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Old World charm

WAYFARER

Santa Fe is a melting pot of diverse cultures and perfect for anybody looking to escape the madding crowd, says **Veena Gomes-Patwardhan**



Tourists throng the historic Cathedral Basilica of St Francis of Assisi; (below) an Adobe-style shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe Photographs by author



Within minutes of arriving at Santa Fe's historic Plaza, I had my first encounter with the city's diverse cultures. Strolling through the vibrant downtown area, I was literally stopped in our tracks by a smiling, *bindi*-sporting Indian face on the cover of a magazine on a newsstand.

Intrigued, I picked up a copy to browse through at the hotel. It turned out, the young lady on the cover of *Santa Fe OneHeart* magazine was Sohini Das, a Calcutta school teacher on a Fulbright exchange programme in the city, who was teaching Santa Fe kids the intricacies of Bharat Natyam!

Actually this was my second encounter with an Indian face in Santa Fe. The first was at the budget hotel I had checked into — King's Rest Court Inn on nearby Cerrillos Road — run by a Gujarati couple.

I had arrived in Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico in the US, rather late the previous evening after a long flight and an hour's drive from Albuquerque. The sun was disappearing behind the volcanic Jemez Mountains to the west of the city, but I was lucky to catch a breathtaking view of one of Santa Fe's famed sunsets. The sky was a spectacular sweep of blushing pink with splashes of purple and orange. The magical experience set the tone for the rest of my stay in this ancient colonial city.


That night I dined at Maria's, the New Mexican restaurant famous for its legendary Margaritas. There was a rather long wait before our pony-tailed waiter brought the orders — piping hot fajitas and icy-cool, peach Margaritas. The next morning after breakfast, I headed for Santa Fe's historic downtown quarter.

Founded in 1610 by the Spanish under the leadership of Don Pedro de Peralta, Santa Fe is the second oldest city in the US, celebrating its 400th anniversary this year. A bronze statue of Peralta seated astride a horse is located at Federal Place, west of the post office. The Spaniard built Santa Fe on an ancient Pueblo site abandoned by Native Indians somewhere around the 1300s.


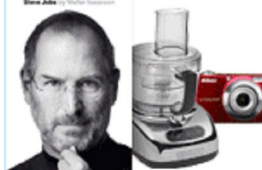
Santa Fe is a tricultural melting pot, the mingling of cultures amply evident in its architecture, cuisine, artworks and local traditions. Native Americans, followed by the Hispanics and finally the Anglos, contributed to the flourishing of a unique hybrid civilisation in this desert town.



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For the last few decades, captivated by the stunning landscapes and colourful mix of cultures, artists, painters and poets, those looking for unconventional lifestyles and wealthy retirees, among others, have been making a bee-line for Santa Fe either to relax in their second homes, or set down roots here away from the dizzy pace of life elsewhere. The city has also been a popular Hollywood destination from the time of John Wayne. Even Hrithik Roshan was here, shooting for *Kites*.

A leisurely stroll down the streets is all it takes to discover the charm of Santa Fe. What I found most fascinating was the ubiquitous, earth-toned adobe architecture. Not just private homes, every building flaunted this antiquated style characterised by pinkish-brown exteriors, flat roofs, smooth, rounded contours, wooden beams protruding through exterior walls, and sturdy, wooden columns supporting wide patios. I learnt later that the uniform adobe architecture had been imposed on Santa Fe's historic districts by law, it being the city's most alluring feature.

Moving north of the Plaza I came upon the Palace of Governors, a low, single-storied adobe building housing one of Santa Fe's main museums. Native Americans were hawking their handcrafted wares spread on blankets in the shade of the portal along the front of the building. They seemed to be doing brisk business selling silver and turquoise jewellery, wood carvings, pottery, beadworks and other keepsakes.

Santa Fe is awash with art galleries. And the most popular one, the Georgia 'Keefe Museum, showcasing the largest collection of one of America's leading modern artists, is just off the Plaza.

On the south side of the Plaza is the well-known San Francisco Street with the historic Cathedral Basilica of St Francis of Assisi at its east end. The French-designed Church with its eye-catching rose window and Romanesque architecture presented a sharp contrast to the adobe-style buildings around it. Santa Fe does have an adobe church but that's the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe located at an easy walking distance from the Plaza.

Back on San Francisco Street, I spent some time gawking at the arts and crafts objects on display in various shop windows, or just trawling through the scenic Plaza area enjoying the city's unique ambience. Every passing moment reinforced the sentiment that true to its enduring nickname, Santa Fe was truly "The City Different". Not a single skyscraper, no glass and chrome towers, no garish neon lights. Just a distinctively beautiful landscape and oodles of Old World charm.

As for dining options, the streets leading off the Plaza offer an eclectic mix ranging from Mexican, American and New Mexican to Italian and Thai. I even spotted a signboard that read French Pastry Shop and Crêperie right in the middle of adobe territory.

A quaint sign propped up on the counter inside this unassuming café read "Please seat yourselves". The furniture was very basic — old-fashioned heavy wooden chairs set around tiny, unadorned wooden tables. As I joined the huddled groups of tourists guzzling coffee and tucking into delectable crêpes, it felt like I was in a bustling Paris café.

For decades Santa Fe has mesmerised visitors. Thousands return again and again. Treated to a dramatic display of yet another of Santa Fe's world famous sunsets on the evening of my departure, I could understand why.

READY RECKONER

Getting there: The nearest airport is the Albuquerque International Sunport Airport, 58 miles away. Take a train, bus or car to Santa Fe from there.

Getting around: The best way is to walk. Or take the Santa Fe Pickup Shuttle for free.

Traveller tip: Many of the museums charge entry fees. But for some, admission is free on Fridays between 5pm and 8pm.



Photographs by author

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