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THE TRAVEL ISSUE

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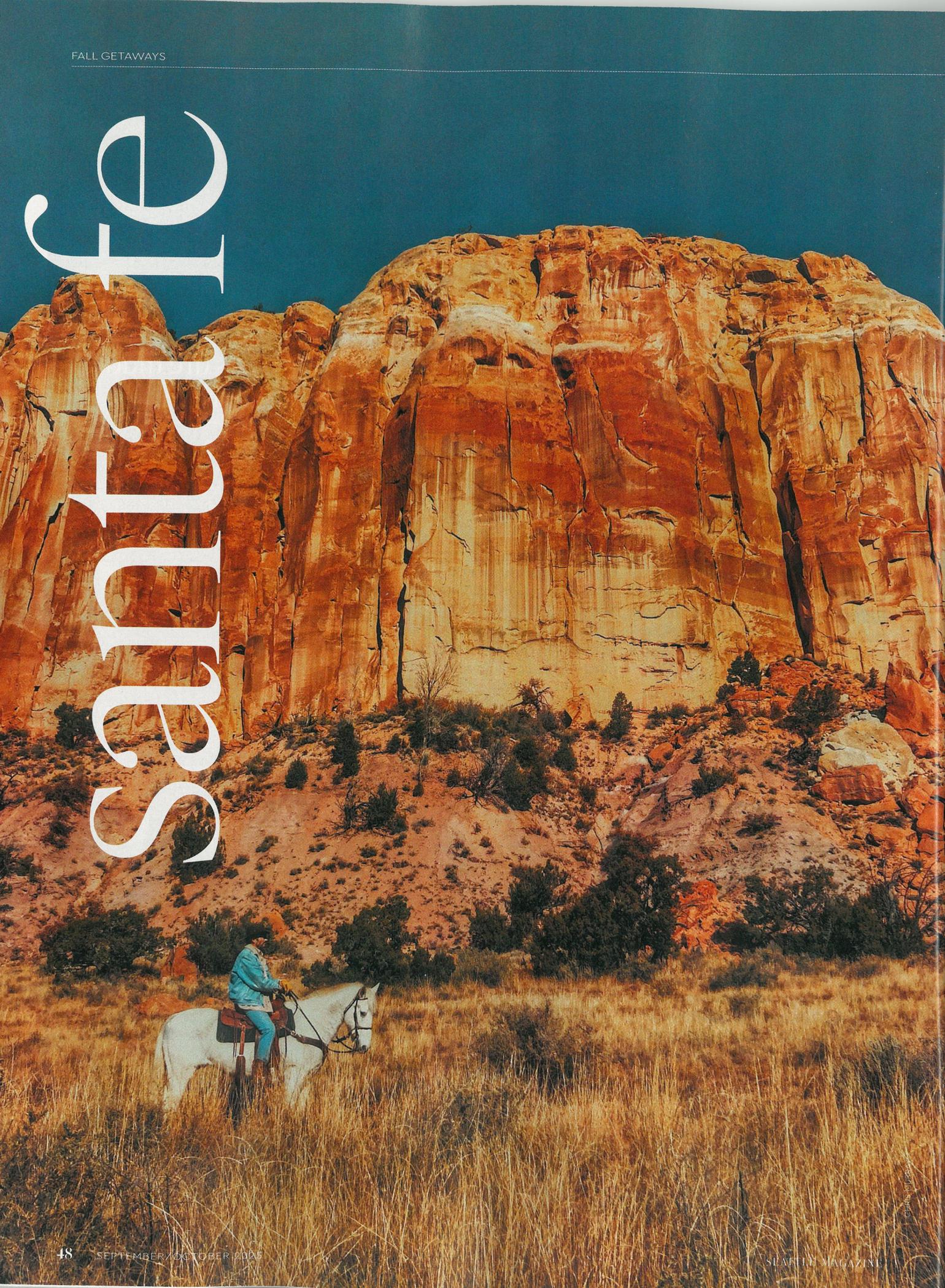
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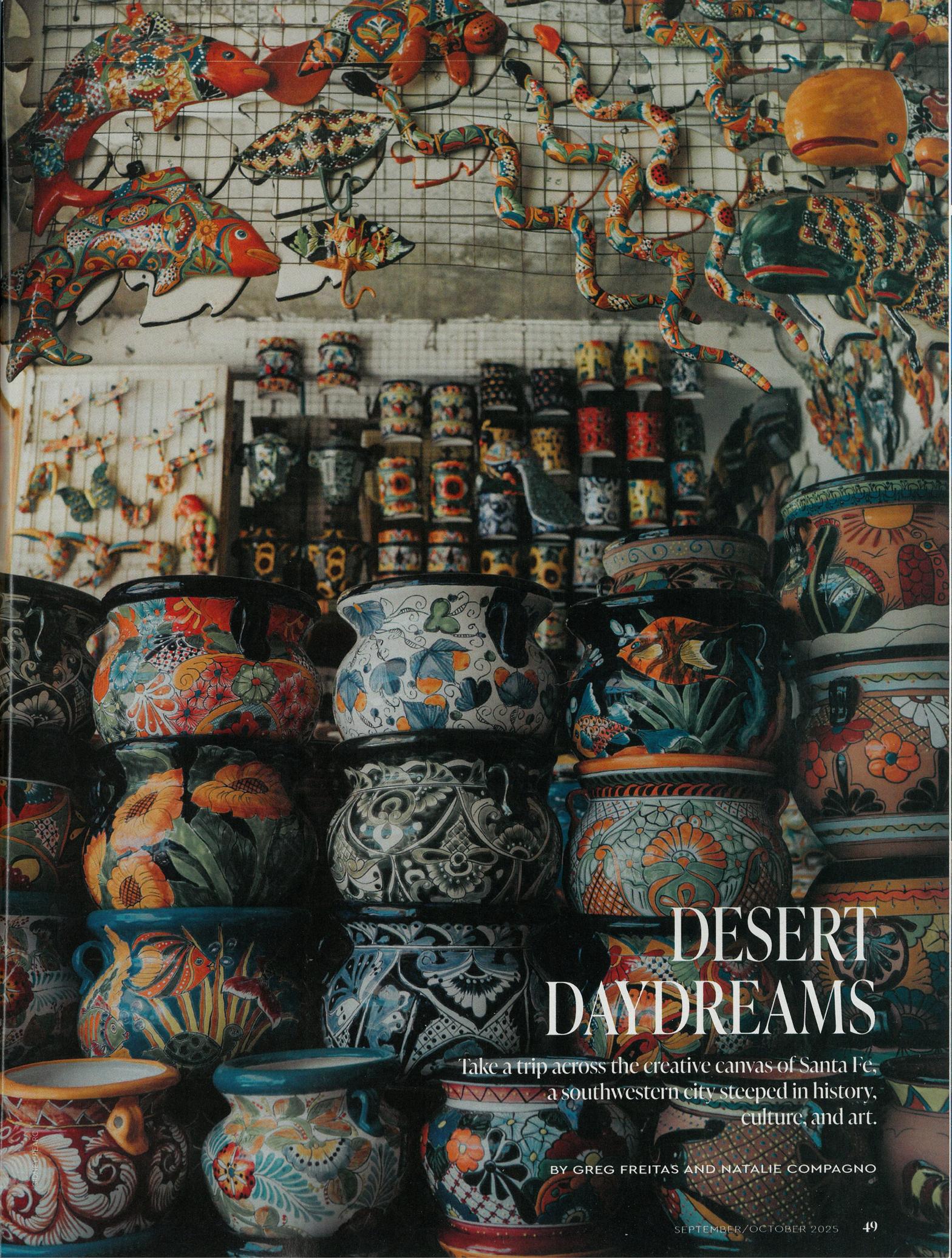
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DESERT DAYDREAMS

Take a trip across the creative canvas of Santa Fe, a southwestern city steeped in history, culture, and art.

BY GREG FREITAS AND NATALIE COMPAGNO

Time doesn't move in a straight line in Santa Fe.

It's more of a palette—one that the city draws from boldly. New Mexico's quirky capital, nicknamed the City Different, offers visitors an experience that draws from multiple eras. Centuries pile on top of each other, enhancing, rarely erasing. The ancient Pueblo tribes and the frontier West coexist with immersive art installations, Apache skateboards, and smash burger pop-ups.

A walk through the city's two-hundred-year-old central Plaza isn't a march through history—it's a prism. Light bends through centuries at every turn. The adobe churches are not replicas, the Indigenous art is not revivalist, and the Spanish plazas are not stage sets. The city is a living canvas, its surface textured with memory and invention alike. It resists nostalgia even as it honors lineage.

ADOBE DREAMS AND DESERT REINVENTIONS

This same interplay of eras runs through Santa Fe's hotels. The Plaza's iconic La Fonda is pure Southwestern romance—painted headboards, kiva fireplaces, the comforting hush of thick adobe walls. Just around the corner, Hotel Chimayó invites guests into New Mexico's Spanish-Hispanic traditions, with its saints, and its hot rod bar Low 'N Slow. Here, the mood is calm, and the décor is as immaculate as the crosses that line the walls. The friendly bartenders are part mixologists, part guides—eager to share stories and insights into the city's booming beverage scene.

A few miles south of the Plaza, El Rey Court offers a spatial and sensorial pivot in Santa Fe's creative tapestry—less an homage to history than an act of reinvention. This 1930s motor court, rejuvenated as desert-chic hospitality, is anchored by its mezcal and tequila bar, La Reina. It's bright and airy with outdoor seating and a cozy lounge, and it doubles as a sanctuary for locals and the new creative class alike.



Evenings at La Reina pulse with energy. As twilight settles, the front-patio crowd—artists, musicians, designers—gathers for what feels like a weekly salon. In a span of just two nights, we experienced Locals Night, a taco truck, a jewelry bazaar, live music, and the wildly popular One Trick Pony smash-burger pop-up—woman-owned, grass-fed, regenerative local beef, delivered with a side of community.

COLORFUL CHARACTERS

Throughout Santa Fe, Día de los Muertos is a popular holiday. Below: Just two blocks off the central Plaza, Sazón takes a fine-dining approach to regional Mexican cuisine.

TIME PORTALS, TURQUOISE, AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Nearby, small shops like Tru Treasures offer the state stone, turquoise, of course, to fashionistas of all stripes. On Baca Street, the Reflective Jewelry boutique retools traditional silversmithing with Fair Trade politics and sculptural minimalism. Under its glass display cases, discover one-of-a-kind silver necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, produced through contemporary ethical metalsmithing that ensures you can feel good knowing the origins of your purchase.

And at Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return, time unspools entirely. The immersive, 20,000-square-foot installation operates on surreal logic: a mystical, modern haunted-house-meets-art-project experience that opens into parallel dimensions, neon

TOURISM SANTA FE; COURTESY OF SAZÓN



forests, subterranean ice caves, and chambers with dreamy soundscapes. It's whimsical, yes—but beneath the spectacle is something more profound: the tale of familial unraveling through space and time, haunted by memory and touched by otherworldly forces.

At the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, *Douglas Miles: Always & Forever* (open through February 8, 2026) recalibrates history and motion through the mythic language of ancient tribes. Drawing on his heritage, Miles, who founded Apache Skateboards in 2002, elevates skate decks into moving canvases—each emblazoned with Apache warriors—to, according to the exhibition program, “reassert the sovereignty of motion and Native American cultures as dynamic and contemporary.”

About 10 miles north, at the New Mexico History Museum, *Zozobra: A Fire That Never Goes Out* (on display through September 26) introduces one of Santa Fe's enduring traditions. *Zozobra*—also known as Old Man Gloom—is a towering, 50-foot-tall, ghostlike puppet that's burned each year in a cathartic ritual meant to cast off the collective burdens of the past. The exhibition traces the event's evolution (it dates back more than 100 years), showcasing vintage posters, ceremonial costumes, and even the handwritten “glooms” that people still submit—notes of anxiety to be consumed by flame. The resemblance to Burning Man is no accident—*Zozobra* served as inspiration for the desert phenomenon.

At its historic 1917 Plaza location, the New Mexico Museum of Art has just unveiled *Gustave Baumann: The Artist's Environment* (closing February 22, 2026), a sweeping retrospective that traces how one of Santa Fe's defining artists drew on Puebloan and Hispanic traditions, whimsy, nature, and modernist aesthetics to shape his distinctly regional vision.

No exploration of Santa Fe's artistic legacy is complete without a visit to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Just steps from the Plaza, the intimate space showcases iconic works alongside photographs, sketches, and personal artifacts that reveal O'Keeffe's deep connection to the New Mexico landscape. It's a quiet, reverent pause—one that reminds visitors how the desert can shape not just a style, but a life.

SPIN THE TIMELINE

To feel Santa Fe at its most unhurried, explore the city by bike. Start at the Santa Fe Railyard District, where repurposed warehouses now boast galleries, breweries, and performance spaces. It's where art walks mingle with farmers markets and local teens hang out at the skate park beside contemporary sculptures. And tucked just off the tracks is Routes Bicycle Tours, a welcoming launchpad for exploring on two wheels.

From here, a designated bike path leads you south along the Rail Trail, or you can take side streets north toward downtown. Either direction offers that perfect Santa Fe tempo: unrushed, open to discovery, and slightly sun-drowsy. Riders coast by historic buildings, artist studios, and cozy neighborhoods—past and present riding in tandem. There's history under your tires, and a fresh perspective around each bend. In a place where time stretches and folds like a Georgia O'Keeffe flower, a bike might just be the best time machine.



BOARDING UP

Douglas Miles, a painter, printmaker, and photographer from Arizona, is the founder of Apache Skateboards. Now on view at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, the exhibition *Douglas Miles: Always & Forever* features Miles' 2022 installation *You're Skating on Native Land*, comprising 30 skateboard decks.

GREEN CHILE ROOTS AND CULINARY REVOLUTIONS

Santa Fe's food scene mirrors its art: respectful of tradition, but always ready for reinvention.

On the city's south side, close to El Rey Court, the Pantry has been slingin' red chilli and huevos rancheros since 1948. It's a diner at heart, beloved by generations; the kind of place where the coffee flows freely and nobody blinks when someone orders breakfast at 3 p.m. Just across Cerrillos Road, El Parasol began as a roadside stand in Española and still feels gloriously no-frills—fried taco shells, green chile stew, and refried beans with melted cheese are best enjoyed immediately on the benches inside.

In the historic Plaza district, Horno, a buzzy gastropub, leads the newer wave of dining options. For a special treat, ask for the prize-winning green chile cheeseburger—it's not on the menu. Just a stone's throw away, Sazón takes a fine-dining approach to regional Mexican cuisine, with famous and artfully plated moles. Popular on Thursdays, Introduction to the Spirits of New Mexico (reservation only) includes a flight of five (featuring tequila and mezcal), plus sangrita and mole.

If you're looking for a throwback, tradition runs deep downtown. Tia Sophia's, inventor of the breakfast burrito, still has lines down the block most mornings. Across from the cathedral, Palacio Café continues to impress with its tuna melts and green chile enchiladas. Try Chocolate Maven for blue corn pancakes topped with a fried egg—best enjoyed while watching pastries come to life in the open bakery. And finally: Coyote Café. When it opened in 1987, it helped define what modern Southwestern cuisine could be: bold, beautiful, theatrical. These days, the Coyote Cantina, upstairs from the original, brings things full circle—serving tacos, margaritas, and grilled street corn with a side of neon-pink sunsets.

Santa Fe's aesthetic isn't a passing trend, but a lasting sensibility—a shared dialect of place, memory, and the ever-present creative pulse in the arid landscape. Unique objects, moments, and people speak the same language: of place, memory, and the creative pulse that never leaves the desert. ■