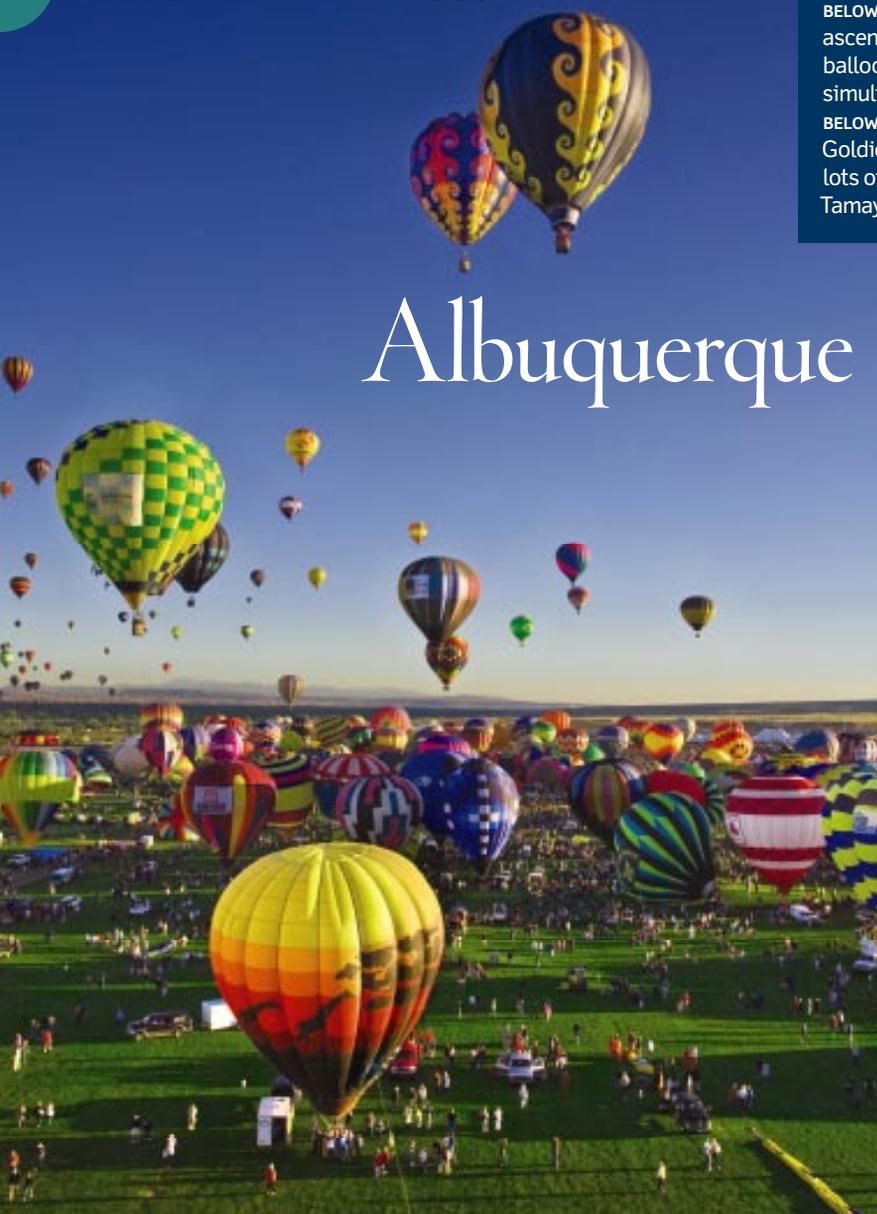


BELOW, LEFT: Mass ascension puts 700 balloons aloft nearly simultaneously.

BELOW, RIGHT: Horses Goldie and Cahokia get lots of attention at the Tamaya Resort & Spa.

# Albuquerque



The sky above this desert city will soon fill with balloons as bright as Christmas ornaments. Come on out for a thrilling autumn getaway. By **Les Thomas**



**W**hoosssshhh. That's the sound I just heard beyond the balcony of my room. I hurry outside to look. Two hot-air balloons rise swiftly over the hotel's rooftop. They're so close I can hear the furnace-like blasts from burners heating the air to make them climb. They're just a fraction of the 700 ready to lift off at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta on Saturday.

Until this morning, I never understood what a charming place New Mexico's largest city could be. Maybe it's the fiery food shaking my taste buds out of the doldrums or the wonderful aroma of piñon smoke drifting over the pueblo resort where I'm

staying beside the Rio Grande. Most of all, it's those beautiful balloons that are everywhere this time of year.

The city is at its best in the fall. Dress warmly—it's cool here, but it's invigorating. Plan your trip now in time to see the balloons decorate the landscape at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, October 4-12. Here are my favorite ways to enjoy an enchanting getaway.

**Stay With the Pueblos** It's just off the interstate, 20 minutes from downtown, but you feel as if you're in a different world at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa. Owned by the Pueblo of Santa Ana, it nestles into 500 acres of a 73,000-acre

## Balloon Basics

Events span two weekends, but the mass ascensions—October 4, 5, 8, 11, and 12—offer the biggest thrills. The balloons go up starting at 7 a.m. Get there at least 90 minutes early to find a parking space (nearly 100,000 spectators attend). Walk among the balloons and watch them launch at Balloon Fiesta Park. General admission tickets are \$6. Parking is \$10. [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or 1-888-422-7277.

Go aloft yourself with Rainbow Ryders, the official ride operator for the fiesta. Flights begin at \$299 per person. [www.rainbowryders.com](http://www.rainbowryders.com) or 1-800-725-2477.

American Indian reservation. Ask for a mountain-view room that looks out on the Sandia Mountains, with the highest crimson-colored peak rising to 10,678 feet.

Tribe members say Tamaya means “a quiet and peaceful place.” I think it should stand for “stay busy.” On a typical weekend you can take a class in drum-making, learn how to bake bread in an outdoor oven called a *huruna*, or get a hands-on lesson in making adobe bricks. “A lot of children like to see their parents play in the mud,” says tribal member Alicia Ortiz. She shows guests how to mix clay, sand, and native grasses to form the blocks used to build the pueblos.

Late one afternoon I bounce along in a pickup truck while Photographer Meg McKinney joins a trail ride to the nearby Rio Grande. We pass spectacular cliffs and Santa Ana sacred sites. On our way back to the lodge, the sunset laces a curtain of low-hanging blue clouds with streaks of red ribbons as bright as lighting. Just dazzling. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Tamaya is a splurge, but it’s worth it.

Weekend rates start at \$265. During the balloon fiesta, rates start at \$315. [www.tamaya.hyatt.com](http://www.tamaya.hyatt.com) or 1-800-233-1234.

For other options, the balloon fiesta operates a helpful reservation service at [www.balloonfiesta.com](http://www.balloonfiesta.com) or 1-866-536-6966.

**Welcome to Old Town** The galleries in Old Town tend to be less pricey than Santa Fe. American Indian artists sell turquoise earrings and necklaces, some for less than \$10, along the covered walkways near the Old Town plaza. Shoppers flock to the Covered Wagon for pottery crafted with horsehair (starting at \$30), turquoise jewelry, and ristras (strands of dried chile peppers, \$10). Drums as big as coffee tables start at \$275.

**Spicy and Delicious** Order enchiladas topped with an egg and savor the aroma of green chiles roasting beside your table at El Pinto. The city’s largest restaurant is almost a town in itself, seating more than 1,000. Take home a bottle of salsa or green chile sauce, made at El Pinto from

chiles specially grown for the company. [www.elpinto.com](http://www.elpinto.com) or (505) 898-1771.

Spend a romantic evening watching the sunset at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa, and then dine at The Corn Maiden, the hotel’s cozy restaurant. Executive chef Mark Ching celebrates autumn with dishes such as pumpkin-roasted poblano bisque, corn-and-nopalitos salsa, and red chile escargots. Dinner for two costs around \$125.

When you’re in Old Town, slip into Church St. Cafe (in the historic Casa de Ruiz building) for tasty chile rellenos. Ask for a table in the garden. [www.churchstreetcafe.com](http://www.churchstreetcafe.com) or (505) 247-8522.

Locals love Golden Crown Panaderia near Old Town for wonderful green chile bread and fresh pastries. Try a *biscochito* flavored with anise and cinnamon. It’s the state cookie of New Mexico. You can order them online at [www.goldencrown.biz](http://www.goldencrown.biz). ●

**For more information:** Albuquerque Convention & Visitors Bureau, [www.itsatrip.org](http://www.itsatrip.org) or 1-800-284-2282.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Riders cross the Rio Grande on a trail ride; the river winds through the reservation and connects all the pueblos. One of El Pinto’s popular dishes tops enchiladas with an egg. Tribal members perform traditional dances at the Tamaya Resort & Spa. San Felipe de Neri Church, built in 1793, towers over the Old Town plaza.