



**A** FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON MY WAY TO Las Cruces. I struck up a conversation with a Japanese man who was going there to teach at New Mexico State University. He told me in very good English that he and his wife were only staying two months because there's very little to do, especially for his stay-at-home wife. He went on to tell me about a time he came through customs at LAX. When the customs agent saw he had written Las Cruces as his destination, and sightseeing as his purpose, the agent said that couldn't be right because there's nothing to see in Las Cruces. Well, to paraphrase singer Arlo Guthrie, don't check my itinerary if you please Mr. Customs man.

Yes, it's true that Las Cruces looks a lot like the Arizona desert, but let me tell you what a wonderful surprise I had in store for me. Las Cruces is enough like Phoenix and Tucson to make it comfortably familiar,

but different enough to feel like I had actually gone someplace new and wonderful.

### THE CHILE PEPPER INSTITUTE

Las Cruces is home to New Mexico State University and the famed Chile Pepper Institute (CPI). The CPI is a worldwide nonprofit organization that focuses on education, research and information on all things capsicum. That's a fancy term to describe the wide variety of chile peppers that are the "hotties" of the tomato family.

Danise Coon is the program coordinator of the CPI, and she's a walking Wikipedia when it comes chiles. She tells us the first chile pepper plant was discovered in Brazil. Slowly, the plant was spread by birds and traded by ancient people until it reached the Las Cruces area. Coon says the heat of a chile pepper is "an evolutionary response to stress. The more stress, either from drought or animals, the hotter the pepper."

## if you go

### **The Chile Pepper Institute**

The Chile Pepper Institute is open weekdays, 8 a.m. to 12 noon and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. It's located on the main New Mexico State University campus, at the corner of College and Knox Streets, in Gerald Thomas Hall room 265. To schedule a tour, call 575-646-3028.

### **The White Sands Museum and Missile Park**

The White Sands Museum and Missile Park is open every day, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. during the week, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, closed Sunday. It's located 22 miles east of Las Cruces on Highway 70. [wsmr-history.org](http://wsmr-history.org); 575-678-8824



White Sands Missile Range Museum,  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Everyone seems fascinated because so much history has been made here. You will learn about the base's top-secret opening in 1945 with the Trinity Project and the test of the first atomic bomb. After the war, German V-2 rockets were brought there, studied and improved to launch the American space program.

Darren Court is the museum director, and he explains that the V-2 on display in its own building was pointed and poised "on a launch pad in Antwerp in December of

1944. Mechanical problems forced the Germans to pull it off the launch site and the war ended before it could be fired," says Court.

The museum hasn't forgotten history before 1945, which it showcases through some substantial exhibits on the ancient peoples who lived near Las Cruces, up through the cowboys who are still there today. It's a land of history and the perfect place to "launch" your new adventure in southeastern New Mexico. ■





## THE **GHOST** PEPPER, AS IT'S KNOWN, IS SO HOT IT CAN CAUSE **BLISTERS** ON THE SKIN...

Most people think the hottest pepper is the Habanera, but the Habanera only hits about 10,000 on the well-known Scoville scale, while the rare Bhut Jolokia from India registers a blistering 1,001,034! The Ghost Pepper, as it's known, is so hot it can cause blisters on the skin, and when Coon got the nerve to bite into one, she says, "I swear I was seeing colors for about 20 minutes."

She adds that the only way to fight the flames of a hot pepper is with a milk product. Milk has a rare protein in it that breaks down the chemical heat that can overtake your taste buds. My take away from my afternoon at the CPI: hot doesn't equal flavorful in chiles, so put away the macho mentality and go with one of the many milder, but more flavorful, peppers and your eating experience will be much richer.

### **WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE**

Arizona has some of the most spectacular sunrises and sunsets in the world. But sometimes, early risers see something very strange on the horizon: curling, curving contrails that make the eastern sky look like Mother Nature has been doodling.

Well, credit the folks at the White Sands Missile Range



in New Mexico because they are the ones treating us to this rare sunrise spectacular. That missile-enhanced sunrise greets us because testing at the White Sands Missile Range is a 24/7 operation for the U.S. military. Almost the entire base is off limits to civilians, but there is a marvelous museum and missile display area that's free to the public — a must-see on any trip to the Las Cruces area. In fact, I should mention that there were several women in our group, and they were just as interested as the men.

PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES; JOSE RUIZ BAGACONIS