

NEW MEXICO TOUR 2016

After a great tour of the Canadian Rockies in 2015, we were looking around to see what we wanted to do in 2016. We had looked at a few different New Mexico tours, one by train and another with a bus tour.

Kathy and I decided we were tired of the “bags outside at 7 AM” routine, so we looked at doing the itinerary on our own. This worked quite well on our trip to Switzerland.

We were intrigued by the symbol on the state flag, so we did a little research on it.

The colors on New Mexico's state flag are the red and yellow of old Spain. The simple, elegant center design is the ancient Zia sun symbol, which represents the unique character of New Mexico (Zia sun symbol). Four is the sacred number of the Zia and is seen repeated in the four points radiating from the circle, each consisting of four bars. To the Zia Indians, the number four represents:

The four points of the compass (east, west, north, and south)

The four seasons of the year (spring, summer, autumn, and winter)

The four periods of each day (morning, noon, evening, and night);

The four seasons of life (childhood, youth, middle years, and old age)

We plan to fly into Albuquerque and rent a car, and do most of the tour itinerary.

The first order of business was to get our flights from Burbank to Albuquerque and back. I discovered that Southwest Airlines has a feature on their website which lists the lowest fares per day for an entire month, so we chose a Thursday and a Saturday a week later. The difference in fares was almost 2 to 1! The next step was to select hotels in both towns, and I asked Kathy to do that. Between Hotels.com, and Trip Advisor, we had all the information we needed to make a selection.

Taking a page from our Swiss trip, where we stayed in the same hotel the tour did, I looked at the hotels we would be staying if we were on a Tauck tour. I went on line and found a deal for the hotel in Santa Fe at 30% off!

Kathy also found a place called El Pueblo in Taos that was highly recommended, so we booked it. The scary thing was we got the last available room for those dates!

Kathy said since I was doing most of the navigating, we should get the “Never Lost” GPS option for our rental car. I went to the website to learn how to use it, and discovered a great option. You can find destinations on their website, and then load them into a flash drive that can be plugged into the car's GPS. That way you do not have to enter anything in the car.

I was thinking about booking a flight seeing tour of the area, so I Googled the Santa Fe Airport. I was amazed to find a company called the Jet Warbird Center that offered flights in different military jets. I told Kathy about it, and, bless her heart, she said, “Go for it”. I want to fly a MIG 15, which was used in the Korean War. I contacted the company and reserved my slot on the MIG-15.

I wrote a separate story on the experience at:

<http://stevekathytravels.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/mig15.pdf>

SANTA FE

While doing some on-line research about the Santa Fe Depot, which has a number of shops and restaurants, I found that there is a free shuttle that runs every 15 minutes around the city. I went to their website, and discovered much to our pleasure, that one of the shuttle stops is close to our hotel! I also went to the Auto Club and got a new Tour Book and assorted maps of where we were going to be. Kathy read through it and found a company that gives personalized tours, so we will look them up on line, and see what they have to offer.

I just got the new AFC Tours catalog that offered a New Mexico tour, and in Santa Fe, they were going to a restaurant called La Casa Sena, which featured singing waiters doing pop and Broadway songs. That sounds like a lot of fun and we will check it out.



We were picked up at 7:30 AM (ghastly) by our driver for the one hour trip to Burbank Airport. We had to select an early morning flight because we wanted to get to our hotel in Santa Fe before dark, We picked up our rental car with NeverLost (Thank you, Kathy) at the Albuquerque Airport and drove north to Santa Fe. On the way there we saw a huge rainstorm ahead of us, but fortunately it was moving away from us. The residual water was quite a hazard, however, not to mention the highway divider that was blown into our lane!



There was also some Virga from the storm, which is rain that evaporates before it hits the ground. We did take the rainbow as a good omen, however.

We finally got to the hotel, but only after finding the front entrance on our own. The GPS directed us to the loading dock!

We checked in, and after getting situated, wanted to have dinner. The main restaurant was booked for a private dinner, so we ended up at CAVA, which was the bar. It turns out that we could order food from any of the restaurants, so we checked out the menus.

One item on the menu caught Kathy's eye-it was a dish of pig's ears! I, being not as adventurous, ordered mussels. We were not sure how the pig's ears would be served, but they were strips that had been fried, along with a dipping sauce. Kathy gave me one to try, and they were a little chewy, like calamari rings.



The CAVA Bar



Mussels

Pig's Ears

During the times we were in the CAVA bar, there was a very talented classical guitarist and singer performing.

The next morning we took the shuttle to the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi. The cathedral was built by Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy between 1869 and 1886 on the site of an older adobe church.



When we entered the cathedral, there was some scaffolding set up behind the altar. Some workmen were removing the statue of St. Francis from its place on the wall behind the altar. It was placed just behind the altar along with a large candle.



After leaving the Basilica, we walked down towards the Loreto Chapel to see the miraculous staircase. On the way we saw a restaurant called “La Luminairia”, where we stopped to have lunch.

After lunch, we entered the chapel and read the story of the staircase.

When the Loreto Chapel was completed in 1878, there was no way to access the choir loft twenty-two feet above. Carpenters were called in to address the problem, but they all concluded access to the loft would have to be via ladder as a staircase would interfere with the interior space of the small Chapel. Legend says that to find a solution to the seating problem, the Sisters of the Chapel made a novena to St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. On the ninth and final day of prayer, a man appeared at the Chapel with a donkey and a toolbox looking for work. Months later, the elegant circular staircase was completed, and the carpenter disappeared without pay or thanks. After searching for the man (an ad even ran in the local newspaper) and finding no trace of him, some concluded that he was St. Joseph himself, having come in answer to the sisters' prayers.

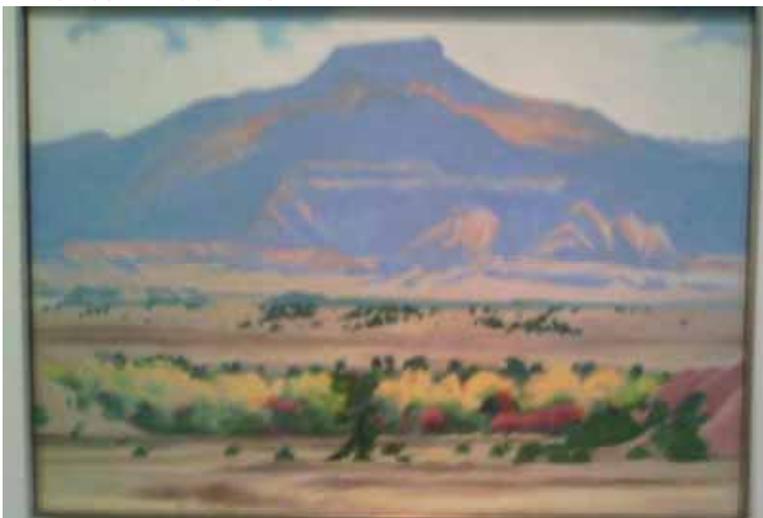
The staircase has two 360 degree turns and no visible means of support. Also, it is said that the staircase was built without nails—only wooden pegs.

At the entrance to the chapel, there was a model of the staircase, so it could be seen in its entirety.



The next day we decided to visit the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. I went to the front desk to get directions, as the map we were given was stylized and not to scale. We were told to walk to the back door of the hotel, and the museum was across the street.

Georgia O'Keeffe is one of the most significant and intriguing artists of the twentieth century, known internationally for her boldly innovative art. Her distinct flowers, dramatic cityscapes, glowing landscapes, and images of bones against the stark desert sky are iconic and original contributions to American Modernism.





On our last day in Santa Fe, we took the shuttle bus to the Visitor Center, and then changed to another bus that took us to Canyon Road, where many of the art galleries were. There were some large pieces of art on display, as well as many interesting ones in the galleries.



On our last night in Santa Fe, we decided to eat at La Casa Sena, to enjoy a dinner with the singing waiters. Because of the parking problem, we took a cab, which dropped us off nowhere near where we

wanted to go. I went back to the driver and told him we wanted to go to the front door of the restaurant, He claimed he thought we knew where we were going, and I told him we did not have any idea other than the front door of the restaurant. We finally got there, and enjoyed a nice meal accompanied by three of the waiters singing.

We left the next day for Taos, but planned to stop at Chimayo.

CHIMAYO

A friend of ours, who is familiar with New Mexico, suggested we stop at Chimayo, between Santa Fe and Taos. Here is the story:

Sometime around 1810, a Chimayo friar was performing penances when he saw a light bursting from a hillside. Digging, he found a crucifix, quickly dubbed the miraculous crucifix of Our Lord of Esquipulas. A local priest brought the crucifix to Santa Cruz, but three times it disappeared and was later found back in its hole. By the third time, everyone understood that El Senor de Esquipulas wanted to remain in Chimayo, and so a small chapel was built on the site. Then the miraculous healings began. These grew so numerous that the chapel had to be replaced by the larger, current Chimayo shrine -- an adobe mission -- in 1816.

El Santuario de Chimayo is now known (at least locally) as the "Lourdes of America." The crucifix still resides on the chapel altar, but for some reason its curative powers have been overshadowed by El Posito, the "sacred sand pit" from which it sprang, which gapes unevenly behind the main altar. Over 300,000 people visit this dustbin of heaven every year.



The Prayer Room, which is located in the sacristy of the church (next to the pit), is filled with discarded crutches, braces, and handmade shrines.

We arrived at the chapel just in time for Mass for the Consecration of the Host. We stayed for the entire mass, and then went to the Sacred Pit to get some of the sacred dirt.





We filled up a zip lock bag with some of the dirt, and then went to the gift shop to buy small holders for the dirt to give to friends and family.

After visiting the sanctuary, we stopped for lunch at the Rancho de Chimayo Restaurant. It was a very large place, and quite crowded. We ordered a combination plate that had so much food we ended up taking some with us to our hotel in Taos.

As we were leaving, a Tauck bus pulled up and disgorged its 40 passengers. Kathy and I looked at each other and smiled, once more glad we were on our own for the trip.

The road from Chimayo to Taos paralleled the Rio Grande River, and it was relative small, compared to its size downstream in Texas.



Coming out of the canyon, we got a great view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.





TAOS

We made reservations at the El Pueblo Motel, which is a retro style motel that was highly recommended. It was very comfortable, and featured a full breakfast. Instead of using the in room coffeemaker, I just took the carafe up to the coffee machine in the breakfast room.

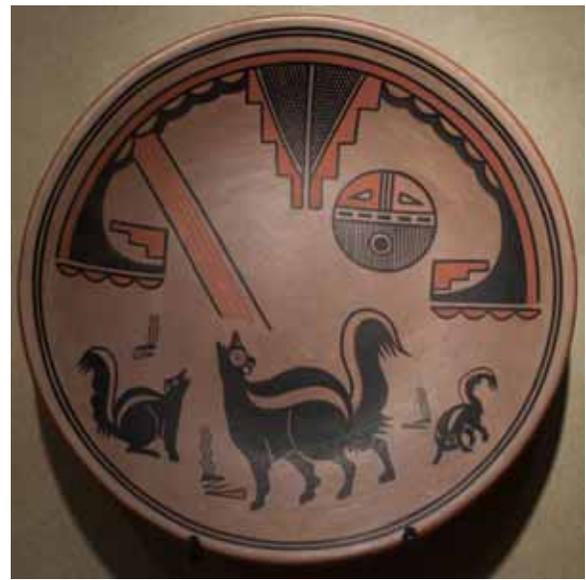


The first place we went to see was the Rio Grande River Gorge, a miniature Grand Canyon. The Rio Grande Gorge is a geological feature in northern New Mexico where the watercourse of the Rio Grande follows a tectonic chasm. Beginning near the Colorado border, the approximately 50-mile gorge runs from northwest to southeast of Taos, New Mexico, through the basalt flows of the Taos Plateau volcanic field. The gorge depth is 800 feet just south of the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge. The plateau is flat land from one side of the mountains to the other, but with no hint of the gorge until you are right over it.





In our way to the Rio Grande Bridge, we passed a sign for the Millicent Rogers Museum. We decided to stop there the following day, as we knew nothing about her. She was the granddaughter of Henry Rogers, who co-founded Standard Oil. During her 51 years, she travelled extensively through Europe and the Americas. Her rebellious spirit and high profile romantic escapades made her a favorite subject for the media. She died in 1953, long before any of the internet social media and tabloid magazines, so we knew nothing about her. If she were alive today she would have been followed like a reality show star, The main exhibit focuses on Maria Martinez, who was a Native American potter for over 80 years. She developed a technique of black on black pottery. She also made many polychrome items.



There is one large room in the museum that features her work.



After visiting the museum, we headed into Taos to have lunch. Kathy has been very active on a cooking website, and a fellow member lives in Taos. We were looking forward to meeting her at a place called The Alley Cantina at the Taos Plaza, which is quite popular.

We had a nice lunch, and chat with Beth. It seems living in Taos has been very good for her. After lunch, we did a little shopping on the Taos Plaza. I found a beautiful tiny pot with a butterfly design that was expensive because of the small details that had to be worked on the pot. The pot was handcrafted at the Santo Domingo Pueblo. Kathy found a beautiful silver feather necklace and matching earrings.



To show how small the pot is, the coin in front of it is a quarter.

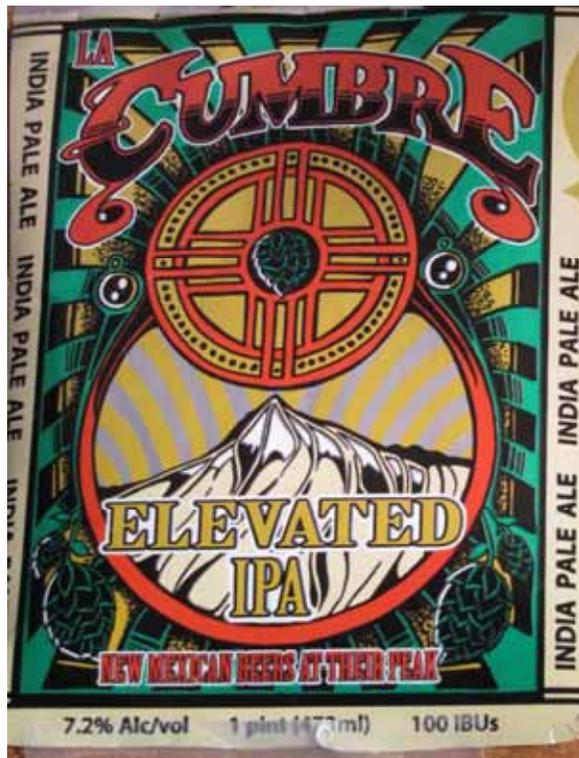
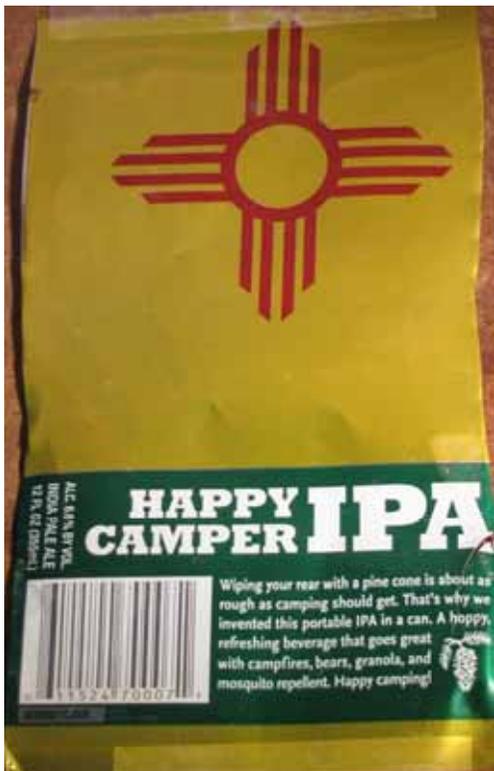
We had heard about a ski resort called Angel Fire, and decided to drive out towards it. Kathy said we would probably go half way, as we had to also drive back to the motel.

The drive was quite scenic, with many of the trees changing color. At the altitude of 7000 feet, you do not get the variety of trees that you would in New England. It was quite a change from the flat Taos Plateau.

However, being a mountain road, it was extremely winding, and when we turned around, we were glad to see the "Welcome to Taos" sign.



At dinner that night, I ordered a local beer, and was taken by some of the designs on the cans. Here are two examples. The caption under the Happy Camper cracked me up!



The next morning we left early, because we had about a 120 mile drive to get to the Albuquerque Airport. We were glad we did leave early, because there was road construction south of Santa Fe, and the detour cost us almost an hour. Instead of dropping the rental car off, we first pulled in next to the rental car building and dropped our luggage off. Kathy watched the luggage while I took the car around to the rental car return place. We checked our bags and headed to our gate.

Fortunately, we still had enough time to get a sandwich before our flight.

We decided on this trip to get 2 aisle seats across from each other so we could have a little more legroom. On the flight from Albuquerque to Las Vegas, Kathy had a grandmother and 7 year old girl sitting next to her. It was their first flight ever, and the little girl was so excited, especially when Kathy told her we would be flying above the clouds.

I had a couple sitting next to me, and it was the man's first flight. It took 20 minutes for the lady to get the circulation back in the hand he was gripping.

We changed planes and had a one hour flight from Las Vegas to Burbank Airport. Our driver was waiting for us, and an hour later we were home,

In summary, it was a great trip for many reasons: neither of us had been to New Mexico, the short elapsed time of our flights (4 hours instead of 10 to 12), meeting the friend of ours, and of course my MiG-15 flight. We were glad we did it on our own, and had the luxury and flexibility that entails.

Northern New Mexico was surprisingly beautiful, and we always enjoy exploring together.

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