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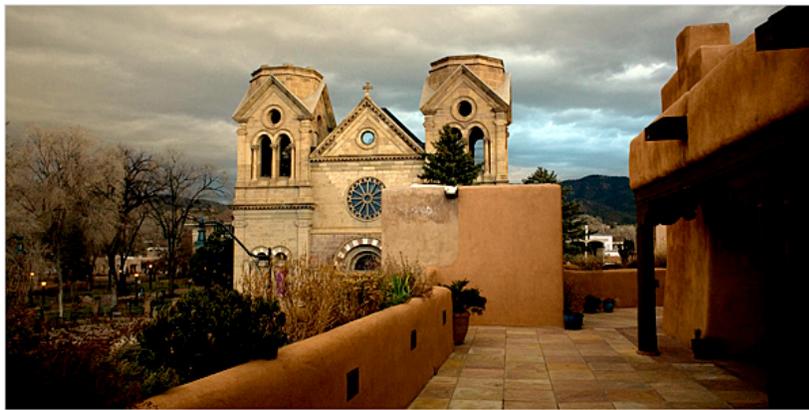
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FRUGAL TRAVELER | SANTA FE, N.M.

Treating Mom to Art, Opera and Lots of Chiles



Rick Scibelli Jr. for The New York Times

The Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi.

By MATT GROSS
Published: December 23, 2007

FOR almost 200 years, [Santa Fe](#) has been a site of pilgrimage. Every Good Friday since the early 18th century, believers have marched by foot, away from the center of town, with its Romanesque cathedral and rounded stucco buildings the color of roasted corn, toward El Santuario de Chimayo, the Lourdes of the Southwest, in the high-desert hills some 28 miles north. It's a marathon of the devout, who reach the holy finish line wearing anything from [hiking](#) gear to their Sunday best.

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When I arrived in Santa Fe, the capital of [New Mexico](#), last summer, however, a different sort of Friday pilgrimage was under way. A remarkably homogeneous set of faithful were ambling up Canyon Road, where 100-plus [art](#) galleries had thrown open their doors, as they do every Friday night.

The women were all willowy, with long, pale hair that plumb-lined down the backs of their linen blouses. The men all wore freshly laundered jeans and crisp oxford shirts, their cuffs buttoned to the wrist. Most were in late middle age; many might once have been hippies. All exuded an aura of moneyed confidence.

All, that is, except me and my mother, who had flown in from [Connecticut](#) for the weekend. While the people around us were

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Rick Sobell Jr. for The New York Times
Robert Gonzalez performs at Santa Fe Baking Company.

Video

very likely spending hundreds, if not thousands, on Colonial-chic hotels, trendy restaurants and Navajo artifacts, I had a weekend budget of just \$500, far from enough to support Mom in the style to which she should really be accustomed. More stressful yet, my mother had been my original tutor in frugality — a coupon-clipping budgetarian capable of transforming humdrum leftovers into Michelin-starred feasts. Now I had to live up to her example.

Yet our stay in this 400-year-old city began auspiciously, with a perfectly inexpensive art walk. Up Canyon Road we followed the pilgrims, popping into Marigold Arts to glance at Kenneth Parker's vibrant Asian landscape photos (and drink the free ginger iced tea), then wandering down an alley to the Anahita

Gallery for a stark behind-the-Iron-Curtain photography show (plus cheese and crackers).

The best show was "Flooded Desert," Teresa Neptune's painterly photographs of drenched dunes at White Sands. Not only was the show in El Zaguán, a rickety but quaint 1850s merchant's home that houses the Historic Santa Fe Foundation, but Ms. Neptune had shot all these gorgeous images on just a few rolls of film. Whence such efficiency? As a poor art student, she said, "I had to learn to be very frugal."

To beat the crowds, Mom and I departed Canyon Road for the [Coyote Cafe](#), the storied restaurant that elevated Southwestern

cuisine way beyond green-chile cheeseburgers. But because its entrees frequently hit the \$30 mark, we went up to its more casual (and cheaper), bustling Rooftop Cantina. There, we munched chipotle shrimp, Cuban sandwiches and duck quesadillas and drank crisp, hoppy Santa Fe Pale Ale.

As I paid the bill, which came to \$54, I jokingly suggested we celebrate our first trip together in 15 years the traditional Southwestern way — with tequila shots. Five minutes later, we were entering the [Matador](#), a subterranean bar where the punk-ska band Operation Ivy was playing on the sound system and one wall displayed a poster for D.O.A., an early-'80s hard-core group.

This was a real dive bar. Well, a Santa Fe dive — instead of shots, we sipped smooth añejo (\$19 with tip) until Mom announced she was tired.

I was beat, too, so we returned to the Camel Suites (just recently sold and renamed the [Santa Fe Suites](#)), the least expensive hotel I could find that still claimed to represent Santa Fe's "rustic charm." So, rustic charm meant the bedspreads were an indiscriminate medley of pink, purple, copper and turquoise, and the wood furniture was factory-made to look rough-hewn. But the beds were soft, the historic district just minutes way, and the rate was \$90.75 a night (including tax). We slept soundly.

The next morning we drove to the [Santa Fe Baking Company](#), a homey, crowded cafe where Mom loaded up on scrambled eggs with scallions and Cheddar cheese, and I ate light: a cinnamon bun, coffee and an imperial pint of fresh orange juice — all for a fair \$20.

Then, it was off to the [Georgia O'Keeffe Museum](#) (admission was \$8 for me, \$7 for my 60-or-older mother). We arrived in time to join a free tour, whose elderly docent sketched the painter's life, from her discovery by [Alfred Stieglitz](#) to her artistic blossoming in New Mexico.

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My mother, a part-time docent herself, questioned the way the guide played down O’Keeffe’s sensuality — an approach that, of course, had the opposite effect on us. We could see little else in O’Keeffe’s flowers and landscapes, and couldn’t help speculating on her relationship with Tony Vaccaro, whose intimate photographs of her adorned one gallery.

Post-museum, we window-shopped in the central plaza. (“Well!” Mom exclaimed. “It looks just like [Taormina!](#)”) At jewelry stores, Indian storyteller figures — ceramic characters on whose shoulders sit a rapt audience of children — were selling for \$1,500, and at Shiprock Trading, antique Navajo rugs cost 10 times that.

We did find one bargain, though not really at a boutique: the Frito pie, \$4.15 at the Five and Dime General Store on the tourist-flooded plaza. Back behind the aisles of shampoos and Hallmark cards lay the lunch counter where this delicacy — a small bag of chips sliced open and drenched with chile — was allegedly invented in 1962, when this was still a Woolworth’s. The pie is a satisfying snack. In fact, it weighed a ton — something like three pounds of meaty, beany, salty, corny goodness.

It necessitated a trip to the countryside to work off that weight. For Santa Fe is not simply its historic center but also the wild hills that lead into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We drove past adobe-style gated housing developments, then around tight switchbacks, the forests of pine and aspen growing ever thicker.

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