



Santa Fe National Forest Scenic Byway

Marti Niman

Click to view Area attractions and map in new window.

Where else can one shop for handmade Native American crafts under the shady portal of a 17th century Spanish adobe capitol in the morning and trek into a 13,000-foot alpine wilderness that afternoon? The Santa Fe National Forest Scenic Byway originates in downtown Santa Fe at the oldest public building in America – the Palace of the Governors – and loops 15 miles through an aspen-evergreen forest to the Santa Fe Ski Basin. En route, vast vistas of amber-tinged badlands, azure mountains and abundant opportunities to hike, bike, ski, camp, picnic or snowshoe make this byway a refreshing break from Santa Fe's cultural deluge.

The stately yet rustic Palace of the Governors (505-476-5100) sprawls the northern length of the downtown Plaza and shelters some 900 Native American artisans who sell their handiwork in the shade of its wide portal. Built in 1610 – a decade before the Pilgrims stepped off the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock – the structure has sheltered Spanish governors of New Spain, a Pueblo Indian community and Mexican and American territorial governments. Now aptly serving as a history museum run by the Museum of New Mexico, the Palace of the Governors encloses a courtyard, historic presses and exhibits. At Christmas time, its parapets and colonnades are an authentic backdrop for the interactive street theater celebration of La Posada, when Spanish-costumed carolers stroll the narrow adobe-lined Plaza streets and boo the devil himself as he taunts them from the rooftops.

Several blocks north on Washington Avenue, the byway passes the immense lipstick-pink Scottish Rite Masonic Temple (505-982-4414), built in 1911 and modeled after the Moorish architecture of the Alhambra in Spain. The building's Pepto Bismol stucco coat is a blazing color digression from the regulation adobe brown of Santa Fe's historic center. Tours by appointment.

At the Artist Road turnoff, city-run Ft. Marcy Park (505-955-2500) offers recreation facilities and hosts the annual burning of Zozobra kick-off to Santa Fe Fiesta in early September. One of the Kiwanis Club's less staid fundraisers, Zozobra is a 50-foot animated marionette representing bogeyman Old Man Gloom. It is set on fire to banish the community's woes and troubles while the crowd chants "Burn him, burn him!" As one reveler said, "It's a rare chance to get really crazy – legally." The original Ft. Marcy was built by the U.S. Army in 1846 marking the U.S. acquisition of New Mexico in the Mexican-American War.

Artist Road winds through several residential neighborhoods and accesses the northern portion of the Dale Ball Trails, a 30-mile system of loops through the pinon-juniper foothills for hikers, runners and mountain bikers. Artist Road becomes N.M. 475 and enters the Santa Fe National Forest (505- 438-7840), a cool haven from the desert sun with its ponderosa, spruce, fir and white-barked, gold-leaved aspen trees. The road jogs through Hyde Memorial State Park (505-476-3355 or 888-NMPARKS), where the massive stone-and-log Hyde Park Lodge recalls fabled Old World hunting castles. Built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1938, it served as a Girl Scout retreat and the original Ski Basin Lodge. The 350-acre park was named for naturalist and businessman Bennie Hyde, whose widow donated the property in 1938 as one of New Mexico's first state parks. For campers who prefer the comfort of civilized digs, the park offers seven electric sites in addition to group shelters, picnic areas, trails and 50 developed campsites.

Re-entering the Santa Fe National Forest, the byway horseshoes 3,353 vertical feet through several climatic life zones and ends at the ski basin. Trailheads, picnic areas and campgrounds beckon travelers into the backcountry, where aspen meadows and sparkling waterfalls could lead one to forget this is the high desert – if not for the vistas of the Arroyo Seco badlands

beyond. At the ski basin a wooden bridge connects to the Windsor Trail – a short and sweet grunt uphill that lands the intrepid hiker at the gateway to the spectacular 223,333-acre Pecos Wilderness – land of bighorn sheep, black bear, elk and native Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

Winter snowfall lures snowshoers and cross-country skiers to backwoods trails and downhill skiers and snowboarders to the groomed slopes of Ski Santa Fe (505-982-4429), where chairlifts rise 1,650 vertical feet to Tesuque Peak at 12,000-foot elevation. Here the view encompasses 7,000 to 11,000 square miles and backcountry adventurers often schuss through the trees to the neighboring Aspen Vista trail, where they hitch a ride back to the easy lift uphill.

The lifts are not limited to winter months only. When the aspen leaves burst into fiery gold and crimson in late September, the chairs offer a relaxing trip upslope through woodlands that seem to be at finger's reach. In autumn, the hillsides take on an almost ethereal, shimmering aura when angled sunlight filters through the quaking leaves.

Visitors may retrace the same route downhill to return to Santa Fe and chase away their own bogeymen at a Japanese spa on the way – if the retreat into the rarified air of the forest byway hasn't already worked its magic.