



FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Albuquerque, New Mexico, takes flight with the world's largest hot-air balloon festival.

By Rebecca L. Rhoades



It's 7 a.m., and the crowds at Balloon Fiesta Park on the northern side of Albuquerque, New Mexico, are transfixed by a yellow flag. The weather is cloudy and windy. About an hour earlier, the Dawn Patrol had lifted off. Its choreographed inflation and launch sent murmurs of wonderment through the growing crowd, as the dozen balloons, illuminated against the still-dark sky, set off to test wind speeds and directions.

Now, we await the fate of the morning's mass ascension, which was scheduled to begin at 6:30 a.m. Hundreds of flight teams, their deflated balloons spread across the grounds, watch impatiently for a change of flags. Yellow, the current color, means the day's flight is delayed. Green means go, and red means the ascension is cancelled.

At almost 8 a.m., a cheer goes up. Green! Giant fans begin to whir, and one by one, colorful balloons of all sizes and shapes begin to inflate. Another cheer erupts as the first balloon takes to the air. Soon, hundreds of balloons are lifting away like colorful champagne bubbles floating to the surface.

It's all part of the annual International Balloon Fiesta, Albuquerque's premier event and the world's largest gathering of hot-air balloons, and it's a must-see bucket-list event for anyone planning a visit to the New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment.



CREDIT: MARBLESTREETSTUDIO.COM

More than 700 balloons fly during a mass ascension.

The festival began in 1972 with only 13 balloons taking flight from a mall parking lot in downtown Albuquerque. Since then, it has expanded into an nine-day international event, attracting upward of 700 balloon teams from as far away as Germany, New Zealand, South Africa, Thailand and 18 other countries, and featuring balloon races and competitions, chainsaw carving competitions, car shows, live music by top recording stars, pin trading and fireworks.

But the stars of the show are the daily mass ascensions. Every morning at 7 a.m., hundreds of balloons ascend into the Albuquerque sky, following the wind for an hour or longer. I had the opportunity to join a Rainbow Ryders flight team in 2014. (Southwest-based Rainbow Ryders is the only balloon company authorized to take paying customers on flights launching from Balloon Fiesta Park during the festival.)



CREDIT: MARBLESTREETSTUDIO.COM

Balloons inflate at sunrise in Balloon Fiesta Park.

As we soared more than 2,000 feet above the city, the strong breezes seemed to disappear. It was as though an invisible conveyor belt was moving us weightlessly through the sky. Our route took us south, paralleling I-25 and the Rio Grande River, and over the skyscrapers of downtown, the ABQ BioPark with its zoo, and numerous residential neighborhoods. A balloon from Germany floated so close that we could see the smiles on the flight team's faces. We all cheered and waved. Below us was more cheering and waving as residents emerged from their homes to shout joyful greetings. Everywhere, dogs barked, chasing the shadows we cast from above.

After the 90-minute-long flight, chase crews quickly packed up the balloon, and vans whisked everyone back to the park grounds for a celebratory champagne toast.

"I wouldn't miss this event for the world,"

says pilot Mike Collins of Rainbow Ryders. "We bring all of our balloons here for it. It's a great time, and it's a great place to meet other teams from around the world. Everyone wants to come here."

You don't have to head for the sky—or even Balloon Fiesta Park—to experience the wonder of the event. Viewing sites are set up throughout the city. From these vantage points, you can watch the parade of balloons rising into the sky, hundreds of vibrant teardrops punctuated by special shapes, such as a stagecoach, a cow, a pig, beer bottles, flowers, cars and the fan-favorite Darth Vader. (An added bonus: You don't have to get up before sunlight to enjoy the spectacle from these other sites.)

The fun and ethereal evening glows offer another look at the balloons. During these popular activities, which began in 1979, the balloons remain grounded. As the Balloonmeister gives his orders, they're ignited, filling the park with hundreds of luminescent orbs. Guests can walk among the glowing balloons and chat with the pilots.

In between balloon events, head over to the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum, which sits adjacent to the launch field. Here, inside the balloon-shaped glass facade, you'll learn everything you need to know about ballooning, from the world's first successful flying machine to early 20th-century blimps and Japanese balloon bombs to the history of the Balloon Fiesta.

Whether you come for just a weekend or spend the entire nine days in Albuquerque, the Balloon Fiesta is a celebration unlike any other. It's a family-friendly event that charms all ages, but its colors and fantasy-filled flights will make anyone feel like an awestruck five-year-old.

IF YOU GO

- The 2015 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta takes place October 3–11.
- The Fiesta takes place at Balloon Fiesta Park, one mile west of I-25 in the city's northern section, at 5500 Balloon Fiesta Parkway.
- The Albuquerque Convention & Visitors Bureau sponsors a Fiesta Express Park & Ride, which carries visitors from five locations to the park. The ticket fee includes admission to Balloon Fiesta Park.
- If you plan on being at the park for a morning ascension, make sure to arrive early—no later than 6 a.m.—especially on the weekend. While the balloons don't lift off until 7 a.m., the parking lot—as well as the incoming streets—gets packed much earlier, resulting in traffic jams that last upward of an hour.
- The Dawn Patrol, eye-catching illuminated balloons that test the day's wind speeds and directions, take off at 5:45 a.m.
- Wear layers and bring a hat, scarf and gloves, as it is quite cold before the sun rises.
- For more information, visit balloonfiesta.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Nativo Lodge: Located just minutes away from Balloon Fiesta Park, the pet-friendly Nativo Lodge is inspired by New Mexico's Native American heritage. The rustic, soaring, log cabin-like lobby features Native American influences, including earthen colors and carpets, sculptures and paintings, while the rooms include the latest amenities. Eight artist rooms are filled with contemporary art from emerging Native American artists, transforming the spaces into livable installations. Nativo is also a popular home base for many of the balloon teams. nativolodge.com

Los Poblanos Historic Inn: On land originally inhabited by the Anasazi pueblo, this 25-acre former ranch offers 20 guest rooms complete with white stuccoed walls, wood-burning fireplaces, beamed ceilings and antique furnishings. Still a working farm, the grounds include fragrant lavender fields and cottonwood trees. Its restaurant, Le Merienda, serves farm-fresh breakfast and dinner to guests daily. lospoblanos.com

WHERE TO EAT

Sadie's: An Albuquerque institution, Sadie's has been serving up heaping helpings of spicy New Mexican cuisine since the early '50s. In fact, everything here can be ordered with the state's famous Hatch green chiles (or for something a little milder, red chiles). From chile rellenos to enchiladas to the world's largest stuffed sopapilla, the food here is not for those counting their calories. Don't miss Sadie's award-winning burger, served on thick French bread with a pile of picante chiles. sadiesofnewmexico.com

Zacatecas Tacos + Tequila: For a modern take on Mexican food, head to the Nob Hill neighborhood, a trendy district known for its eclectic shopping, hip nightclubs and upscale dining, including Zacatecas. In addition to tacos (more than a half-dozen flavors are on the menu), you'll find fresh, flavorful dishes that remain true to their namesake Mexican city. A must have: the duck relleno, a chile stuffed with duck confit, goat cheese and manchamantel sauce. Don't forget to check out the extensive tequila and mezcals selection, too. zacatecastacos.com

Pueblo Harvest Café: After learning the state's Native American history at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, quell your hunger with a traditional Tewa taco served on fry bread or a bowl of posole stew at the on-site Pueblo Harvest Café. After 4 p.m., the menu offers more substantial meals, including wild boar, elk and New Mexico lamb. For a starter, try the blue corn onion rings. indianpueblo.org/visit/cafe.html

Golden Crown Panaderia: Albuquerque's only New Mexican bakery sits in the heart of Old Town. Stop in for a boscochito, the official state cookie, or one of the delicious fruit empanadas. If you're craving something more filling, Golden Crown also offers a variety of pizzas with either blue corn or green chile crust, as well as sandwiches. goldencrown.biz



Ladder, chile ristras and a skull outside a shop in Old Town.

CREDIT: KIPMALONE.COM

BEYOND BALLOONS

Old Town Albuquerque: Looking for that postcard-perfect image of Albuquerque? You'll find it in Old Town, where chile ristras decorate the facades of picturesque adobes that date back to the late 1700s. Dominated by the circa-1793 San Felipe de Neri Church, the 10 historic blocks are filled with art galleries, museums, restaurants and souvenir shops. Visit the famed Candy Lady, where you can pick up some green chile treats, and Santisima Gallery, which specializes in Hispanic art. albuquerqueoldtown.com

Breaking Bad film locations: One of Albuquerque's biggest tourism draws in recent years is the hit TV series *Breaking Bad*, as well as its spin-off *Better Call Saul*. A variety of self-guided and group tours are available that take you to such hot spots as Walter White's house (please, leave the pizza at home), Jesse's house, Walt's car wash and Los Pollos Hermanos. Pick up your baggie of "blue ice" candy from Old Town's Candy Lady, maker of the show's original prop, and stop by Rebel Donuts for a Blue Sky Donut (or 12) and have an A-1 day. visitalbuquerque.org/albuquerque/film-tourism/breaking-bad/

Indian Pueblo Cultural Center: New Mexico has a long and storied Native American history. The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center leads visitors through the history of the state's 19 pueblos (or communities) from pre-Columbian to current times. The 10,000-square-foot museum looks at the cultural and political history of the pueblo nations and features a renowned collection of Native American pottery, jewelry and art. indianpueblo.org