

THE INDEPENDENT

traveller

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Ruby in the desert

Wax goes wild for New Mexico

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Village life: Ruby Wax makes friends with the locals; the Taos Pueblo, a Native American settlement AP

MAGIC IN NEW MEXICO

Last week **Ruby Wax** visited America's most exotic state for the first time since she was a teenager - and discovered a land where ancient tradition meets modern-day madness

I first saw New Mexico when I was 17. It all started in Denver, Colorado, at a party. Around midnight I was splayed on a shag-pile rug gazing at a lava lamp when I decided we should all get up and go to Mexico. I persuaded one volunteer, who was so drunk she didn't know she'd volunteered, and we stuck our thumbs out in the dark. We were immediately picked up by a soldier heading to his base about 45 minutes away, but by the time we got there we had infected him with our mania and

made him so crazy he said he'd take us to Texas. I fell asleep but woke up to catch a glimpse of Santa Fe, New Mexico. It felt like a dream: rising out of the desert floor like giant mosquito bites were round terracotta adobe huts with windows and doors painted turquoise, yellow and orange. Flagpoles were loaded up with feathers, bells, skulls, balloons and streamers. The locals looked like the cast of Woodstock, and were slumped in mid-stoned positions. I screamed to stop the car but the soldier was so determined to dump us in Texas that he stepped on the pedal.

In Texas we pretended to cry, burbling that it was in the middle of nowhere and please, please could he just take us just a teeny-weeny 500 miles more to Mexico? By now he had apparently gone AWOL, and would probably be hanged. I guess he thought at the end of the ride there would be sex as a thank-you, but at the Mexican border we leapt out and stole his camera. Such are the whimsies of youth.

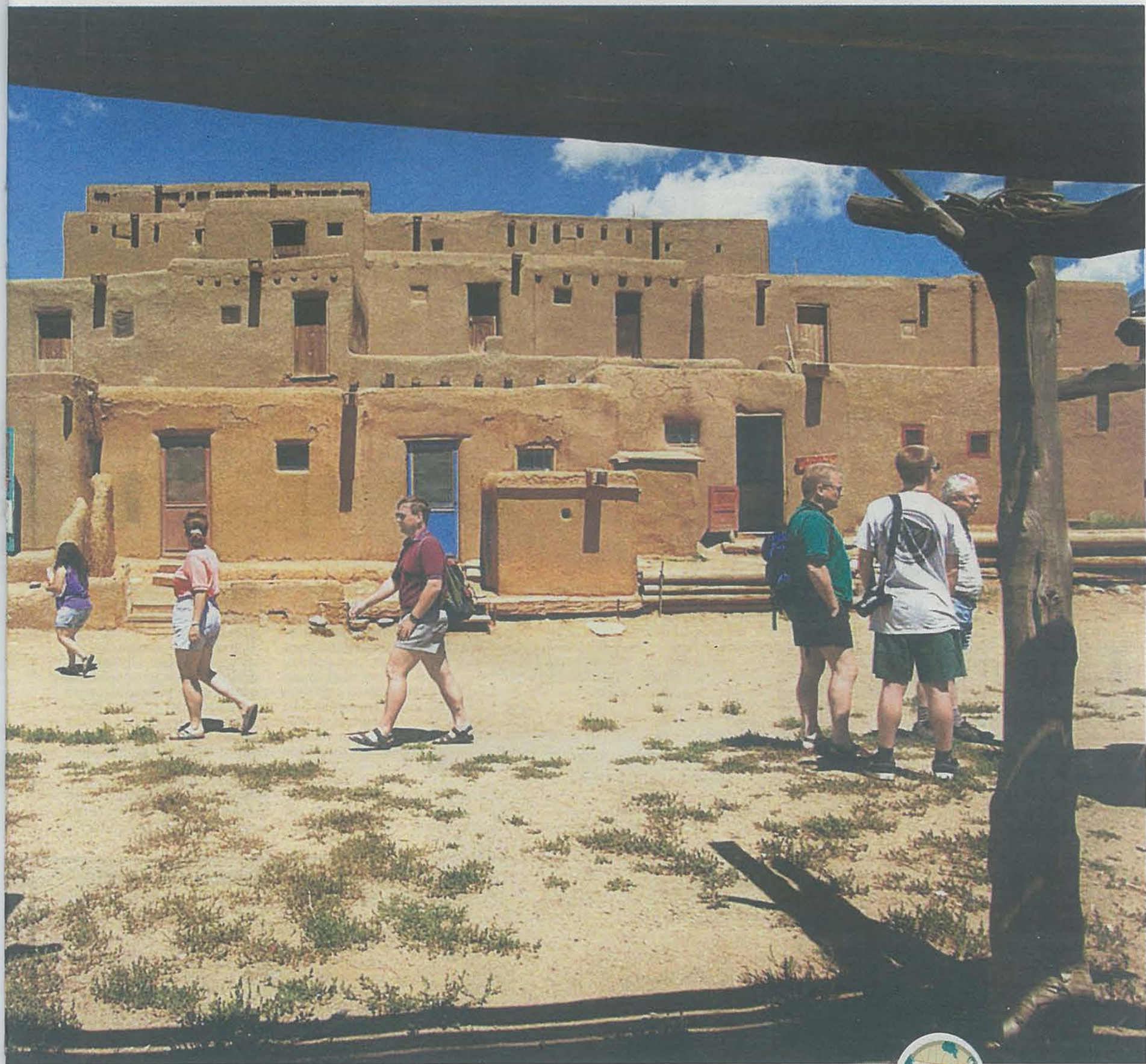
Last week I flew back to see if Santa Fe was all I imagined it to be. I'd told my kids to pack their sunscreen, swimsuits and shorts because New Mexico would be

burning hot. No one mentioned to me that it was 7,000ft high in the mountains and therefore cold. We stopped at an American poor cousin of Primark on the way from the airport, and loaded and layered ourselves up in hundreds of T-shirts, all for \$30 (they had no winter clothes for sale). So we arrived in Santa Fe looking like obese bumble bees. To my horror the first thing I saw was an imitation red-clay shopping mall. Not the authentic adobe huts from my dreams; these were *faux-dobes*, called things like "Wind Chimes" and "Rainbow Man."

We walked, fat and freezing, in and out of every store finding nothing to buy. Having said that, if you were Pocahontas you could shop till you drop. I've never seen so much squaw-wear: the latest in knee-length beaded moccasins, full-feather head-dresses and the skinned animal dress with a fringe. You want a tomahawk or bow and arrow? Then this is your kind of town. I was tempted to buy a poncho but realised it was an old blanket with a hole in the middle: not so flattering for the waist line.

There were about a hundred jewellery shops where you could buy





earrings in the shape and size of a fully grown bald American eagle, embossed with enough gemstones to wipe out a mine. There were also Mexican-bling buckle-belts which could fit around the White House several times. Along one side of the town square, squatting on the sidewalk, were real Native Americans. I walked down the row apologising for massacring their people one after another, when someone told me this was a privileged position. Apparently it was an honour for these people to sell their goods out there on the sidewalk. I didn't realise. By the way, they looked so

beautiful and majestic that next to them we look like pale, pasty pigs.

There is also a street called Canyon Road, the art quarter of Santa Fe. The paintings here are all the same: eye-blinding orange, spotted with lurid aqua. Apparently they represent the sunset. What we thought was a mound of manure turned out to be a bear and her cubs set in bronze. So much for Santa Fe.

Let's talk instead about my hotel, which was a 20-minute drive away. It's a whole different experience at the Encantado, an Auberge Resort, which lies in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Throughout the 57 acre estate are 67 individual *casitas* where adobe charm goes five star. Each suite is made of clay and slick exposed wood with outdoor patios facing waving hills of red desert spotted with juniper bushes, cedar, aspen and pinon trees. When the wind blows you're hit with a clean, herby, heady scent. Inside there's original art, an Indian clay oven for fires, heated floors, Navajo rugs, one plasma screen in the living room and – four feet away – another one in the bedroom.

My galaxy-sized bed faced a glass wall with views of the snow-peaked mountains and a blazing baby-blue

sky that turned deep turquoise and orange at night. It looked like the paintings on Canyon Road, but this time done with talent.

A walkway of stones leads to a spa. Inside is a round Japanese white-oak wooded room, where you are rolled up in a blanket in front of a fire and fed apricots and almonds. Outside is a heated waterfall, saunas, Jacuzzis, Turkish baths, a yoga and fitness centre and a lake-like steaming pool which, if you weren't rolled up in a blanket, you would go in. The treatments include Mountain Spirit Purification, Ayurvedic Attunement (to re-align the chakras) and ▶



◀ Shirodhara (which would involve dripping oil on my "third eye"). Remember when we had plain vanilla massage? I had something where my spiritual guide lit a smudge stick (basically a bunch of sage) and waved it east, west, north and south to bless the ancient grandmothers, who made sure I was spiritually awakened and made holy. I was smirking about it until I passed out in euphoria. When I woke up, I made sure I tipped all the grandmothers.

I eventually crawled to a gym so state-of-the-art it lost weight for me. The whole resort in the early evening is lit by candles in little paper bags which makes the place glow. You pass courtyards with open fires made of pinon logs and hear the coyotes howling in the distance. As the sun sets the air looks like it catches fire with blue cotton-candy clouds lined in neon.

You get a view of this from the glass-walled restaurant called Terra whose chef dropped from heaven then trained at La Cirque in Paris. I ate something called Three Little Pigs. The first little pig was a dish of crispy pork belly on green chilli edamame purée, the second little pig was a pork tenderloin with adobo sauce (basically classy chilli sauce) and the third pig was pork cheek enchilada with pumpkin seed sauce. For dessert I was given something that won the super-bowl award in New Mexico called white chocolate soup. I nearly went faint after a mouthful.

The staff at Encantado know how to love you. Their *raison d'être* is to ensure you're happy. They even gave me the keys to an open-top Mercedes for no extra charge, which was important because from the resort you have access to the vast Santa Fe National Forest. And that's where the glory and ecstasy of this state begins.

We drove in our Merc to the Taos Pueblo, a multi-layered, red-clay Indian village. It was authentic: not an advertisement, not a Starbucks, not anything but red-clay huts, piled on top of each other like building

blocks. The huts surrounded a sandy tribal dance area. At the end was a white arched clay church straight out of a Western. Here, I walked into some unadorned shops and met the world's most enchanting people. Each had eyes so wise they looked straight into me.

Inhabitants of the Taos Pueblo take care of each other, just as their ancestors did. They have monthly festivals to celebrate seasons, moons, plants, the dead, corn, whatever. (Although probably not Thanksgiving.) I was so envious. I don't even know my neighbours in London, but these people have a whole tribe. I met a young boy who was about 13. He told me he was going to law school in Wisconsin to become a prosecutor. I hope he sues the entire white nation.

Then I had to stop my son in mid-flow from saying to a local, "I bet I can make you speak Indian." The nice man was about to say "How?" I'm so ashamed.

If you head south, you'll find a hippie village called Madrid. It's an old mining town, and again it's the real McCoy: a dusty shootout-at-sunset-type street runs down the middle. On either side are timber houses in all colours, shapes and sizes. Instead of door knockers they have painted cow's skulls, some with feathers hanging off them, others with an American flag hanging from an eye hole. I wondered where this tradition began? Some of the shops in Madrid were rickety log cabins that sold clothes from the 1960s and dream catchers. They're supposed to, you know, *catch your dreams*. On certain drugs this makes sense.

There's also a long row of bright pink shops called Gypsy Plaza which has "We Have Very Cool Stuff" painted on the wall. Should you need one, this is where you can buy a print of the Virgin Mary on an apron. Nearby, the Mine Shaft Tavern has those swinging doors which you use if you're Clint Eastwood making an entrance. Most of the people in the



bar looked like Clint; the rest were Hell's Angels with their hogs tied up at the post outside. (New Mexico is Harley heaven: the whole population rides up and down the road on their low riders. Some of them are so tattooed you can't see a sign of human flesh under the Chinese dragons and macabre medieval sorcerers.) In the Java Café I saw a poster that read "Mad Dog for Governor". It was a photo of a homeless-looking man, short of a few teeth, wearing a baseball cap that read "f*** everyone".

Later, we went to the Bandelier National Monument near Los

Alamos, home to the excavated ruins of a thousand-year-old settlement of Pueblo people. From the canyon floor you're surrounded by sheer cliff walls. On these walls are *kivas*, large holes with ladders leading to them. You can climb in and see the original wall etchings of the Tewa Indians, all having the time of their lives collecting scalps. Looking down you see a large remaining stone circle where the rituals took place.

I was told that the dancers, all men, lined up in a single row, shoulder to shoulder, each clasping a rattle and some evergreen branches.

On their knees they wore rattles made of turtle shells with pigs' hooves attached by leather thongs. This is where the Tewa people did their Turtle Dance songs that celebrate renewal; basically fertility.

Then, just to experience a bit of yin to that yang, we headed toward Los Alamos where J Robert Oppenheimer worked on the first nuclear weapons. There are life-sized models of Little Boy and Fat Man, both atomic bombs. At the Bradbury Science Museum you can watch footage of Little Boy being dropped on Hiroshima in slow motion with the real sound effects.

New Mexico by numbers

Aliens, astronauts and atomic bombs... not to mention the oldest capital city in the States. **Laura Lindsay** adds it all up

15 The number of times Wales could fit within the state boundaries of New Mexico. New Mexico was the 47th state to be admitted to the Union, joining on 6 January 1912. At 121,356 square miles it is the US's fifth largest state (behind Alaska, Texas, California and Montana). newmexico.org

200,000

The cost, in dollars, of a journey into space with Virgin Galactic from Spaceport, New Mexico, near Las Cruces. Flights can now be booked, and test flights are underway. virgingalactic.com



1947 The year aliens allegedly crashed near the town of Roswell. The UFO Museum and Research Centre houses exhibits purporting to relate to the crash, to help visitors form their own opinions about the controversial incident. The centre opens daily. roswellufomuseum.com

40,000

The approximate height, in feet, of the mushroom cloud created by the first atomic bomb detonated in Los Alamos in 1945. After this, atomic bombs were used on cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos shows exhibits detailing the bomb's history. lanl.gov

19

The number of Native American pueblos (traditional communities) in New Mexico. Albuquerque's Indian Pueblo Cultural Centre provides a comprehensive guide to the history and culture of the pueblos. indianpueblo.org

2010 The year Santa Fe will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the building of the Palace of the Governors, the oldest continuously-used public building in the US. Santa Fe claims to be the United States' oldest capital city. santafe400th.com





All the streets here are named after nuclear test sights that were experimentally bombed: Bikini Atoll Road, Trinity Street. It turns out that the folk at Los Alamos – physicists, chemists, biologists – want you to know they are now doing things to help the world. They're working on finding a cure for Aids, investigating treatments for cancer, building computers that think a million times faster than me, and sustainability to make the planet green. And if we really want to get rid of our carbon footprint? Well, I guess we can always drop another bomb. I love New Mexico.

Desert dream: the Encantado Resort in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, where adobe charm goes five star

ERHARD PFEIFFER

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

Getting there

The writer flew to Albuquerque from Heathrow with Continental (0845 607 6760; www.continental.com) via Houston. Regional departures are also available via Newark.

Staying there

Encantado: an Auberge Resort, 198 State Road 592, Santa Fe, New Mexico (001 505 946 5700; encantadoresort.com). Casitas start at \$475 (£339), room only.

Visiting there

Santa Fe National Forest (001 505 438 7840; fs.fed.us/r3/sfe). Taos Pueblo (001 575 758 1028; taospueblo.com). Bandelier National Monument (001 505 672 0343;

nps.gov/band). Bradbury Science Museum, Los Alamos (001 505 667 4444; lanl.gov/museum).

More information
newmexico.org;
001 505 827 7400

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10

The number of ski areas in New Mexico. Taos, the best known, was said by *The Independent* to be "no place for skiers who like the fripperies of [big] resorts". skitaos.org



Up here, 4,593 feet above sea level, it's easy to find an escape from the stress of the daily grind. Far from the madding crowd, those seeking relaxation will find the magnificent panoramas and richly diverse Alpine flora the perfect setting in which to recharge the batteries.

To order the Walk Austria 2009 guide go to www.austria.info/walk, e-mail holiday@austria.info or call us on 0845 101 18 18.