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Albuquerque rising

Like great turquoise, the city's a natural. But with its balloon fiesta and confluence of cultures, this unpolished gem is primed to shine.

By Beverley Beyette
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Albuquerque — AT the American International Rattlesnake Museum in Old Town Albuquerque, I spotted a sign on the door. "We love tourists," it said. "They taste just like chicken."

In the past, this city was about as welcoming as that sign. Shops in Old Town had to be persuaded to stay open evenings, and until recently, zoning laws prohibited visitors from sitting on a restaurant patio and having a glass of wine or a margarita.

So tourists would fly into Sunport, Albuquerque's airport and slither their way up Interstate 25 to Santa Fe, its sexier, better-dressed sister city.

Now Albuquerque is sprucing up its Cinderella image and turning into one of the belles of the tourist ball. TripAdvisor placed Albuquerque fourth in last year's listing of the top 10 underrated world destinations, and online travel company Orbitz chose it as one of five "outstanding locations that should be on everyone's must-see list" in the next five years.

If one thing has put Albuquerque on the tourist map, it's the annual International Balloon Fiesta (Oct. 5-14 this year). It "helped establish a sense of place," said Dale Lockett, president and chief executive of the city's convention and visitors bureau.

The fiesta began modestly in 1972 as a hot-air-balloon rally sponsored by a local radio station publicizing its 50th anniversary. The event, held in a dirt parking lot, attracted 20,000 spectators and 13 balloons. These days, the 10-day festival draws up to a million visitors and as many as 700 balloons.

The balloon crowd had just left when I visited in late October. I decided to ground myself here, so I checked into Los Poblanos, a historic inn not far from Old Town. The inn once was the home of Albert Simms and Ruth Hanna McCormick, who met while serving in Congress in the late 1920s, married and moved to New Mexico, his home state.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast at the inn, I set off to find out what all the "better-than-it's-ever-been" buzz was about.

I started in Old Town, site of Albuquerque's first Spanish settlement in 1706. The shops in the adobe buildings around the band-shell-centered square weren't doing much trade, selling T-shirts, turquoise and kachina dolls. I quickly lost interest and headed for Old Town's Spanish Colonial twin-spired 1793 San Felipe de Neri Church, where Masses are still celebrated. It is one of the oldest surviving buildings in the city, and its rectory was leased to the Army after the Civil War.

Nearby, I discovered the rattlesnake museum. Its \$3.50 entrance ticket came with a certificate of bravery. The museum claims to have 31 species of rattlesnakes. But don't worry: All those rattlers are safely behind glass.

At a strip mall on Central Avenue, I stumbled across the Turquoise Museum, where owner Joe Lowry took me through rooms full of glass cases displaying turquoise from mines around the world.

If you are buying turquoise jewelry, "the word to shop with is 'natural,'" Lowry said. "Real and genuine do not equal natural."

The Federal Trade Commission defines natural as having nothing changed but the shape, he said. That rules out adding other material to enhance a stone's density or changing its color. The latter trick is hardly new. Early Native Americans used bear grease, the Chinese yak fat.

Less than 10% of the turquoise in mounted jewelry is natural, Lowry said. By law, those who sell it must be able to produce a written guarantee. Buyers, he said, should also make sure a piece of jewelry is handmade, with no machine-made parts. "Both are pieces of jewelry, but only one is a work of art," he said.

More works of art can be found in the gentrified Nob Hill section on the southeastern side of the city, where galleries, smart restaurants and boutiques in vintage 1940s buildings dot Central Avenue. Central is also Route 66 and has the 66 Diner and some neon-lighted 1940s buildings — gas stations, motels — that have been adapted to new uses.

(A store to check out: Hey Jhonny at 3418 Central Ave. has an eclectic mix of home *objets* where I found flower frogs about the size of a quarter and good-quality jewelry.)

New energy downtown

THE city is grittier, more real, than "Fanta Se," as some residents disparagingly refer to their northern neighbor, and that's evident in Albuquerque's downtown, which lies between Nob Hill and Old Town. The Downtown Action Team, a private nonprofit, is spearheading the latest urban renewal in the once-dreary district.

"Over the years, there have been 31 other efforts to revitalize downtown," said Luisa Casso, its president and chief executive. Casso says the key to

the success of the current 10-year plan, now in its sixth year, is funding, primarily from downtown property owners. Signs of progress: new retail shops, a 14-screen movie complex, small theaters, restaurants and lofts.

"We are a downtown that's evolving," Casso said. "It's not where we want to be. But five years ago, the streets of downtown would roll up at 5 o'clock."

Downtown still is mainly 9 to 5, but a few great buildings are worth an after-hours trip. The renovated 1927 KiMo Theatre, a Pueblo Deco treasure, is emblematic of the city's multicultural diversity. One of Albuquerque's true sources of pride is its blend of Euro-American, Hispanic and Native American cultures.

"Albuquerque has a lot of hidden treasures," said Eduardo Diaz, executive director of the National Hispanic Cultural Center.

"We're trying to kick things into higher gear here. Santa Fe gets it, and has always gotten it. Albuquerque needs to move out of the shadow of Santa Fe and create its own distinctive flavor and brand," he said, building on "this confluence of cultures for centuries."

The center has a performing-arts center named for donor Roy E. Disney (nephew of Walt) and a gallery with a permanent collection by contemporary Hispanic artists.

Albuquerque is focusing on its Native American culture too. Four of New Mexico's 19 Indian pueblos — Sandia, Santa Ana, Isleta and Laguna — are close by.

"The traditions are very much alive and well on the pueblos," said Ron Solimon, director of the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center on 12th Street.

The center is a nonprofit, and proceeds from the gift shop and restaurants go to the pueblos. Indian pottery is its most valuable collection.

"As the trains were coming through here in the 1880s," Solimon said, locals "discovered people wanted to buy not only the item — corn, say — but they wanted the vessel too."

Like the tourists of the past, I was intrigued by the vessels, so I went to Acoma Pueblo, 60 miles west of the city, because the tribe has long been known for its pottery.

The sandstone mesa looms dramatically among the desert's red rock formations. Acoma is one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the United States and may date to 1150.

Fewer than 15 families now live here year-round. "Most of them are elders," said our tour guide, Gerry. "It's more like a spiritual place and retirement community."

There's neither electricity nor running water, and portable toilets dot the site. Kerosene lamps light the homes. "Probably the only time you hear generators is [during] Monday night football games," Gerry said.

We walked through the original wooden doors onto the dirt floor of 17th century San Esteban del Rey mission church. The rainbows painted on its walls represent rain, for which the desert-dwelling Acoma people pray.

Elemental patterns also show up on modern Acoma pottery, which is sold at the pueblo. (In the 1950s, Acoma women revived pottery making.) On my visit, I saw women pop out of their adobe houses to peddle their handmade works.

Damian Garcia, an Acoma who is curator of the museum at the pueblo's visitor center, guided me through an exhibit, explaining how the designs evolved.

Traditional patterns were very simple, he said, with elements such as wind, rain and lightning. But with the coming of the railroad to Albuquerque, artists began adding other symbols, such as animal figures.

"Tourists wanted something elaborate," Garcia said. "They wanted their money's worth."

The tourists of today do too. In Albuquerque, they will get it.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Albuquerque...

... is the birthplace of Microsoft (no, it wasn't Seattle).

... has more than 100 art galleries and 20 museums.

... was named for Spain's 10th Duke of Alburquerque. (The first "r" was dropped, by one account, because a station master had trouble with the spelling.)

... was the city from which the "runaway bride," Jennifer Wilbanks, called police and ended a search that titillated the nation in 2005.

... was the site of the first recorded balloon flight on July 4, 1882, by "Professor" Park A. Van Tassel, a local saloon keeper, who landed safely in a

cornfield. The balloon museum is named for the late Maxie Anderson and Ben Abruzzo, Albuquerque residents who were members of a three-man team that was first to cross the Atlantic by balloon in 1978.

— Beverly Beyette

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

A place in the sun

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, Southwest and United have nonstop flights to Albuquerque. Southwest, America West, United and Delta have connecting flights (change of plane). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$190.

WHERE TO STAY:

Los Poblanos Inn, 4803 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W.; (866) 344-9297 or (505) 344-9297, <http://www.lospoblanos.com> . A historic family-run inn near Old Town. Rooms wrap around a center courtyard and have kiva fireplaces and Southwestern décor. Doubles, including full breakfast, from \$145.

Böttger Mansion of Old Town, 110 San Felipe N.W.; (800) 758-3639, <http://www.bottger.com> . Elvis stayed here, Sinatra sang here. Machine Gun Kelly hid out here. Now it's a Victorian bed and breakfast. Doubles start at \$115.

Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town, 800 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W.; (505) 843-6300, <http://www.hotelABQ.com> . Renovated Southwestern-style convention hotel. Doubles from \$99.

WHERE TO EAT:

Seasons, 2031 Mountain Road N.W.; (505) 766-5100, <http://www.seasonsonthenet.com> . Upscale dining near Old Town. Seasonally fresh ingredients, open kitchen. Main dishes about \$16-\$39.

Duran Central Pharmacy, 1815 Central Ave. N.W.; (505) 247-4141. This 1940s-style eatery, popular for breakfast and lunch, has fabled tortilla burgers. Nothing is more than \$9.

Church Street Café, 2111 Church St. N.W.; (505) 247-8522, <http://www.churchstreetcafe.com> . Old Town lunch favorite serving New Mexican cuisine in the city's oldest residence, dating from the early 1700s. Priciest item is \$13.

Scalo, 3500 Central Ave. S.E.; (505) 255-8781, <http://www.scalonobhill.com> . Northern Italian grill in inviting two-level contemporary space with open kitchen. Dinner main dishes and pasta \$12-\$30.

WHAT TO DO:

Albuquerque International Balloon Museum, 9201 Balloon Museum Drive N.E.; (505) 768-6020, <http://www.balloonmuseum.com> . I loved the exhibits devoted to ballooning history. The Balloon Fiesta, <http://www.balloonfiesta.com> , will be held Oct. 6-14 this year.

American International Rattlesnake Museum, 202 San Felipe N.W., Suite A; (505) 242-6569, <http://www.rattlesnakes.com> . Open 11:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays, 1-5 p.m. Sundays. Admission: \$3.50 adults; \$2.50 kids.

Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, 2401 12th St. N.W.; (866) 855-7902, <http://www.indianpueblo.org> .

KiMo Theatre, 423 Central Ave. N.W.; (505) 768-3522, <http://www.cabq.gov/kimo> .

National Hispanic Cultural Center, 1701 4th S.W.; (505) 246-2261, <http://www.nhccnm.org> . Museum is open 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. \$3 adults, kids 16 and younger free.

Sky City Cultural Center, Interstate 40, Exit 102 (15 miles south of the pueblo of Acoma); (800) 747-0181 or (505) 552-7860, <http://www.skycity.com> . Guided tours of the Acoma Pueblo start on the hour; \$10 adults; \$7 children 6-17; younger than 5 free.

Turquoise Museum, 2107 Central Ave. N.W.; (505) 247-8650. Open 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays. \$4 adults, \$3 for kids younger than 12.

TO LEARN MORE:

Albuquerque Convention & Visitors Bureau, on Plaza Don Luis in Old Town or baggage claim level at the airport; (800) 733-9918, <http://www.itsatrip.org> .

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