

New Mexico's TOP 10

By Norman Martin

They range from a dazzling underground world to an out-of-this-world museum dedicated to alien life forms. They are New Mexico's "Top 10" tourist attractions from the New Mexico Department of Tourism.

Carlsbad Caverns

Amid enormous rock formations, crystal-clear pools and gigantic subterranean chambers lies southeastern New Mexico's top attraction, Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Geologists believe that the caverns began forming about 250 million years ago, when a vast shallow sea covered part of the state. Today, the park contains more than 97 known caves, including Lechuguilla Cave, the nation's deepest limestone cave at 1,567 feet. Carlsbad Caverns is highly accessible, with a variety of tours offered year-round. The geologic treasure has been a national park since 1930.

Into the abyss: Carlsbad Caverns, right, contains gigantic subterranean chambers and formations that are home to some 300,000 Mexican free-tail bats.

Santa Fe

Santa Fe's remarkable history, art and cultural heritage make it among the nation's top tourist destinations. Starting with the Santa Fe plaza, the city's 1.7 million annual visitors can fan out to see more than 300 galleries or visit several top-flight museums, including the Palace of the Governors, Museum of Fine Arts, Museum

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of International Folk Art and Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Santa Fe's tourists add about \$26.2 million to the local economy. Other attractions are St. Francis Cathedral, and the Loretto Chapel and its legendary Miraculous Staircase, which spirals upward without a center pole for support.



Stepping up: Above, the Loretto Chapel's "Miraculous Staircase," was built sometime between 1877 and 1881. Both its builder and its engineering remain subjects of Santa Fe mystery.

Taos Ski Valley

One of New Mexico's most celebrated ski resorts, Taos Ski Valley is a year-round alpine playground, famed for its slopes in winter and hiking, biking and horseback riding in summer. It remains one of the few family-owned and operated ski resorts in North America. In addition to snow adventures, there's the nearby Kit Carson Home & Museum, as well as the five-story adobe Taos Pueblo, which is the largest multistory pueblo in existence.

Downhill run: Taos Ski Valley's first lift, a Bridger-Boseman J-Bar, was installed by Ernie Blake, 16 men from Taos Pueblo and a mule named Lightning in fall 1956.

Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad

One of northern New Mexico's most nostalgic attractions is the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, a historic train that runs on a limited schedule between Chama and Antonito, Colo. Riders taking the 64-mile, narrow-gauge line can sit back and hear the howl of the old train's whistle and see the old steam locomotive's trail of black smoke as it plods along a high-country route. Many consider Chama to be the trip's highlight. This tiny town located about 10 miles south of the Colorado border sits next to a picturesque valley below the peaks of the San Juan Mountains.

All aboard: The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad takes visitors into the past to relive an era when steam-powered locomotives and the trains they hauled were an essential part of the real Old West.

Billy the Kid Museum

Fort Sumner, a small eastern New Mexico town where Henry McCarty, aka "Billy the Kid," spent his final days, offers several interesting sites, not the least of which is the legendary bad boy's final resting place at the Old Fort Sumner Museum. It's said that Billy, who was about 5 feet, 8 inches tall, loved music and dancing, along with robbing and killing. At the nearby Fort Sumner State Monument is the old Maxwell house, where 21-year-old Billy was shot and killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett in 1881.

Grave news: The Kid's tombstone reads, "The Boy Bandit King. He Died As He Had Lived."

International UFO Museum at Roswell

Eastern New Mexico's Roswell hit the tourist lotto in November 1992, with the opening of the International UFO Museum and Research Center. This largely agricultural community has become a magnet for the UFO curious, who search for the truth about a purported UFO crash northwest of town in 1947. This monument to the event has drawn hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world. The museum occupies a former movie theater downtown and claims to be a worldwide center for UFO information, as well as a good place to buy an alien bobble head and silk-screened survivor cap.

Truth seekers: Roswell's International UFO Museum and Research Center has become the clearinghouse for UFO-related phenomena.

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Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument

More than 700 years ago, a mysterious band of migrating Indians, probably numbering fewer than 60, established a tenuous foothold on the West Fork of the Gila River in southwestern New Mexico. Their new home wasn't on the water; it was 180 feet above in a series of large caves. In the caves, the cliff dwellers constructed 40 rooms, crafting their quarters from nearby stone, mud mortar and timber. But less than 50 years later, the cliff dwellers were gone, abruptly abandoning their homes and fields. Some archaeologists believe the retreat was triggered by drought, but no one knows for sure.

Living on the edge: Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument appears much as it did when the Mogollon people inhabited the rock houses in the late 13th century.



Sandia Peak Tramway

Sandia Peak Tram, the world's longest aerial tramway, is a slow, gentle lift that climbs 2.7 miles to the peak of the Sandia Mountains. Reaching the top at 10,378 feet, visitors can see more than 11,000 square miles on a clear day. From the tramcar, riders see striking views of interesting rock formations and sometimes even mule deer, black bear, raccoons, bobcats and golden eagles that live on the mountain. At the crest, visitors can enjoy 24 miles of hiking trails that offer fabulous views down the mountain.

Engineering marvel: The Sandia Peak Tramway climbs 4,000 feet in about 18 minutes, depositing riders at the top of Sandia Peak.



Chaco Culture National Historical Park

Since the 1890s, when the first major excavations of Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico were undertaken, archaeologists have found scientific treasure in the ruins of the Anasazi culture in southeastern San Juan County. In about A.D. 850, the Anasazi—or the Ancient Ones, as the Navajos call them—produced a flowering of a civilization that vanished as quickly as it had bloomed. Over the next three centuries, Chaco Canyon near Nageezi was transformed from a community of crude surface dwellings into a complex of elaborate stone pueblos. By the early 1200s, however, the great stone cities were deserted, the likely victim of an extended drought.

The ancient ones: Chaco Canyon, a major center of ancestral Pueblo culture, was a hub of ceremony, trade and administration for the prehistoric Four Corners area.

White Sands National Monument

Deep in southern New Mexico lies a vast sea of glistening snow-white dunes that continually draws visitors from across the world. One of the nation's top geologic treasures, White Sands National Monument was formed by gypsum, hydrated calcium, deposited at the bottom of a shallow sea that covered the region some 250 million years ago. Only a few plants grow rapidly enough to survive burial by the silky, fine-grained sand. Surrounding the park is the 4,000 square-mile White Sands Missile Range.

Shifting sands: White Sands National Monument is part of the world's largest gypsum dune field, where glistening dunes rise 60 feet high and cover 275 square miles.

