

New Mexico Nature & Culture

with Naturalist Journeys



December 3 – 10, 2023

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Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night New Mexico Nature & Culture Tour
\$2690 DBL / \$3250 SGL from Albuquerque, NM
Airport is Albuquerque International Sunport (ABQ)

Bring special meaning to your holiday season on a journey to a dramatic and beautiful part of the country. The winter solstice has great significance to Pueblo cultures, and both Albuquerque and Taos have special events to celebrate this festive time of year. Venturing to New Mexico off-season allows us affordable stays in Albuquerque and Taos at top-rate historic accommodations full of charm. Experience a wonderful blend of nature and culture and take care of your holiday shopping!

Discover outstanding geological and archeological sites, national monuments, historic trading posts, and modern galleries that feature some of the best Southwestern artists—past and present. By visiting the varied habitats of Bandelier National Monument and Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge at this time of year, we avoid the crowds typical of other seasons.

Bosque del Apache, in fact the entire Middle Rio Grande valley, is one of the richest wintering areas for cranes and waterfowl in the Southwest. Each autumn and winter, tens of thousands of ducks (17 species!), geese, and cranes pour into the extensive fields, wetlands, and marshes of the valley.

In Albuquerque, we explore the birds and forested habitats of the surrounding mountains, and drive to the crest of the Sandia Mountains (over 10,000 ft) to seek out the three species of Rosy Finches at probably the most reliable place in the country to see them. While there, we enjoy the scenic bird's eye view of the Rio Grande valley. This is a Naturalist Journeys sampler trip, with a blend of birding, travel photography, cultural attractions, and fun!

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Travel through scenic and historically rich New Mexican villages and landscapes
- ✓ Search for three species of Rosy Finches
- ✓ Witness one of the most population-dense wintering areas for waterfowl and cranes in the Southwest
- ✓ Explore an authentic pueblo and meet local artisans
- ✓ Gaze upon the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains—the southernmost subrange of the Rockies
- ✓ Drive the fascinating High Road between Taos and Santa Fe, stop at Chimayo and other historic sites including the Santa Fe plaza with its many colorful vendors and wares.
- ✓ Take your taste buds on an adventure with New Mexico's famous green chili (and learn the answer to the state question)!

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sun., Dec. 3 Arrive in Albuquerque

Those that arrive by 2:00 PM may choose to visit Albuquerque's delightful Rio Grande Nature Center State Park, where we can take a short walk on trails through beautiful riverside bosque (what locals call the riparian cottonwood forest). Behind the large windows of the Antoine Predock-designed Nature Center building, we watch Wood Duck, Gadwall, American Wigeon, coots, and other wintering birds at a beautiful, willow-lined pond.

After birding and exploring the nature center, we settle into our lodgings, then if you wish, explore a bit of nearby Old Town, decorated in holiday garb, and gather for a welcome dinner at one of our favorite restaurants.

If you plan on arriving later, please take a taxi to the hotel in Old Town in time to join us for dinner. Meet in the lobby at 6:30 PM.

Accommodations in Albuquerque (D)

Mon., Dec. 4 Bernardo | Bosque del Apache | Cranes & Geese

The Middle Rio Grande, including Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in central New Mexico, is one of the richest wintering areas for waterfowl and cranes in the Southwest. Each autumn, tens of thousands of ducks and geese converge in the extensive wetlands and marshes of the valley. Some years this area harbors over 25,000 Snow and Ross's Geese, as well as tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes! In the morning, the noise is deafening as birds fly out of safe roosting areas to neighboring farm fields where they feed. Eagles and marauding Coyotes create quite a stir among the flocks—most often signaled by an explosion of thousands of geese. This is truly an experience not to be missed!

Our first stop during the day is the Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area. This area has become a must-stop for any birding trip in the Middle Rio Grande. Managers plant extensive fields of corn, sorghum, and other crops to attract the cranes and geese. We admire the spectacle from the viewing platforms and wildlife drive and walk a short distance to some viewing ponds.

We then continue further south to the legendary Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge where we enjoy a picnic lunch filled with a continual chorus of cranes and geese. One admirable feature of this refuge is the layout of the road system, which provides excellent proximity to many species. During the day, we drive the roads of the refuge looking for birds and other wildlife such as Mule Deer, Coyote, and Porcupine. Don't be surprised if Wild Turkey or a herd of Javelina strut out from the brush! Bosque del Apache is legendary for the rarities that have occurred there over the years, such as the US's only record of Rufous-necked Wood-Rail! The refuge, too, is at the northern edge of the range of some desert species such as Verdin and Pyrrhuloxia, which sometimes show themselves at the feeders. The refuge and surrounding areas are also excellent wintering sites for many raptors. Bald Eagle, American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, and Red-tailed Hawk are fairly common. Ferruginous Hawk and Golden Eagle may also be seen in the area.

After sunset at the refuge, we enjoy a bit of local flavor for dinner in Socorro before returning to our lodging in Albuquerque.

Accommodations in Albuquerque (B,L,D)

Tues., Dec. 5 Sandia Mountains | Old Town Albuquerque

Today we explore the Sandia Mountains (Spanish for watermelon) on our drive up to the Sandia Crest. We travel up the east side through a variety of oak, pine, and mixed conifer forests. This is a popular recreation area for residents, and we pass several picnic grounds and a ski area. We stop to bird en-route, with a chance to see Northern Pygmy Owl, Williamson's Sapsucker, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Clark's Nutcracker. A portion of the drive is heavily forested, and at stops such as Cienega Canyon and Capulin Spring we may find more typically northern species such as Pine Grosbeak, Cassin's Finch, Red Crossbill, or (if we are really lucky), American Three-toed Woodpecker. Views are spectacular and eventually we reach tree line and the open, often snowy and wind-swept crest. Here feeders have been set up that ALL THREE North American species of Rosy Finches (Brown-capped, Gray-crowned, and Black) are attracted to. We view the feeders from below, in the parking lot, or above from the side of the shop, depending on the wind and weather conditions. We bring gifts of seed to aid the effort made by local banders to mark and study the intermingled and dynamic flocks.

The joy of a Sandia Crest birding day is that atop the world, the birds come to us! We also may have some good raptor viewing, with Merlin and Northern Goshawk both possible. We have lunch in Sandia Crest on our return trip and return to Albuquerque by mid-afternoon so you can enjoy some free time in festive Old Town. Dinner is at another great local restaurant.

Accommodations in Albuquerque (B,L,D)

Wed., Dec. 6 Jemez Mountains | Bandelier National Monument | Taos

This morning we leave Albuquerque and travel an hour and a half northwest through the Jemez Mountains and Valles Caldera to Bandelier National Monument, a gem of the national park system. The monument boasts the highest density of archeological sites of any national park, all in numerous distinctive and beautiful canyons carved into the Pajarito ("Little Bird") Plateau. The ancestors of modern pueblo tribes inhabited this site—which has an abundance of water—even after abandoning others in their region. We walk trails established in the 600-foot-deep Frijoles Canyon to examine the historic structures. The geology of the area is fascinating as well: layers of pale ash and tuff encrust darker, denser strata beneath, portraying the rocks' volcanic origin. We also have the opportunity to look for some of the typical winter birds of the mountains of New Mexico, including Townsend's Solitaire, Mountain Chickadee, Juniper Titmouse, three species of nuthatch, and, if we are lucky, Pinyon Jay.

After a picnic lunch in Bandelier, we make a brief stop at the Bradbury Science Museum to explore the history of the Manhattan Project (another important aspect of New Mexico's history) and then continue on to Taos. This drive involves a significant gain in altitude, from the desert shrub and grasslands surrounding Albuquerque to aspen and pine as we near Taos. It includes a very scenic stretch of road through the lower Rio Grande gorge and we may see Common Merganser or Common Goldeneye in the river. In Taos, which is the highest elevation we reach on our trip, we could get a real sense of winter coming! Dinner tonight at a local restaurant.

Accommodations in Taos (B,L,D)

Thurs., Dec. 7 Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch

This morning, we embark on a journey to the Chama River Valley and the town of Abiquiu. Along the way, we visit the unexcavated Poshuouinge Pueblo ruin, perched high on a hill above the Chama River. This impressive ruin (believed to have had 700 rooms!) is unexcavated, but the outlines of the buildings are clearly visible from the overlooks higher up the trail at the site. It is thought that the site was occupied from about 1375 to 1475 and its inhabitants were the ancestors of the people living in the modern-day Santa Clara and Ohkay Owingeh (formerly San Juan) Pueblos. Depending on time, we also visit the interesting geological formations known as Plaza Blanca, the subject of several of Georgia O'Keeffe's well-known paintings.

After lunch at the comfortable Abiquiu Inn, we proceed to the nearby Ghost Ranch where we tour the landscape that so inspired Georgia O'Keeffe, including some of the specific formations (and even trees!) that she painted. If time permits, there are lovely hikes and museums to explore here, and much to see.

Returning to Taos, we sample another great restaurant in town this evening.

Accommodations in Taos (B,L,D)

Fri., Dec. 8 Explore Taos Culture: Museums, Pueblo, Downtown

We begin the day by heading west of town to the famed Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, perched high over the 800-foot-deep canyon, to admire the scenery, landscapes, and possibly spot Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep climbing on the steep walls. The rest of the day is spent exploring the various cultural offerings that Taos has in store for

us. We may visit the stunning Taos Pueblo, or “Place of the Red Willows”, framed by the rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Fifteen hundred Pueblo people still inhabit this village; it is a pleasure and a privilege to share time in their ancient home as they prepare for the family celebrations of Christmas and the winter solstice. After a guided tour, we take time to walk through some areas of the pueblo where we can visit with artists who live and work here. Many parts of the pueblo, including the Catholic Church, contain rock and adobe structures that date back a thousand years. Enjoy the mouth-watering smell of bread baking in the hornos (clay ovens), or the fragrance of juniper-log fires warming the artists’ homes.

We may also visit the Millicent Rogers Museum. The museum, named after its founder, an heiress of the Standard Oil fortune, has an amazing collection of fine art. It is particularly strong on Native American art, with a comprehensive collection of Pueblo pottery from all the current pueblos and many historical pieces. An entire room is devoted to the legendary potter Maria Martinez from San Ildefonso Pueblo, who almost single-handedly rediscovered the technique of black-on-black pottery and produced many superb pieces. Another fascinating part of the collection is several 19th Century Navajo blankets, which are extremely rare. After lunch in Taos and some free time in the afternoon, join your guide to visit the historic Martinez Hacienda, which recreates Spanish Colonial life of one of the prosperous Mexican families that first established the ranch in 1804. Or, you can choose to explore Taos—including shops, galleries, and the Kit Carson Home and other museums—on your own.

This evening we turn you loose to explore the Taos plaza, with its many shops. There are delightful restaurants for you to explore and enjoy dinner at your leisure.

Accommodations in Taos (B,L)

Sat., Dec. 9 San Francisco de Asís | Chimayó | Santa Fe via the High Road

After breakfast, we make our way to Santa Fe, driving along the “High Road”, a route that takes us through picturesque villages rich in culture, such as Peñasco, Las Trampas, and Truchas. This winding, 52-mile route offers glimpses of endless vistas, fiery-red strings of drying chilis, and beautiful mission churches. We visit the San Francisco de Asís Mission Church in Ranchos de Taos, made famous by Georgia O’Keeffe, Ansel Adams, and Paul Strand. We stop at the legendary Santuario de Chimayó, a National Historic Landmark and perhaps the most important pilgrimage site for Catholics in the country. The trip has nearly endless photo opportunities of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, which have inspired many artists and photographers, and where Robert Redford’s *The Milagro Beanfield War* was filmed.

We continue on for lunch at Museum Hill in historic Santa Fe. After lunch, you may wish to spend a few hours enjoying one of the several excellent museums on Museum Hill or accompany your guide to the nearby Randall Davey Audubon Center and adjacent Santa Fe Canyon Preserve for a final afternoon of birding. Then, we take you to our hotel in Santa Fe for the afternoon where you can enjoy the rich sights and sounds of the famous plaza or some of the fine local museums and the Palace of the Governors.

Enjoy a final dinner together at one of our favorite restaurants in Santa Fe with time to recount our adventures.

Accommodations in Santa Fe (B,L,D)

Sun., Dec. 10 Departures from Albuquerque

After breakfast, we arrange transportation for the one-hour drive to take you directly from Santa Fe to the Albuquerque International Airport. Please arrange your return flights to leave after 11:00 AM. If you have to leave earlier than this, we can arrange an airport shuttle. Or, you may want to say on a few extra days to truly enjoy and explore the “City Different.” (B)

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Albuquerque International Sunport by 2:00 PM or before on Sunday, December 3. Please plan departures after 11:00 AM on Sunday, December 10.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main journey is \$2690 DBL / \$3250 SGL, per person, based on double occupancy, from Albuquerque, NM this cost includes: accommodations for seven nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), airport welcome and transfer or hotel shuttle, land transportation during the journey, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost does not include round-trip airfare to and from Albuquerque, NM or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Photo Credits

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Dwayne Longenbaugh, Sundance Nature Photos (DWLO); Great Horned Owl, Greg Smith (GRSM); Pinyon Jay, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Steller's Jay, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Black Rosy-Finch, DWLO; Sunset Cranes, PEAB.

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