

Southwest to Adventure

For those interested in touring the great Southwest, now's the time to plan an early fall trip to beautiful Albuquerque, New Mexico. You'll find the weather divine, the sights abundant – oh, and the largest hot air balloon festival in the world.



I wandered across the adobe facade of New Mexico last fall to fulfill a lifelong promise. For some time, well-traveled friends have returned from the “Land of Enchantment” praising the stunning natural landscape. They insisted I see for myself the wonder of Carlsbad Caverns and the gypsum dunes of White Sands National Park. They waxed poetic about the artsy, cultural towns of Taos and Santa Fe with their ubiquitous adobe architecture, unique art galleries and the Santa Fe Opera House – and outdoor architectural gem. And, of course, who can forget infamous Roswell? (An alien encounter might just make a vacation.) But first and foremost, they advised I travel in the fall to experience Albuquerque’s amazing balloon festival.

The Fiesta (September 30 - October 9, 2005)

Each fall, tourists from around the world congregate in Albuquerque to enjoy the cornucopia of colors that is the International Balloon Fiesta. Days in advance, balloon enthusiasts traveling in trailers and RVs gather at Balloon Festival Park to set up for a week of races and other events. Last year, I arrived a day before the Fiesta began. After a good night’s sleep, I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at 4:30 the

next morning for the Fiesta’s opening day Dawn Patrol. It is the Dawn Patrol’s daily responsibility to determine if weather conditions are acceptable for the day’s ballooning activities. (Because balloons rise faster in cooler weather, the early start is a must.) Thousands of people joined me in the dark to view the Dawn Patrol balloons. The almost eerie view of glowing balloons against the black, pre-dawn sky adds to the drama as visitors anticipate the patrol’s weather report.

As the Dawn Patrol launches into the sky, those left on the ground also have important work. Volunteers follow meticulous patterns to unfold balloon canvasses, powerful gas engines inject hot air giving birth to the shape of the balloon and safety instructions are carefully reviewed.





Once the Dawn Patrol gives the “okay,” the mass ascent begins. Referees in striped shirts direct when each series of balloons can leave the ground. The morning I was there, almost 600 balloons took to the skies. I was in one of the first balloons to rise giving me a wonderful view of the park and opportunity to take excellent photos. The multi-colored balloons in a variety of shapes and sizes put on a fantastic show.

While it is an experience I certainly recommend, it’s not necessary to go up in a balloon to enjoy the festival. There are plenty of other activities of which to take advantage. Consider joining the “chase crew” and driving behind the balloons to assist them when they land. Or, spend your day exploring all that the souvenir vendors and informational booths have to offer in the park’s large midway. After dinner, go back to the park for the balloon glow and the festival takes on a special romance.

The Museums

When you’re not attending the balloon festivities, take some time to enjoy historic Albuquerque. Old Town provides Spanish and Mexican architecture and the three unique museums are not to be missed.

At the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History, (formerly, the National Atomic Museum) I was intrigued by “Ten Seconds That Shook The World,” a several decades old but well-produced film that documents the Manhattan Project – America’s effort to produce a nuclear bomb. Next, walk down the street to the American International Rattlesnake Museum. There’s never a quiet moment in this small but interesting exhibit with rattlesnakes of all kinds on display. Your third stop should be the Turquoise Museum. The

proprietors of this tremendous collection of turquoise from all over the world are friendly and knowledgeable.

More Albuquerque

Two other entertaining activities to fill your day could be a ride on the Sandia Peak Tramway – the world’s longest aerial tramway-and a visit to one of the several pueblos in the Albuquerque area. I toured the Acoma pueblo located an hour or so outside town. This ancient Indian settlement is perched high on a dramatic mesa and features picturesque views complete with postcard-perfect azure skies broken only by the occasional puffy white cloud.



Hungry? Albuquerque is full of cafes and restaurants featuring favorite local dishes often including various chilies and peppers. I ate at El Pinto Restaurant & Cantina and highly recommend the red and green cheese enchilada, tomas and Aztec corn.

Families, adventurers, seniors – everyone will enjoy the visual and cultural experience that is enchanting Albuquerque. ▶