

Las Cruces, New Mexico: a fusion of culture, architecture and attractions

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Photo by Las Cruces Visitor and Convention Bureau

White Sands National Monument, less than an hour's drive from the center of town, is worth a visit. Rising from the heart of the Tularosa Basin, dunes have engulfed 275 square miles of desert, creating the world's largest gypsum dune field.

By Nicole Pensiero

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While it doesn't have the artsy reputation of the much smaller tourist city of Santa Fe, beautiful and spacious Las Cruces, N.M., offers visitors a charming mix of small-town warmth and big-city fun. Even more, its location provides easy access to everything from the amazingly dramatic vistas of White Sands National Monument to the futuristic lure of Spaceport America, where commercial space travel is being

readied on a large scale.

With a population of about 95,000, Las Cruces, New Mexico's second largest city, is a fusion of Mexican, American and European culture and architecture — with a heavy emphasis on Mexican when it comes to cuisine.

Located in south-central New Mexico, between and the Organ Mountains to the east and the Rio Grand to the west, Las Cruces has adopted the tourism slogan "Stay Sunny," which not only sums up the weather (350 days of sun each year), but also seems a fitting metaphor to residents' general state of mind. Not only are Las Cruces residents noticeably upbeat (I say "residents" and not "natives," as I didn't meet one person who said they were from the city originally), they are

unmistakably proud of the region's attractions and cultural diversity.

Less than an hour drive from Texas' El Paso International Airport (where the majority of commercial flights arrive), Las Cruces boasts more than 40 art galleries, museums, and studios, displaying everything from local photography to historic artifacts. And nature's attractions are abundant, too, from mountain vistas to the sweeping dunes of White Sands.

We chose a centrally located hotel, **El Encanto**, which provided us with easy access to explore the city and outlying regions. Since the weather is usually hot and dry during the day, we set off in the early mornings to explore. We especially enjoyed our visit at the **Chile Pepper Institute** and the **New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum**, the latter of which offered a fascinating exhibit about the New Mexico's often arduous journey to statehood (achieved 100 years ago, in 1912).



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Photo by Las Cruces Visitor and Convention Bureau

La Posta is a traditional Mexican restaurant in Las Cruces.

The Chile Pepper Institute, or CPI as locals call it, was founded 20 years ago as a research-based, nonprofit organization devoted to all things related to Capsicum, i.e. chile peppers.

There, you see the myriad of chile peppers being grown (and bred) as well as purchase pepper seeds and plants. Paul Bosland, co-founder and director of the CPI (part of Las Cruces' New Mexico State University), was responsible for finding the world's hottest chile pepper, the Bhut Jolokia, a few years ago. The record-holder for the world's largest chile pepper is a specimen of the 'NuMex Big Jim' variety that was developed at NMSU in 1976, boasting five times the flavor of the standard green chile. Chile Peppers are a staple of Las Cruces cuisine and we were pleased to gain better understanding about the world of green and red peppers (and other colored ones, too!).

After a visit to the downtown area's Museum of Fine Arts, we were able to walk directly to the nearby Farmers & Crafts Market on the downtown mall. Open year round, the market is held from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. every Wednesday and Saturday and features a plethora of crafts, foods, plant, woodwork, food and music.



Photo by Las Cruces Visitor and Convention Bureau

The famed Double Eagle Restaurant — which looks like something from a glamorous turn-of-the-century movie set inside — is said to be haunted by two mischievous ghosts; visitors are welcome to sit on 'their' chairs if they're brave enough.

A five-minute drive from downtown Las Cruces brings you to its charming sister city of **Mesilla**. This historic town played a key role in America's Wild West history, and visitors can even check out the building where Billy the Kid was sentenced to hang. There are an array of fun and funky stores and boutiques in Mesilla, and several excellent eateries. We enjoyed a traditional Mexican meal at **La Posta**, which features an array of enticing margaritas and reasonably priced meals (not to mention exotic birds in the lobby to enjoy while waiting for a table).

The famed **Double Eagle Restaurant** — which looks like something from a glamorous turn-of-the-century movie set inside — provided us with the most sumptuous meal of

our visit, and featured chili-enhanced side dishes that gave things an added “kick.” (The Double Eagle is said to be haunted by two mischievous ghosts; visitors are welcome to sit on “their” chairs if they’re brave enough).

Las Cruces also proved ideal for a few memorable side trips. We especially enjoyed a visit to **White Sands National Monument**, less than an hour’s drive from the center of town. Rising from the heart of the Tularosa Basin, dunes have engulfed 275 square miles of desert, creating the world’s largest gypsum dune field. Visually stunning, White Sands National Monument is a must-see for any visitor to Las Cruces. And the ride there was breathtaking in its own way, too: all open land and mountains.

For this tourist from South Jersey, Las Cruces provided memories that will last a lifetime.

For more information, visit www.staysunny.org or www.lascrucescvb.org

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