes. There angels live in the trees and take children. In the local grocery shop they sell everything from burritos, hot dogs and tamales to items of religious significance with built-in miraculous powers.

In one church, a sort of miracle-workers' headquarters, El Santuario de Chimayo, the walls are encrusted with crutches and walking sticks, testimony to the power of something more than positive thinking. The sacred soil on the floor of the cave at the rear is credited with miraculous powers. I confess I slipped some into a container for future emergencies.

In New Mexico there's a saying that when the poplar trees stop whispering the snow begins to fall. There are excellent ski fields ranging from intermediate level to advanced and there are first-class cross-country trails.

But don't be fooled by the outward appearance of cheapo lifestyles. Indian ski field owners know the nature of ski business and charge accordingly.

At Pueblo Taos, at the highest point in New Mexico at 4,800 m, you are in the Rockies. Once an artists' colony, it was a favourite spot for D. H. Lawrence, with its spectacular gorges and rivers. Here you can shop for some of the best turquoise and silver to be had on the US side of Mexico. And here, Indian village life is preserved, albeit for the tourists, in its complete originality. Women still bake the bread in igloo-shaped outdoor oven houses, they own the buildings, build them and repair them and men do all the farmwork.

Seekers of religious thrills and cults need go no further than Española, 40 km from Santa Fe. Here a strange group, the Penitentials, practise self-flagellation and crucifixion. Their origins, they claim, spring from an order of St Francis of Assisi, but the Roman Catholic church does not approve. Threatened with excommunication if they continued their usual activities they went underground, dragging their whips and crucifixes with them. Their rituals have become highly-guarded secrets and members no longer admit to belonging to the sect. So beware when shaking hands with strangers in New Mexico. Check the holes in the hands first.

In New Mexico people go underground for all kinds of reasons. The red cliffs are pock-marked with caves where Indians used to live and where nowadays middle-class Americans find refuge from the rat race.