

Land of Enchantment

New Mexico's endless beauty abounds

BY AMY LYNCH

It's by no mistake that New Mexico's state bird is the roadrunner. The desert creature is a fitting symbol for the place it represents: With the ability to run up to 20 mph, the bird roams through large swaths of its homeland, enjoying ground-level views of the endless vistas in every direction. Likewise, humans who grow up amid the same expanse of plains, plateaus, mountains and grasslands fondly recall family road trips across the state, traveling from one staggering sight to the next.

"I get chills down my spine thinking about the almost otherworldly beauty of New Mexico's national parks," says Trevor Wolfe, who grew up in Corrales, N.M. "My childhood memories are dotted with the lunar landscape of White Sands, the remote beauty and bigness of Valles Caldera and the anxious excitement of venturing into Carlsbad Caverns."

As the numbers show, the experience is by no means limited to locals. More than 1.7 million people visited the state's 15 U.S. National Park Service sites last year, according to Sue Masica, the service's intermountain regional director.

"Each park I've visited in my nearly 30 years of federal service offers something special, (but) I think what makes our sites in New Mexico stand out is a variety of park experiences and abundance of culturally significant sites that tell the story of our American history," she says.

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White Sands National Monument

Glistening dunes of gypsum sand cover 275 square miles of desert — the largest gypsum dunefield in the world.

nps.gov/whsa

It's also a relaxing experience without the throngs of people commonly associated with the country's most visited public spaces. "A lot of the parks in New Mexico receive fewer visitors than some of the more popular

destinations in places like Utah and Wyoming," Masica says. "As a result, they offer a great alternative for those wanting to avoid entrance lines and large crowds." Less-crowded outdoor spaces, she notes, can allow more opportunities for wonder.

UNDERGROUND AWE

One exception to that rule can be found near the Texas-New Mexico border in the northern Chihuahuan Desert. There, Carlsbad Caverns National Park attracts the masses — more than 300,000 visitors a year, including President Obama in 2016 — to its famed caves, trails and springs. With more than 100 caves on-site, the UNESCO World Heritage

Site's main attraction is its Big Room route, leading through majestic caverns of stalactites, stalagmites, totem pole formations and cave pools.

Carlsbad "draws crowds for a reason," says Kelly Eidson, who has traveled the state with her family throughout her childhood in Albuquerque. "There's nothing quite like the experience of being underground, taking in the awe-inspiring structures in the Hall of Giants and exploring all the rooms. It's been a long time since I've visited, but I'll never forget it."

ANOTHER WORLD

It's possible to experience something akin to another planet while in New Mexico. To do so, head to White Sands National Monument, where a tremendous patch of bright white gypsum sand creates a breathtaking landscape, the sand rippled into hypnotic patterns by the wind. So popular are the dunes among sun-seeking picnickers and day-trippers that the park's visitor center rents discs on which to sit and slide down.

While White Sands carries great visual impact at ground level, the same is true from afar. "The snow-white gypsum dunefield covers 275 square miles," says Rebecca Wiles Burghart, the monument's chief of interpretation. "It is so big that astronauts can see it from space."

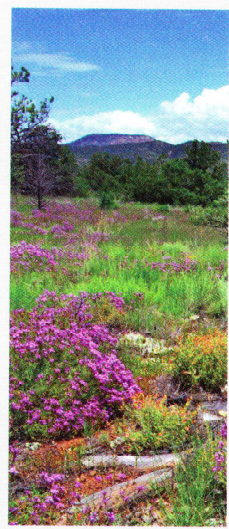


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REBECCA WILES BURROUGHS NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**Alkali Flat Trail,
White Sands
National Monument**



NATURE BECKONS

With 15 sites under the U.S. National Park Service's care, New Mexico offers many ways to engage with its natural wonders and culture. Curious souls can explore the volcanic shadow of Valles Caldera National Preserve, learn about the ceremonies and civilizations of lava country in **El Malpais National Monument** and pay respect to Pueblo Indian ancestors through a quiet visit to Bandelier National Monument.

Further horizon-broadening experiences can be found in 27 state parks, at dozens of museums and through countless captivating opportunities — from turquoise mines and wildlife refuges to rock formations and cultural celebrations. This enchanted land enriches all who visit.

Jesus Muñoz
Flamenco dancers
perform at the
National Hispanic
Cultural Center.

IRENE FERTIK

CULTURAL STUDIES

A host of museums offer a closer look at New Mexico and its wonders. Here are a few you will want to visit:

NATIONAL HISPANIC CULTURAL CENTER

Spanning 20 acres, this vibrant hub hosts more than 700 performances, workshops and events each year. In its gallery, visitors encounter thousands of works by artists of Hispanic, Latino and Chicano heritage. Dance classes, film screenings and storytelling events round out a roster of date-night and family-friendly outings.

► 1701 4th St. S.W., Albuquerque; 505-246-2261; nhccnm.org

NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS

The NMSU campus offers public museums and collections, including a gallery with more sacred Mexican tin art than anywhere else in the U.S., two

regional history centers exhibiting artifacts from the American Southwest and northern Mexico, and an arthropod museum housing a century's worth of the state's smallest inhabitants.

► 1280 E. University Ave., Las Cruces; 575-646-5161; nmsu.edu/museums

GEORGIA O'KEEFE MUSEUM

One of New Mexico's most renowned artists, O'Keeffe is celebrated throughout the state, but the most comprehensive collection of her work rests in the Santa Fe museum that bears her name. Run by the same organization that maintains the doyenne's home and studio (tours by appointment only) about 50 miles away, the museum welcomes guests to

experience more than 3,000 of O'Keeffe's works.
► 217 Johnson St., Santa Fe; 505-946-1000; okeeffemuseum.org

ROSWELL MUSEUM AND ART CENTER

Long associated with extraterrestrial folklore, Roswell is home to the Robert H. Goddard Planetarium, where celestial shows and star parties keep visitors looking skyward. The museum and art center also houses 12 galleries and more than 11,000 relics and works of art.

► 100 W. 11th St., Roswell; 575-624-6744; roswell-nm.gov

— Amy Lynch