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TRAVEL

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FAMILY

Kid-pleasing activities make Albuquerque a vacation for all

BY GAIL REITENBACH
Special to the Mercury News

BABY boomers are discovering something less than enchanting about Taos and Santa Fe: The most popular New Mexican destinations are not especially child-friendly. A steady diet of galleries and shops and trendy restaurants in crowded plazas doesn't spell vacation for kids.

Albuquerque, on the other hand, goes out of its way to be child-friendly while offering accessibility to all the features that make New Mexico the Land

of Enchantment. Unfortunately, most people see Albuquerque only as airport access to Santa Fe.

New Mexico's largest city has been criticized for its sprawling expansiveness. However, well-timed traffic lights and efficient freeways make the distances manageable rather than frustrating. With the city's size come more lodging options than are available in Santa Fe, more plentiful parking, and — most notably — a wider variety of child-pleasing sights and activities.

In Albuquerque, most tourist destinations are

concentrated in a couple of neighborhoods that are home to children's attractions as well, which means one parent can shop or gallery hop while the other escorts the kids for a couple of hours.

Here's a primer on Albuquerque attractions that earn an A from kids and parents alike.

Old Town

Most adults hope to engage in a few rounds of recreational shopping when they visit New Mexico, and Albuquerque has plenty of shops to help them
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A vaquero outside the Albuquerque Museum.



GAIL REITENBACH

N E W M E X I C O

Albuquerque's a gold mine for families

■ ALBUQUERQUE

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satisfy that desire. Old Town, which boasts structures that date from its settlement by Spanish colonists in 1706, provides a quaint shopping experience, complete with a plaza a la Taos and Santa Fe. Shops carry both tourist-grade and museum-quality art and artifacts, including Indian jewelry, pottery, paintings and weavings. The colorful B.C. Gorman even has a gallery here.

Old Town dining isn't outstanding, but you'll find enough purveyors of New Mexican food for a restorative lunch. One of the most enjoyable restaurants is the Church Street Cafe, a 1706 home that's enjoying a second career as a restaurant. From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, you can enjoy salads, soups and New Mexican standards.

For a break from shopping and eating, take the kids to the American International Rattlesnake Museum on the plaza. If kids or parents find that prospect too chilling, walk to one of the other nearby museums.

Museums for all moods

New Mexico is proud of its multicultural heritage, and Albuquerque is a good place to introduce your family to the American Indian, Hispanic and Anglo history that has made the Southwest the vibrant region it is today. The best place to start is the free Albuquerque Museum, which offers free parking at the edge of Old Town and is within walking distance of the Children's and Natural History museums.

The Albuquerque Museum has a wonderful community feel to it. Outside you'll find spacious lawns, sculpture and a fountain. Inside there's a permanent exhibit that traces the succession of Albuquerque's residents and conquerors over four centuries.

Across the street, attached to

the Sheraton hotel, is the Albuquerque Children's Museum. Tots can enter through a child-size door. Colorful hands-on activity stations make this a cross between a science lab and a toy store. Exhibits are designed primarily for ages 2 through 12. (You'll find another children's museum, the Explora Science Center, in the lower level of the First Plaza complex downtown. Call for hours, which are limited.)

When nothing but a dinosaur museum will do, head to the Museum of Natural History. The prehistoric fellow out front hints at what's inside. The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology on the University of New Mexico campus is another place where school-age children and adults can gain an appreciation for Southwestern history and culture. An exhibit detailing an archaeological excavation helps visitors understand how scientists re-create the past from studying layers of earth and a variety of artifacts.

The great outdoors

When the kids have had their fill of museums and shopping, move outside and let them burn some energy. If you visit Albuquerque during the peak of summer's heat, you'll want to plan outdoor activities for early morning or early evening.

One spot for an hour's fresh air break is Petroglyph National Monument in Boca Negra Canyon. The canyon is home to at least 15,000 petroglyphs, rock art created as long ago as 1000 B.C. Three trails of varying length meander through rocks bearing a treasury of images. Mesa Point Trail is labeled the most strenuous, but anyone in good health can manage it with sturdy walking shoes or sneakers.

If you arrive before the park gate opens at 9 a.m., continue driving north and follow the road as it curves left, eventually becoming a gravel road with signs for Boca Negra Park. A couple minutes later you'll see a turnoff on the right for the George I. Maloof Memorial Airpark. In pleasant weather, you'll find avid model airplane pilots servicing and flying their colorful, radio-controlled machines. This isn't a place for child participation, but the airplane hobbyists are happy to have an audience. When the days are hot, pilots tend to gather



A realistic dinosaur groots visitors at the Museum of Natural History.

microphones and indoor speakers provide sounds from the pond.

Beyond Albuquerque

Chances are you'll want to take in as much of New Mexico as you can, even if you make Albuquerque your primary destination. If you plan a day trip to Santa Fe, consider taking the back road rather than the freeway. The Turquoise Trail, as it's known, winds behind the Sandia Mountains and cuts through picturesque villages.

Even if you don't make a pilgrimage to Santa Fe, consider a drive up to the 10,078-foot Sandia Crest. This is a far better alternative to the train ride up the crest on the city side of the mountain. (A family of four would fork over close to \$50 for the 15-minute ride.) The drive up the winding mountain road is beautiful anytime but especially in the fall, when the aspens turn gold.

At the summit, the observation deck gives you a 360-degree view. You can walk or hike along breathtaking trails. In winter, cross-country skiers can rent equipment at the summit, and

take home with you.

The tour begins at the 1629 San Esteban del Rey Mission, with its mixture of Catholic and Indian symbols on the walls. Children will be especially intrigued by the one- to three-story homes and pole ladders used for accessing upper levels and ceremonial underground kivas.

Several families display pottery for sale along the way. At the tour's end, visitors have the option of riding the bus back or hiking down an ancient trail.

A taste of New Mexico

One of the joys of traveling is sampling new restaurants, especially those featuring local cuisine. When you have youngsters in tow, the choices can become more restricted, but in Albuquerque you'll find plenty of options.

Plan on at least one New Mexican meal. A favorite with tourists and local business people is the M&J Sanitary Tortilla Factory downtown, just off Central. Generous portions, low prices, pitchers of iced tea and a child's menu make this a great place for lunch or breakfast.

Another local favorite, off the tourist path and worth the short drive, is Charlie's. Actually, there are three Charlie's: Charlie's

IF YOU GO . . .

■ **GETTING THERE:** A number of airlines fly from San Francisco to Albuquerque, with connections typically through Phoenix. Reno Air is your best bet out of San Jose. Expect to pay in the range of \$160-\$200 round trip for the most restricted fare. Two-for-one deals as low as \$326 may be available on Southwest, Reno and America West.

■ **WHEN TO GO:** The city is most crowded during the Balloon Fiesta in October and state fair in September. You'll need to reserve your room a couple of months in advance.

If your visit to Albuquerque includes a Monday, be sure to check whether the attractions you want to visit are open. Our tourist plans were thwarted several times on a Monday by museum and restaurant closings.

Front Door and Back Door at 8224 Menaul NE, and Charlie's Other Door at 6910 Montgomery, Charlie's features plentiful plates of sour cream chicken enchiladas and enormous pillows of fluffy sopapillas for dessert.

The Nob Hill neighborhood offers perhaps the greatest variety of dining options, from espresso bars to affordable diners to moderately expensive bistros. Among

our favorites is Fred's Bread & Bagel. During the heyday of Route 66, Albuquerque saw thousands of travelers pass through. Today, thanks in part to an attitude that welcomes and plans for children, it's a place for travelers to play and stay awhile.

■ **BALLOONING:** Several companies provide balloon rides year-round. In the summer, rides are scheduled in the early morning. Contact the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau for current rate sheets. The cost for a one-hour ride (often with champagne breakfast), pickup and drop-off should be about \$135 for adults, \$100 for children. Ask about seasonal and group specials, and pilots' experience and certification before booking.

■ **INFORMATION:** New Mexico Tourism and Travel Division: (800) 545-2040.

Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau: (800) 284-2282. New Mexico Central Reservations: (800) 466-7829 for lodging, ski packages, river rafting, ballooning, gliding and other reservations.

— Gail Reitenbach

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Nob Hill

Nob Hill represents Albuquerque's attempt to gentrify a historic neighborhood with boutiques, espresso bars and good restaur-

ants. The area, which retains some of its 1930s and '40s architectural touches, lies primarily between Carlisle and Girard on Central Avenue (once better known as Route 66).

Inside the horseshoe of the Nob Hill Business Center sits an eclectic mix of businesses, including a couple of funky card/gift/T-shirt shops with plenty of items for teens. Holly Cow sells espresso drinks and ice cream, and the food co-op is a good place to buy fresh fruit for snacks. Papers! sells exotic wrapping and writing papers from around the world, as well as a large selection of decorative stamping tools.

The wild life

Bears and baboons, Bengal tigers and bats — Albuquerque's Rio Grande Zoo has all the customary attractions. An Earth Renewal Exhibit educates visitors about sustainable resource use, and displays throughout the zoo focus on endangered species.

At the Rio Grande Nature Center, another home to wildlife, your visit can range from half an hour to several hours. The visitors center houses several hands-on exhibits for children to help them understand the area's natural ecosystems.

The highlight is the wetlands viewing room. An expansive picture window overlooks a pond where waterfowl, turtles and other creatures may be observed without disturbing them. Outdoor

equipment at the summit, and downhill skiers can enjoy the slopes at the Sandia Peak Ski Area. In summer, mountain bikers can haul bikes up on the ski area's chairlift, then ride down on 15 miles of trails.

The pueblos

Indian pueblos dot the state and most can be visited. Some are of little interest unless you're hoping to buy art directly from a particular artist. Others — especially Taos Pueblo and Acoma's Sky City — are of more interest.

If you have to choose only one pueblo in the Albuquerque area, it should be Acoma. After an hour's drive west on Interstate 40, you turn south to the pueblo, pass Enchanted Mesa and pull up to the visitors center at the base of a large sandstone mesa known as Sky City. As you look up at what seems to be a fantasy village atop an inaccessible rock, it's hard to believe that the settlement has existed since 1150.

At the base of the mesa, visitors board a bus that carries them up to Sky City. Guides supply you with all sorts of facts about the community, but it's the otherworldly sense of the place and the 360-degree views that you'll