

Saturday 19 May 2012
 News updated at 3:01 PM IST


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Santa Fe: Hollywood's delight

 Veena Gomes-Patwardhan
 ANCIENT CITY

When most people think of American cities, they invariably think of skyscrapers and tantalising neon lights. But true to its nickname, Santa Fe offers vistas devoid of these. In fact, there's not a single high rise building piercing this ancient city's bright blue skies.



We had arrived in Santa Fe the previous night via a flight to Albuquerque's International Sunport Airport followed by a one-hour drive in a rented Toyota Camry. King's Rest

Court Inn, the motel we had checked into, was located about three kilometres from downtown Santa Fe on Cerrillos Road, an area dotted with budget hotels. Built in the 1930s, the place had adobe style architecture (more on this later) and every room had its own garage, a feature that was common in the old days. Also, the accommodation was clean and homely, and from the multihued, southwestern-print bedspreads to the handmade wooden door, everything exuded a Santa Fe old world vibe. The surprise element was discovering that a Gujarati couple managed the motel.

A layered history

Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, sits pretty at an elevation of 7000 feet at the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that span its eastern horizon. The lingering reddish glow bestowed on these mountains by the setting sun is the reason for their metaphoric name which means 'Blood of Christ' in Spanish.

Native American settlements, called Pueblos by the Spanish, once flourished at the present location, but abandoned it somewhere in the 1300s. Spanish conquistadors built the city on the Pueblo ruin in the early 17th century, naming it 'La Villa Real de Santa Fe de St. Francisco de Assisi', Spanish for 'The Royal City of the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi.'

Highways constructed in the 20th century dramatically changed things around here, infusing the sleepy colonial town with a new energy. Soon, painters, photographers, writers, hippies, wealthy retirees and those tired of fast-paced lifestyles began flocking to Santa Fe in droves.

Like most first-time visitors, my family and I decided to kick off our tour from the heart of the downtown area — the Santa Fe Plaza. Once a grazing spot for shepherds and then the focal trading point for early Spanish and Mexican settlers, the area is now a park with a central war monument surrounded by quaint benches set in the shade of stately trees.

Clustered around the plaza were art galleries, museums, shops and restaurants. Ambling down a few streets we saw the preponderance of Santa Fe's tri-cultural



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Movie Guide



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heritage — Native American, Spanish and Anglo — everywhere, in the street sculptures, the colourful ristras or bunches of chilli peppers hung at the entrance of restaurants and homes for good luck, the cuisine in the eateries, and the traditional artworks in galleries and shops. But the city's most striking feature was its ubiquitous pinkish-brown adobe architecture that blended perfectly with its desert setting. The only splashes of colour in the monochromatic adobe scenery came from trees and flower beds along the streets.

Spanish settlers had continued the Pueblo tradition of living in flat-roofed houses with smooth, rounded contours, adobe walls made from dried clay and straw, and roof-supporting wooden logs protruding through the walls. But they added their own ethnic touches to the construction. They used sun-dried bricks made out of the adobe material for the walls, and decorative wooden columns for propping up a covered patio or portal in front. These adobe-style characteristics are conspicuous in houses and commercial buildings all over the city.

Santa Fe's distinctive landscapes and architecture have been exploited in many Hollywood movies. But now these have been captured on film by Bollywood as well. We learnt that, following in the footsteps of Hollywood hotshots like John Wayne (The Cowboys), Billy Crystal (City Slickers) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Terminator 2), Hrithik Roshan was recently here too, shooting for his soon-to-be-released romantic thriller, Kites.

If you're wondering why there's a uniform adobe architecture, well, a law was passed in 1958 making it mandatory for all constructions to maintain the Spanish Territorial or Pueblo style, because a major contributor to the city's allure is the character of its archaic building style. Which is why, even today, visitors to Santa Fe get the feeling of travelling back in time and trespassing into a bygone era. However, most of the modern constructions are imitation adobe and not the real thing.

Just off the historic plaza, on the north side, is the Palace of the Governors. Now housing a history museum, this single-storeyed adobe structure was once Santa Fe's capitol building. Hunkered down along the length of the portal in front of the building, we could see Native American vendors hawking hand-crafted jewellery and artworks.

Moving south of the plaza we got to the bustling San Francisco Street flanked by ethnic restaurants and shops selling everything from high fashion jewellery, moccasins and scarves, to pottery and rugs. At its east end was the iconic French-designed Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, its Romanesque style contrasting with the surrounding Pueblo architecture. The striking rose window in front and the exquisite, stained glass nave windows on the sides were brought to America from France by ship and then transported overland to Santa Fe in covered wagons. A little chapel in the north-east side of the Cathedral is all that remains of the original adobe church. An ornate altar here enshrines a small carved wooden statue of Our Lady of Peace resplendent in real clothes.

Just minutes away was the 19th century Loretto Chapel which houses a 20-foot high, "miraculous" spiral staircase, believed to be constructed by a mystery carpenter. Making two complete 360-degree turns, bereft of a central support and resting only on its base and the choir loft above, its construction confounds architects and modern day carpenters. No longer a functioning church, this place is now a museum with an entry fee of \$3.

A short 10-minute walk westwards took us to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, considered to be the oldest still-standing shrine dedicated to Our Lady in the US.

Art lovers can have their fill of art in Santa Fe, for it has hundreds of world-class galleries. Some museums and galleries have an entry fee, though most waive it on Fridays. Unfortunately, we didn't know this before hand. As for eating out, from family-run cafes to fancy restaurants and heritage hotels, the city offers a great selection of dining options in a variety of ethnic flavours.

When we finally hit the road again, speeding past Santa Fe's awesome natural landscapes, I recalled an observation made about New Mexico by Georgia O'Keeffe, the legendary American painter who has a museum housing the biggest collection of her works in the vicinity of Santa Fe Plaza. O'Keeffe, who had moved for good to a place not far from the city around 1950, forsaking the glamour of New York for the solitude of the desert, had said, "It's something that's in the air. It's different." I couldn't agree more.

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