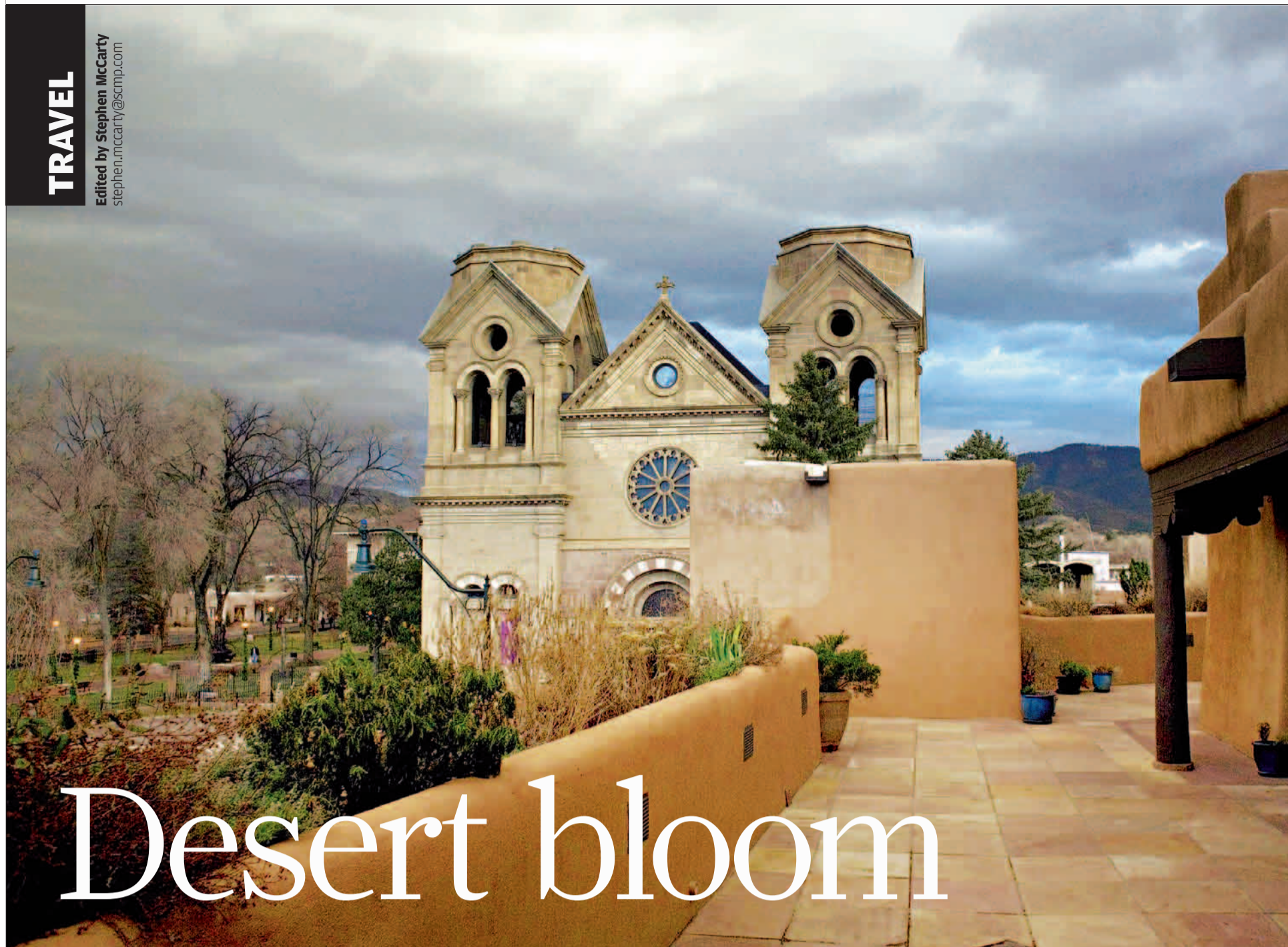


TRAVEL

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Desert bloom

Santa Fe may be a playground for the rich but this arts hub has plenty to offer visitors on a budget, writes **Matt Gross**

For almost 200 years Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, has been a site of pilgrimage. Every Good Friday since the early 18th century, believers have marched on foot, away from the centre of town, with its Romanesque St Francis Cathedral and rounded stucco buildings the colour of roasted corn, toward El Santuario de Chimayo, the Lourdes of the southwest, in the high-desert hills 45km north. It's a marathon of the devout, who reach the holy finish line wearing anything from hiking gear to their Sunday best.

On a recent weekend visit to Santa Fe, however, a different sort of Friday pilgrimage was under way. This group of the faithful was

ambling up Canyon Road, where more than 100 art galleries had thrown open their doors for a regular Friday-night viewing.

The men and women were in late middle age; many might once have been hippies. All exuded an aura of moneyed confidence.

They were probably spending hundreds, if not thousands, on Colonial-chic hotels, trendy restaurants and Navajo artefacts, but our visit was a test to see if Santa Fe could be done on a budget of US\$500.

The art walk is the perfect start to an inexpensive holiday in this 400-year-old city. Up Canyon Road, pop into Marigold Arts to check out Kenneth Parker's vibrant Asian landscape photographs (and drink

the free ginger iced tea), then wander down an alley to the Anahita Gallery for a stark behind-the-Iron-Curtain photography show (plus cheese and crackers).

Then head off for a wander around El Zagan, a rickety but quaint 1850s merchant's home that houses the Historic Santa Fe Foundation.

Next stop, the Coyote Cafe, which has elevated southwestern cuisine way beyond green-chilli cheeseburgers. But with US\$30 entrees, the more casual (and cheaper), bustling Rooftop Cantina is kinder to the wallet. The US\$54 covered chipotle shrimp, Cuban sandwiches and duck quesadillas, complemented by crisp, hoppy Santa Fe Pale Ale.

Our hotel was the Santa Fe Suites, the least expensive hotel I could find that still claimed to represent Santa Fe's "rustic charm". So, rustic charm meant the bedspreads were an indiscriminate medley of pink, purple, copper and turquoise, and the wooden furniture was factory-made to look rough-hewn. But the beds were soft, the historic district just minutes away, and the rate was US\$90.75 a night (including tax).

The next morning we drove to the Santa Fe Baking Co, a homey, crowded cafe where scrambled eggs with scallions and Cheddar cheese, a cinnamon bun, coffee and fresh orange juice cost US\$20.

Then it was off to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum (admission US\$8). We arrived in time to join a free tour, whose elderly guide sketched the painter's life, from her discovery by Alfred Stieglitz to her artistic blossoming in New Mexico.

Next stop, window shopping in the central plaza. At jewellery stores, Indian storyteller figures – ceramic characters on whose shoulders sit a rapt audience of children – were

selling for US\$1,500, and at Shiprock Trading, antique Navajo rugs cost 10 times that.

Much more affordable were the Frito pies, US\$4.15 each at the Five and Dime General Store on the tourist-flooded plaza – a filling snack of meat, chilli, beans and corn.

Working off that meal necessitated a trip to the countryside. Santa Fe is not simply its historic centre but also the wild hills that lead into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We drove past adobe-style gated housing developments, then around tight switchbacks, the forests of pine and aspen growing ever thicker.

At last, we reached Ski Santa Fe, sitting at 3,154 metres.

The ski lifts weren't in operation, so we climbed the steep ascent. Thirty minutes later, at the peak, we could see sunbeams breaking through clouds, and the hills, so red up close, were now infinite shades of blue and grey. Below, Santa Fe was reduced to a little pueblo.

Returning to the town, it was time for a visit to the opera. At US\$14 a ticket, the open-air Santa Fe

The Romanesque St Francis Cathedral (left) and the Santa Fe Baking Co (below), where musicians entertain the breakfast crowd. Photos: NYT



Opera, a few kilometres away, was too good to pass up – especially since the locals turned the event into a picnic. Walking through the parking lot we encountered a dozen parties, some in formal dress, seated at foldout tables and finishing off bottles of wine.

This was serious feasting and we began to feel a little ashamed of our takeaway meal from Dave's Not Here (US\$18.56) – chillies rellenos (stuffed peppers) and a green chilli stew – delicious, but a much sloppier option than Dave's famous green-chilli cheeseburger.

The opera was Strauss' *Daphne*, and, apart from the chic production

demonstrated their techniques, live bands from Japan and West Africa performed on a stage and thousands of shoppers perused jewellery, toys, textiles, masks and trinkets.

As afternoon approached, prices dropped. A US\$300 Mexican indigo rug was half-price; a Kyrgyz felt rug went for US\$100. We bought a bright woodcut of an orange by Brazilian artist Abraao Batista Bezerra for just US\$30, and another by his countryman Jose Francisco Borges for \$20.

We celebrated our buys with a US\$5 cup of sublime organic lavender ice cream from Tara's booth.

With about US\$40 left on our weekend budget we decided to visit Ten Thousand Waves, a Japanese-style spa in the hills. Here, US\$19 buys an all-day soak in the communal hot tub, but the prudish beware – clothing is optional. There was a single bathrobed woman lounging in a chair, but the communal tub was full of naked men.

Among the bamboo walls and the needly pine trees, I went from hot tub to cold plunge to sauna, drank tea and finally relaxed. I'd been worried that a meagre budget wouldn't suffice in Santa Fe, but we'd eaten gloriously, shopped thriftily and enjoyed a hefty dose of Santa Fe culture.

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The New York Times
Getting There
American Airlines (aa.com) flies from Hong Kong to Albuquerque via Chicago and Fort Worth. Santa Fe is about a day's drive from Albuquerque

Big deal

Peter Walbrook
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Available from now until the end of April (with a HK\$400 high-season surcharge for departures on February 5, 10, 11 and 12), Farrington American Express Travel's two-night Xiamen package starts at HK\$2,090 per person, twin share.

Accommodation is at the Best Western Premier Xiamen Central Hotel

(www.bestwestern.com), but you can book a superior room at the Sofitel Plaza (www.sofitel.com) or a deluxe room at the Sheraton (www.sheraton.com) for HK\$2,430 or HK\$2,450 respectively. Another option is the Riyuegu Hotsprings Resort (www.riyuegu.com) for HK\$2,750. These prices, which include flights with

Dragonair or Cathay Pacific, breakfast and insurance, are for Friday or Saturday departures (add HK\$250 for Sunday to Thursday departures).

For further details call Farrington American Express Travel on 3121 3000 (Hong Kong) or 3121 3900 (Kowloon), or e-mail info@farringtonamex.com, quoting package ID: CS7XMN01HKGS.

Detours: Wing it

Mark Andrews

A whistle pierces the crisp morning air. Wheels slip in the freshly fallen snow as the SL Fuyu-no-Shitsugen-go train leaves Kushiro station in a cloud of thick smoke. This is the best way to enter the snow-covered marshes, the land of the crane.

In winter, Kushiro, an otherwise uninspiring coastal town on the Japanese island of Hokkaido, is transformed into a wonderland. Kushiro Shitsugen National Park is the largest wetlands in Japan and the biggest area in which cars are prohibited. Rare red-crowned cranes inhabit the wetlands and there is no better time to see them than when the ground is covered in snow. In the first three months of the year Japan Rail runs a regular steam special through the marsh to Shibecha.

The service started in 2000 with a tank engine manufactured in 1940, which hauls the train the 48km to Shibecha. The train chugs out of Kushiro and crosses the river's mouth before heading inland. Take

a seat on the left side of the carriage (Shibecha bound) because there is little to see on the other side for much of the journey.

Because the train passes through snow-covered woodlands early in the journey, it is possible to see ezo deer searching for food and, if you're lucky, a fox.

Later the railway line rejoins the river and follows its course. Woodland gives way to the reed beds of the wetlands, and around Kayanuma it is common to see cranes in the fields by the track.

The cranes, known to Hokkaido's native Ainu people as the deity of the marsh, are a Kushiro success story. Once thought to be extinct in Japan owing to overhunting, a small population was found in 1924. Now there are about 1,000 red-crowned cranes in east Hokkaido and, unlike populations elsewhere in Asia, they are resident year round. The best time for seeing the cranes is late October to late March, when they congregate at feeding grounds around Kushiro. Check with the local tourist information office for



Photo: Mark Andrews

the best locations and times. Most of the areas are on the edge of the marsh and are connected by bus.

Tsurumidai is a popular location for seeing up to 100 cranes feeding and frolicking in the snow. The air resonates with their calls and you can also see them dance, bowing and jumping into the air. The sky is filled with birds coming and going and they attract a constant stream of spectators.

The birds are very much part of the culture of the area. Pictures and models of the cranes are

everywhere. And when Japan Rail needed a picture for the ID plate of the SL Fuyu-no-Shitsugen-go, naturally it chose a crane. There are even models hanging from the ceilings of train carriages. Trains operate on the route daily from January 26 to March 9 and also on March 15 and 16. They depart at 11.09am from Kushiro and 1.52pm from Shibecha, and cost 1,840 yen (HK\$130) one way, including seat reservation. For Kushiro tourist information see www.kushiro-kankou.or.jp/english.

Entrée: Warsaw

Nicolette Loizou

Comfort food and new twists on old favourites are the order of the day in Warsaw's magical old town.

Stacja Rynek, 15 Stary Rynek

In a corner of one of the most tourist-crammed bits of Warsaw lies this basement escape hidden underneath a post office. The owners celebrate its darkness with blood-red banquettes, black walls and cinematic prints. It's a bit gothic for a lunch date but ideal for an intimate dinner. Another plus is that tourists don't seem to have cottoned on to its inexpensive food, despite its central location. Try the periogi (Polish dumplings) stuffed with sauerkraut and wild mushrooms for 25 zloty (HK\$80) served simply on a cabbage leaf.

Fret@Porter, 37 Freta Street

Billing itself as a gallery restaurant, Fret@Porter is a refreshing addition to the old town's kitschier offerings. Polish standards such as green lentil soup (18 zloty) are updated with a shot of spiciness and a sprinkling of mint leaves. If your hunger pangs are a bit more pressing, try the meaty carp fillet (39 zloty). Live piano music brightens up most evenings and the walls are adorned with new paintings. It is a special place with a menu that also offers emu and ostrich, although it can be busy.

Gospoda Pod Kogutem, 48 Freta Street

On a street lined with places promising authentic Polish cuisine, this has to be one of the best. It can be lively, thanks to locals downing

syropy spirits, but it's perfect if you're in the party mood. Carnivores will enjoy hefty starters such as blood sausage with grated onion (10 zloty). Another central European speciality is pork in aspic (14 zloty). If that's still not enough flesh, then finish with the calf's legs (€35; HK\$406) with chips and sour cream.

Barbakan, 1 Freta Street

This large, bustling place is handy for peering over the restored city walls of Warsaw's beautiful old town. It has a medieval theme and an arsenal of weapons hangs on the walls. If there are a few of you, it's ideal for a feast. The choice of food is huge, if slightly unsurprising. Best to stick to house favourites such as the steak dusted with green peppercorns (33 zloty). Try the pancakes (16 zloty) crammed with fruit, chocolate sauce and nuts.

Pod Samsonem, 3/5 Freta Street

This restaurant (left) is a great little Jewish/Polish standby. Bottles, lamps and strings of garlic hanging from the window give it a folksy, slightly Bohemian air. The interior looks as if it hasn't been updated since communist times, nor, it seems, have the attitudes of the staff, who can be brusque, but the food will cheer up anyone. The crispy duck with baked apple (20 zloty) is a favourite. This is one of the best places for a bowl of zurek (5 zloty) – a meaty soup made from rye flour that will warm you on the coldest day.

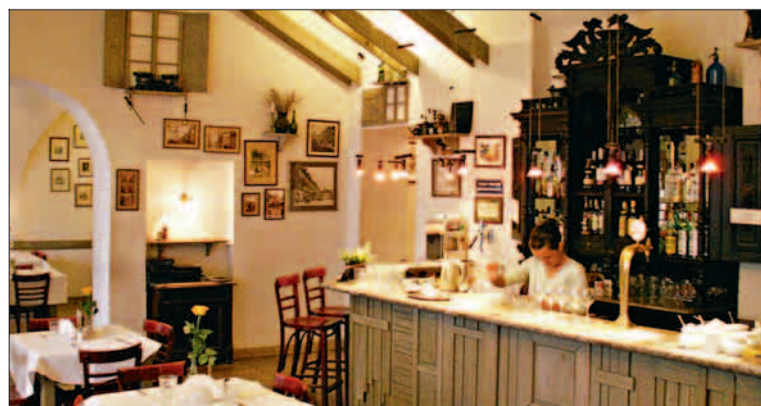


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