

Last week I hopped on a plane to Albuquerque, New Mexico en route to my final destination, the quaint and rich arts community of Santa Fe, the oldest capital city in the United States. Founded in 1610, historic Santa Fe is an artist's and photographer's dream. From the Plaza – the heart of the city - branching out in every direction are red adobe buildings framed against a backdrop of blue skies and white puffy clouds. From the moment I arrived I wished that I had brought along a better camera instead of my "point and shoot" Canon.



Santa Fe, New Mexico

Santa Fe is also a treasure trove of jewelry shops and world-class galleries; in fact I'll bet that there are more jewelry shops and art galleries per capita than anywhere in the United States. Most of the shops feature handcrafted Indian turquoise and silver jewelry and a few carry rare estate pieces such as the Navajo bracelet shown in the photo below. In my browsing I saw everything you can imagine, from the largest turquoise nugget in the world to an evening bag made from pop-tops.



Restaurant windbreak



Navajo bracelet



Pop-top handbag

The town of Santa Fe also boasts some award-winning restaurants, although I usually dined at sidewalk cafes because I enjoy being outdoors and I didn't want to spend all of my time eating, which would be easy to do. The Plaza Café, which is located across from the Plaza, has great Juevos Rancheros. The Pinon Grill, located in the Hilton Santa Fe, serves tasty appetizers and a scrumptious Caesar salad.

During the summer there is live music most afternoons at the Plaza. I got there just in time to hear a featured Jazz band play some sweet tunes. The next afternoon I listened to a Mexican band play while people of all ages danced near the stage. The Plaza is a nice place to relax after a hard day of shopping.

The highlight of my trip happened while I was visiting the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi located a couple blocks from the plaza. After admiring the beautiful Romanesque style architecture – the Cathedral was completed in 1886 - I said a prayer, lit a candle for my mother, and walked outside to study the hand-tooled panels on the doors. While a photographer was explaining to me what each panel symbolizes in the church's history, I heard sirens nearby and noticed that a crowd was gathering in front of the church. Someone in the group said that the 12-foot, 4,000-lb bronze statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe was to arrive from Mexico any minute to be blessed with holy water before being delivered to its final home at a church a few blocks away. A motorcade led by uniformed police escorted the two-ton statue to a spot in front of the church steps. Parishioners spontaneously sang Ave' Maria in Spanish and watched with love and admiration as the statue was unwrapped. After a priest sprinkled holy water on Our Lady, the crowd walked up the flatbed truck ramp to pay their respects by kissing her on the face. I felt blessed to have been there at just the right time to witness such a sacred event.



St. Francis Cathedral



Our Lady of Guadalupe



Cathedral door panel

After the ceremony I wandered around town, tried to keep up with a cone of melting ice cream, and did some more window shopping before I found the oldest church in the United States and the oldest house in the country, which were located right across the street from each other. Unfortunately by that time my camera battery was dead from taking so many photos of Our Lady of Guadalupe, but I managed to take some photos with my iPhone (photos not shown).

To top off a perfect day, right next to the oldest house in the U.S. was the best pizza I've ever eaten in my life at Upper Crust. Up until then my favorite was consumed at a little French-owned pizza café on a dirt road near Cahuita, Costa Rica.

Thursday I took a side trip to Taos, which is a small laid-back ski resort town. There wasn't much going on, but supposedly during the winter the streets are crowded with skiers. I paid three dollars to see a collection of nine D.H. Lawrence oil paintings that were banned in London in 1929. I cooled off with an ice-cold lemonade while a street musician sang and played some folksy tunes on his harmonica.

The next side trip was a lot more interesting.



A few miles north of town near the Rio Grande River is an Earthship community where the homes (Earthships) are built entirely from recycled materials. They are off the grid and completely self-sustained. You may remember a few years ago when Dennis Weaver's Colorado-based Earthship made the evening news. Earthships are built into the sides of hills or berms, partially underground with a panel of heat-collecting windows that face south to provide the light needed for food-bearing plants.

Earthship community

Earthship walls are constructed from rubber tires and cans and then covered with a straw and adobe-like mud. Water is collected from the rooftop and stored in large tanks for drinking and bathing. The used water is then recycled for plant-watering and again a third time for the toilet. The energy source consists of solar panels and a small windmill that provide electric power for the lights, refrigerator, washer & dryer, stove and electronic equipment.



Earthship wall construction

The Solar/Thermal heating and cooling keep the Earthships at an even 70-degree temperature all year round. It's a wonderful concept and I wouldn't mind staying in one for a little while (some are available to rent), but I'm not sure that I could live in one for a long period of time. Inside I felt a little claustrophobic because the all of the windows were covered with shades and also the interior was very humid, probably due to the open water storage tank and the large "jungle" of plants.



Earthship exterior



Earthship interior

On the way back to Taos I stopped to photograph the Rio Grande Gorge and bridge, and later made a visit to Kit Carson's home/museum. My final stop was a women's art gallery at the edge of Taos. The gallery carried many unusual pieces of art including paintings that changed with the light and metal sculptures that moved with the wind. I had hoped to tour Georgia O'Keeffe's former art studio and was disappointed to learn that reservations need to be made months in advance.



Bridge near Earthships



Kit Carson home/museum



Gallery in Taos

My last day in Santa Fe I ate a BLT for lunch at the Plaza Café, bought some gifts for my family, browsed the outdoor Indian jewelry bazaar and then visited the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) where the paintings, prints and sculptures of Fritz Scholder were currently on exhibit. My only regret is not allowing enough time to visit the Georgia O'Keeffe museum.



Indian Craft Market



IAIA



New Mexico Museum of Art

*Writing and photography by Cheryl Burlingame Dillard
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