

25 REASONS TO LOVE LAS CRUCES

A crossroads and a college town, the state's second-largest city offers rich dividends to nature lovers, urbanistas, and seekers of rich Southwestern culture—especially in the fall, when festival season starts swinging.

BY PAMELA PORTER

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Downtown, on the Up and Up

Welcome to a downtown that hums with activity. After a drab spell in the '60s, artists revitalized Main Street by moving into formerly vacant buildings. They also brainstormed the Downtown Ramble. On the first Friday evening of each month, galleries open their doors to hundreds of hometown and visiting art lovers, who stroll through artist receptions, enjoying local wines while munching on chile won tons or veggies con queso to the strains of a cello quartet or guitar soloist. On Ramble night, pick up a map of many art stops at M. Phillips Gallery (mphillipsgallery.com).

If Las Cruces had an astrological sign,

it would certainly be Gemini, those very different twins residing in one being. Spring winds sandblast skin and have launched (at least) a thousand hats, but subside to tranquil breezes that ruffle satiny, amber petals of Mexican poppies erupting from desert slopes. An horno-hot sun dominates summer days before giving way to cool evenings ideal for stargazing; winter ice and occasional snow accumulation usually melt quickly in the mild climate of southern New Mexico.

But in autumn, my Mesilla Valley community shakes off its dual identity to achieve perfect balance and abundance. We celebrate the harvest and our cultural diversity in an extended season that paints our varied landscape with red chile, purple asters, snowy fields of cotton, and golden cottonwoods. New Mexico State University students migrate back, turning us into a college town again. There's much to adore here, just 45 miles north of El Paso, Texas, and Juárez, Mexico.

Our proximity to these borders informs the identity of Las Cruces, at 150 years old a relatively recent settlement along the Camino Real. Mexican traditions and Spanish saints infuse our culture, and the city's cowboy and farming roots are alive and well.

I live near the city limit in a house surrounded by farms, where irrigated rows of vegetables strut toward the dormant volcano of Picacho Mountain. Desert and river critters pass through and sometimes raise their young nearby, and my friends nod patiently to the endless litany of my sightings: coyote, fox, roadrunner, beaver, javelina, hawks, great horned owl, quail, the cutest little line of a mama skunk and her babies, as well as the rare rattlesnake that freaks me out.

I am obviously fond of a hometown that's as friendly and unpretentious as an old pair of Levi's (which are, by the way, perfectly acceptable dress anywhere in this laid-back city). We're growing at a healthy rate—*Smart Money* magazine recently recommended Las Cruces as a desirable retirement locale, for its low cost of living and great golf courses—and this population influx brings new diversions to add to old favorites.

As a confirmed Chihuahuan Desert rat, I am faced with the blissful dilemma of many attractive choices. A revitalizing hike to a seasonal waterfall, or a trip to a photography exhibition at the Las Cruces Museum of Art? Sipping sauvignon blanc at a local winery, or photographing a dramatic thunderstorm racing across the landscape? A refreshing dip in a pool, or some of the best Mexican food on the planet? All this from someone who once declared the town "a whole lot of brown," when my family moved here from the California coast when I was 13.



PAMELA PORTER

2 Mesilla

Mesilla's village limits nudge up against ours, and we like to claim our charming neighbor as our own. Visitors on Preciliana Sandoval's **La Morena Walking Tours** (575-647-2639) get the inside scoop on Billy the Kid, the ghosts in the Double Eagle restaurant, and the late Katy Griggs, who founded beloved traditional New Mexican restaurant **La Posta** in 1939 (laposta-de-mesilla.com). We catch indie flicks at the **Fountain Theater**, built in 1905 (mesilla-valleyfilm.com); enjoy cappuccinos and live acoustic tunes at the **Bean Café** (thebeanmesilla.com); shop in century-old buildings for Native American jewelry at **Silver Assets** (silverassetsonline.com); peruse fair-trade home goods at **Del Sol** (delsolstores.com), and Southwestern and Moroccan attire at **La Mariposa** (575-647-2636); and stop to refuel with Mexican food at **Emilia's on the Plaza** (575-652-3007).

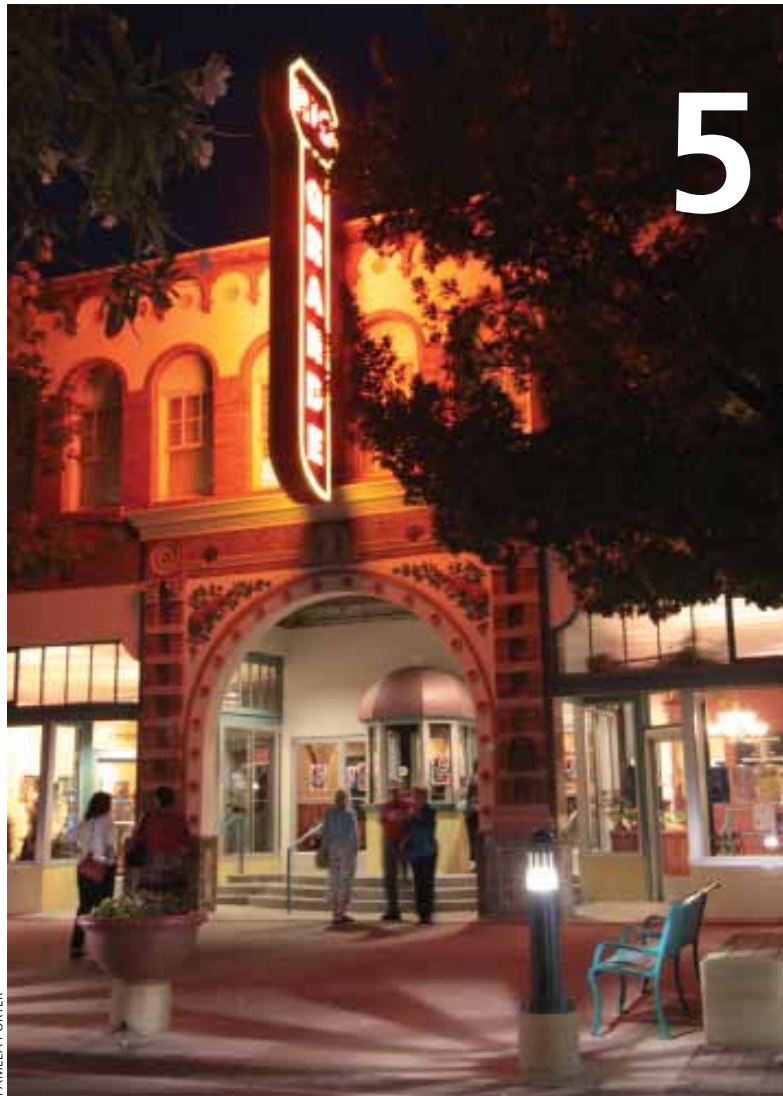
3 Beaucoup Books

It's just fun to hang out in rooms crammed with new and used books at COAS Bookstore, one of the largest of its kind in the Southwest, specializing in regional and natural history titles sure to deepen your appreciation of the area. Family-owned and family-friendly, it's that most precious of local institutions: a sprawling community bookstore (coasbooks.com).

4 Project in Motion

"New Mexico is so amazing—just look up," says Hillary McDaniel-Douglas, artistic director of Project in Motion, a Las Cruces aerial dance company. Her troupe of seven performs breathtakingly fluid and balletic aerial dance. When not touring, the artists divide their time between Indianapolis and Las Cruces, where they mesmerize us in a reclaimed cotton gin. Ongoing classes in aerial dance and trapeze await the acrobatically adventuresome. Look for PIM performances at the Depot Arts District Festival, September 14–15 (projectinmotion.com).

WILLIAM XUN CHI, CHIXUN.NET, COURTESY PROJECT IN MOTION



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Rio Grande Theatre

In 1926, this historic venue's first show was the silent film *Mare Nostrum*, accompanied by pipe organ. A first kiss, a reprimand for flinging popcorn from the balcony, 1970s childhood viewings of *Star Wars*—these are just a few memories Las Cruces treasure of the Rio Grande Theatre, which fell on hard times when audiences abandoned it for more modern complexes. The beloved movie house was rescued and renovated by our tireless Doña Ana Arts Council, which now occupies offices upstairs in the building. The charming venue hosts nationally recognized musicians, classic musicals, open-mike nights, local films presented by Film Las Cruces (las-cruces-film.org), and solid music by regional talent (riograndetheatre.org).



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7 After Dark

The fun doesn't end when the sun goes down; head to Telshor Boulevard, where De la Vega's Pecan Grill & Brewery serves up pecan beer, pecan-smoked pork ribs, and lots of non-pecan-flavored dishes, as well as fusiony bar food from its Back Porch menu (pecangrill.com). Cozy up to an antique bar in Mesilla's elegant Double Eagle, filled with opulent furniture and original pressed-tin ceilings (double-eagle-mesilla.com), or to more casual La Posta for a wide array of margaritas made with 50 kinds of tequila. The best places to dance are Mesilla's El Patio Bar (575-526-9943), for rock'n'roll that caters to boisterous college students, or to divey (in a good way) Palacio's, for salsa (575-525-2910).



SHARON NIEDERMAN

6 Cruisin' to Chope's

Las Cruces all know to head down Highway 28, "the old road" to El Paso, past adobe communities, a sweet little church, and miles of pecan orchards that are shady in September and golden in October. They stop at the village of La Mesa, where traveling foodies and locals chat while lined up for radically unrenovated Chope's Bar and Restaurant's cold cerveza and super-hot chile. I'm partial to eating in the small-town bar crowded with boisterous locals and NMSU students, but drinks are also served in the modest restaurant, where all who step inside are treated like family—a practice since 1915, when Lupe and Chope Benavidez first opened its doors (575-233-3420).

8 Mucho Mariachi

Every November, at the International Mariachi Conference, Las Cruces are serenaded with strains of guitar, violin, trumpet, guitarrón, and singers who belt out Spanish lyrics with heart. This is the music, beloved by generations, that accompanies weddings, quinceañeras, and most celebrations along the border. Renowned musicians from Mexico and the U.S. wow us in a sold-out concert Saturday night at NMSU's Pan American Center (lascrucesmariachi.org).



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10 Months of Fun Days

Come fall, as temperatures cool, local folks know what's on the horizon. Festivities begin with the nearby Hatch Chile Festival, on Labor Day weekend (hatchchilefest.com). Mid-September, with the Diez y Seis de Septiembre Fiesta, Mesilla celebrates its Mexican-American heritage with a parade, ballet folklórico, piñata whacking, and dancing till midnight (oldmesilla.org). Chef Roberto Estrada continues to construct his massive Whole Enchilada at the end of the month with scores of locals, as it's a team effort (enchiladafiesta.com). The Southern New Mexico State Fair & Rodeo (October 3–7) has an old-time country-fair feel that delights residents of seven counties (575-524-8602). Throw in La Union's La Viña Wine Festival in October (nmwine.com), and the endlessly entertaining Doña Ana Arts Council's Renaissance Arts Faire in November, in Young Park (las-cruces-arts.org), and we're (almost) partied out.

9 Blasts from the Past

At Fort Selden State Monument, a frontier cook bearing a frying pan with Johnnycakes and molasses offers me a taste. Since the fort's eroding adobe walls can't speak, employees and volunteers in period dress regularly share stories about the post, its African-American Buffalo Soldiers, and young General Douglas MacArthur, whose father was an officer at this isolated outpost. Frontier Days, September 8, is the perfect time to catch it all (nmculture.org).



PAMELA PORTER



WILLIAM FAULKNER

11 Golf, of Course

There's a reasonably priced course for every golfer in the City of the Crosses. **New Mexico State University Golf Course** is favored by those who prefer a traditional course and appreciate an abundance of shade (nmsugolf.com). **Sonoma Ranch** (pictured) is a links course with a par 72 layout, and, like all Las Cruces courses, has patches of desert terrain among fairways and greens (sonomaranchgolf.com). **Red Hawk** is the newest, and locals appreciate that it uses reclaimed water to nourish its grass (golflascruces.com). All courses boast practice facilities, full bars, and restaurants.



12 Nellie's Café

"He was known as the Burrito Man," Josie Burrow tells me about her dad, Danny Martinez, who opened **Nellie's Café** after his success with selling his wife's homemade burritos around Las Cruces in 1962. Their no-frills restaurant has a devoted following and bears the name of Danny's wife, who still oversees the tasty Mexican food and overwhelming selection of satisfying burritos, chimichangas, and sopaipillas stuffed with chile, beans, lettuce, and meat (575-524-9982).



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13 Shopping Ops

Locals and visitors alike find treasure in Picacho Avenue's Antique District, at **SOB's** (Sweet Old Bob's), **Things for Sale**, **Elegant Junque Shoppe**, and **Small Mall Antiques**. For vibrant Talavera pottery and rustic furniture, stop by **Coyote Traders**, also on Picacho (lascrucesvb.com). Mesilla shops, especially **Galeri Azul**, carry cool Frida Kahlo and Day of the Dead items (575-523-8783). For handbags, jewelry, home décor, and unique, quirky cards, check out **LuLu's** (lulus.com) and **Spirit Winds Coffee Bar's Gift Source** (575-521-1222).



PAMELA PORTER

14 Man's Best Friend-ly

Las Cruces is a great city for dog lovers. Local and visiting pups socialize at our dog park (on N. Hermosa, between E. Hadley and Griggs avenues), and accompany us along the plentiful walking trails and irrigation canals that crisscross the city. Hotel Encanto, the Lundeen Inn of the Arts, and several lodging chains offer dog-friendly accommodations. **St. Clair Winery & Bistro** welcomes their well-behaved presence on the front lawn every third Wednesday of the month during Yappy Hour, for the occasional costume contest benefiting the humane society (stclairwinery.com/bistros/las-cruces).



PAMELA PORTER

15 Las Cruces Farmers' and Crafts Market

"I don't care how much of a brown thumb you have, you can grow these plants," reassures Marcy Scott, surrounded by autumn sage, desert willow, and chocolate flowers. Visitors clutch cups of individually brewed coffee as Beck Rosnick, our Australian java rock star, banters with regulars clutching bags of the beans she roasts locally. I wander among booths filled with gifts for self and others: silver jewelry crafted from old place settings, handcrafted soap, outdoor furniture upcycled from salvaged lumber, and, of course, local, organic produce (lascrucesfarmersmarket.org).

16 Día de los Muertos

Many families in southern New Mexico have a standing date each November 2. They visit cemeteries to clean the graves of friends and relatives, then share a meal with loved ones. In Mesilla, this Mexican custom (November 2–4) is a weekend celebration of lifetimes, with poignant altars to loved ones erected on the plaza. But the event is no downer. We dance with Death dressed in black, her face painted in a ghoulish grin, then have our own faces painted. Kids scared by Mesilla Valley ghost stories huddle next to parents, who haul their camp chairs to the plaza to listen to musicians and snack on gorditas, tacos, and nachos. On Mesilla Plaza, we buy skull candy and earrings from booths festooned with marigolds (oldmesilla.org).



17 ¡Ay, Chihuahua!

Southern New Mexico's desert is hopping with fascinatingly hardy plants and creatures, and the 922-acre **Asombro Institute for Science Education** (*asombro* is the Spanish word for *wonder*) offers myriad ways to get up close and personal with the **Chihuahuan Desert**. Scientists lead classes on creepy-crawly critters, desert plants, and the intricacies of the 1.5-mile Desert Discovery Trail. Trumpet flowers of sacred datura, yellow turpentine brush, and sunflowers often dot the fall landscape. You might even see a desert tarantula scurrying by (asombro.org).



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Munching After Midnight

Veg heads, meat lovers, and night owls rejoiced when **SB's Late Night Lunch Box** opened downtown almost two years ago. Discovered by the college crowd, the Water Street café offers an intimate venue for touring bands. Order the Green Chile Mac & Cheese, Tomato Dill'wich, or the Heart Attack Wrap (bacon and cheddar wrapped in a croissant and topped with more cheese and apple butter), and finish off with an Oreo-gasm: an Oreo baked inside a chocolate-chip cookie (412-623-9556).

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Museum Mile

The city's active arts complex is a magnet for all. Our museums offer free presentations and short workshops, ideal for locals or day-trippers on tight schedules (museums.las-cruces.org).

The **Branigan Cultural Center's** permanent exhibit *Las Cruces: Crossroads of History* breaks 400 years into engaging eras such as "Soldiers, Ranchers, and Outlaws." More fleetingly, the **Doña Ana Camera Club's** September exhibit, *This Enchanted Land*, gives visitors a chance to see Las Cruces through the eyes of top local photographers. **Las Cruces Museum of Nature & History**, which attracts more than 150,000 visitors each year, will relocate to the arts complex in early November. Along with 3,000 square feet of exhibition space, the **Museum of Art** offers art instruction for all ages; families especially love **Family Art Adventures**, Saturday-morning classes related to current exhibits. The **Railroad Museum**, a few blocks west, is sited in a 1910 former Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway depot. Its model trains chug alongside New Mexico railroad memorabilia and history (las-cruces.org).

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Young at Heart

Las Cruces have the best of both worlds: all the perks of a college town, without studying or term papers. The wildly popular **Van's Warped Tour** blasts the campus each summer, and the fall lineup includes **The Black Keys**, a hugely popular rock duo with garage-band roots, October 10 in the massive Pan American Center, home to **Aggie basketball** (panam.nmsu.edu). We attend professional performances, exhibitions, and free lectures, and often find ourselves feeling young by association in nearby hangout **Milagro's Coffee y Espresso**, where one talented barista and foam artist, Yedi Quiroz, tops steaming coffee with whimsical art: cartoon animals, intricate heart-shaped flowers, or anything customers request (milagrocoffeeonline.com).



ANNI MURPHY

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Sacred Ascensions

The one-mile trek up this turtle-shaped desert hill known as **Tortugas Mountain** (aka "A" Mountain) passes through native grasses, ocotillos, and fat barrel cactus, and rewards hikers with a divine 360-degree view. From my perch I gauge exactly how much Las Cruces has grown since my childhood, then face east, toward the Organ Mountains, and chart my wanderings.

On December 11, **Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** Corporation members welcome all respectful visitors to join them on their **Tortugas Pilgrimage** to honor their patron saint. Native American and Catholic traditions combine in this celebration, when Pueblo members walk up the mountain *dos y dos* while praying on a three-mile trip to the summit. They craft walking sticks from desert plants called *quiotes*, celebrate mass, share a meal, and recite the rosary, then set the mountain aglow with a bonfire and a giant cross in lights when they descend at dusk. Matachine and Pueblo dances continue in the town of Tortugas on December 12, the feast day (575-526-8171).

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New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum

This 47-acre living museum, part of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, gives today's generation a look at farming and ranching throughout our history, since well before New Mexico became a state. Indoor exhibitions help tell the story, but the orchards (apple, pecan, and pistachio) and livestock outside bring it alive. Throughout the day, docent-guided cart tours take visitors to the "South 20" livestock pens of dairy and beef cattle, horses, sheep, and burros. You might be able to catch a milking or blacksmithing demo. On Saturday mornings, pony rides are available for kids at an additional charge (nmfarmandranchmuseum.org).

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Crafty Drafts

High Desert Brewing Company offers craftbrew fans 11 beers on tap (such as peach wheat and Oktoberfest lager), concocted by biologists-turned-brewers Bob Goslin and Mark Cunningham. Crowds spill onto the patio Thursday and Saturday nights, when musicians take the stage. The watering hole could just as easily be called **High Desert Eatery**—food is no afterthought here. Pub grub and Southern New Mexican cuisine meet cute on this menu, from the perennial fave green-chile cheeseburger to chipotle-chile quesadillas with asadero cheese and tomatillos (highdesertbrewingco.com).



COURTESY JOSEFINA'S GATE

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Organ Mountain High

Resting in the shade of an enormous Ponderosa pine and listening to water gurgle over rocks and ferns might seem an unlikely endeavor anywhere near Las Cruces. But then, so does wading in a pool under a vigorous waterfall, or hiking to a canyon of maples wearing their orange and scarlet finery—and you can do it all here. Visit a hermit's cave and a crumbling turn-of-the-century health resort at **Dripping Springs**, on the west slope. A curlicue road leads to **Aguirre Spring** and its shady picnic and camping spots, on the mountains' east side; trek over the mountains at **Baylor Pass** (blm.gov/nm).



PAMELA PORTER

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Stay a While

Venture away from Interstates 10 and 25 to find unique accommodations that make any trip more memorable. In Mesilla, fall into an elegant brass bed at **Josefina's Gate Inn** (left), an 1850s building with 21st-century amenities. Two-foot-thick walls provide privacy to a pair of suites that share an indoor greenhouse and outdoor patio. Just steps away, guests dine on green-chile posole and fresh quiche at the café, named for the most photographed gate in the area (josefinasoldgate.com). **Lundeen's Inn of the Arts**, a 20-bedroom B&B in the downtown area, also oozes with history; it's a 100-year-old, former Mexican territorial property. Refined furnishings, 300 pieces of fine art, and lively breakfast conversation keep regulars coming back (innofthearts.com). **Hotel Encanto** (hotelencao.com), one of New Mexico's Heritage Hotels, offers the luxury of a full-service hotel, including excellent dining. ❖

Pam Porter is featured in "Storytellers," (p. 6).