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New Mexico, land of pilgrims

New Mexico has always attracted spiritual seekers. Under widescreen skies, Nick Thorpe is both silenced and blown away.

Nick Thorpe

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The beaver surfaces as dusk falls. On the mirrored surface of the river Chama, his blunt snout carves a V-shaped ripple through the reflection of a low crescent moon hung above dark canyon walls.

It's the kind of poised moment that transcends words — which is just as well, since I'm staying at a Benedictine monastery and forbidden to utter any. A guest whose name I will never know stays obligingly quiet too, thanks to a wooden dove emblem hanging around my neck which means: "Please don't talk to me — I'm on silent retreat." Instead, we stand watching in mute awe until the curious rodent is disturbed, somewhat ironically, by the tolling of the chapel bell for Vespers. With a warning slap of his tail on the water, he dives out of sight.



Christ in the Desert offers a silent and spiritually-charged retreat

Monastic cloisters weren't always high on my list of holiday destinations. But in an era when even a country hike is liable to be desecrated by the trilling of a mobile, I defy you to find silence as well-protected and spiritually charged as at Christ in the Desert. At the very end of a 13-mile dirt track in the stark beauty of the Chama Canyon wilderness in northern New Mexico, its adobe bell tower stands, in the words of the late Thomas Merton, "like a watchman looking for something or someone of whom it does not speak".

A non-speaking holiday? Friends at home frowned quizzically when I told them, but New Mexico has always welcomed quiet pilgrims under its widescreen skies, from Buddhists to New Age hippies. They call it the Land of Enchantment. "A lot of people come here seeking spiritual sustenance," said the keeper of a religious icon shop in Albuquerque. "It's something to do with the desert, being in this vastness where you have to contemplate how tiny you are in comparison."

None of that made the prospect of three days of complete silence any easier, but there was no shortage of advice as I drove north across shimmering plains and vast pink mesas. "It could be the hardest thing you'll ever do," predicted a Muslim I met at a mosque shortly before the tarmacked road ran out.

"You'll hear all kinds of voices in your head. The key is not to fight them or identify with them."

"Treat your thoughts like clouds passing by," agreed a Zen Buddhist in the New Age Mecca of Santa Fe. "You'll find they're either about things you want but don't have, or the other way around. But your goal is to live only in the present moment."

I'm glad they warned me. Within minutes of settling into my simple adobe "cell" (bed, desk, cupboard, shared bathrooms), my brain was jabbering with disjointed thoughts, lists and advertising jingles, like a TV operated by a channel-surfing chimp. How was I going to get through 72 hours?

There are, thankfully, a few stepping stones across this ocean of time. Apart from hiking, beaver-spotting, reading and meditating, guests are welcome at any of the eight short daily offices, where black-robed monks from 10 countries offer up Gregorian chants and fragrant incense. The canyon walls framed in the vast chapel windows induce a healthy sense of perspective, even if you're not sure anybody out there is listening.

Meals are strange yet wholesome affairs. Guests and monks face one another wordlessly across the beautiful timber-beamed refectory, munching on organic produce and soothed by classical music or a reading from a spiritual biography — a sort of monastic Book of the Week.

Optional chores present an added challenge to the mute, but it's amazing how much can be communicated with nods and smiles, as I discover folding bed linen one morning with a grinning Vietnamese novice called Dominic.

Not that conversation is absolutely banned. Monks talk when necessary, and guests bursting for a blether can head for the common room or take a walk together — which is why the stubborn purists among us are supplied with little wooden insignia to ward off the talkies like vampires. It's not a great way to make friends, but useful for wildlife watching and soul searching. In the absence of chatter, you notice much subtler noises — the burr of birds' wings flying overhead, the patter of animal feet among the scrub, your own breathing.

Monkey-mind continues to play tricks, but by day three I'm learning to take my thoughts a bit less seriously. Having found the perfect riverside tree to read under, for example, I'm wryly amused to notice myself instantly plotting how to make sure nobody else pinches the spot. Anything, it seems, but actually enjoy the present moment.

"It's funny how often we forget to see things," agrees the guestmaster, Brother Andre, as I bid the place farewell and reactivate my vocal cords with something surprisingly close to regret. "You don't need to be religious to enjoy this place, just spiritual — but it isn't for everybody. We had one guy who couldn't take the silence. He fled."

Artists and elders

Up on the vast mesa in Taos, a rather different class of hermit once faced the opposite problem. Lured to this frontier desert settlement early in the last century by Mabel Dodge Luhan, a charismatic but "complex" American society hostess, artistic luminaries, from the novelist D H Lawrence to the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, found it took only a few days at her Bohemian country mansion before they were craving escape.

"She had a great feeling for art," explains Judy Jordan, the tactful resident historian at Mabel's adobe guesthouse, now run as a sort of live-in shrine to earlier visitors such as the photographer Ansel Adams, the psychology pioneer Carl Jung and the writer Aldous Huxley. It comes complete with bright bathroom windows painted by D H Lawrence. "She also drove people crazy because she thought she knew what was best for them. Few of them stayed long," adds Judy.

It proved a boon to art: nearly a century later the New Mexico landscape is peppered with the boltholes of artist-hermits fleeing her forceful personality — from the designer comfort of Georgia O'Keeffe's winter studio in the hilltop village of Abiquiu to the now decrepit Lawrence ranch at the foot of Taos mountain.

Yet Mabel's well-meaning fascination for Native American spirituality did at least win her one long-term ally in her fourth husband, Tony Lujan (later anglicised to Luhan), a chief from the nearby Taos Pueblo. This multi-storey adobe structure is now a Unesco World Heritage Site and one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the US.

"People have been living here for a thousand years," says Joe Martinez, a modern-day tribal elder and tour guide, who recently led the restoration.

Tucked somewhere deep in the brooding mountains above us is Blue Lake, a secret place of pilgrimage to Native Americans that was returned to their care by an unusually obliging President Nixon in 1971. Mabel was probably one of the last whites to see it. "It's almost like a church to us, but we're not allowed to tell anyone about what we do up there," explains Martinez politely. "If I told you, then everyone would know."

Uplifting experience

For a more accessible form of spirituality, head for Santa Fe, where you can pick and mix your way through "vibrational therapy", Buddhist meditation in a Zen Temple, or a good kneading by a personal masseuse at the Ten Thousand Waves Japanese-style spa.

But for something more literally uplifting, the destination has to be Albuquerque. In the darkness of a cold October morning, I'm ushered into a wicker basket for the ultimate act of faith — a flight in a helium-filled pig.

"When Pigs Fly' was my father's favourite phrase when I was growing up," explains our pilot, Doug Gantt, as we lift slowly upwards below "Hamlet's" glowing pink trotters. "I guess this was a kind of response to him."

We're leading the dawn patrol, testing the wind for several hundred balloons being unfurled like tongues along the sports field below us. The annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is one of the most spectacular in the world, thanks to a reliable climatic circulation known as the Albuquerque Box.

Around us at 7,000ft, 10 glowing balloons hang like planets above the dark meander of the Rio Grande, waiting for the sun to creep around the earth's curvature. It's a surreal, almost mystical experience. Below, a river of car headlights moves steadily along the freeway — among them a black "chase truck" and trailer, which will follow us to our landing site. A freight train lows plaintively in the distance as, finally, orange light spills over the top of the Sandia mountains and ignites the uppermost balloons one by one.

"I never tire of it," sighs Doug, a flying veteran of 25 years whose angle on the ethereal is no stranger than any other I have encountered in this enchanted land.

"Lifting out of the darkness to meet the morning sun. It's the closest you'll ever get to being a cloud."

New Mexico basics

Nick Thorpe travelled to New Mexico courtesy of North America Travel Service (0113 243 0000, www.northamericatravelservice.co.uk) and New Mexico Tourism (www.newmexico.org).

North America Travel Service offers a scheduled return flight with American Airlines from London or Manchester to Albuquerque plus one week's car rental from £687 per person (based on two travelling), with tailor-made itineraries.

Santa Fe and around

- Christ in the Desert Monastery (www.christdesert.org) offers basic room and full board for a suggested donation of \$60.
- The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe (001 505 946 1000, www.okeeffemuseum.org; \$8 admission) houses seasonal and permanent exhibitions; tours of O'Keeffe's home and studio in Abiquiu cost \$30 per person and must be booked (001 505 685 4539).
- Inn on the Alameda (001 505 984 2121, www.inn-alameda.com; doubles from \$125).
- Spa: Ten Thousand Waves (001 505 982 9304, www.tenthousandwaves.com).

Taos

- Mabel Dodge Luhan House (001 575 751 9686, www.mabeldodgeluhan.com); doubles from \$95.
- Taos Pueblo (001 575 758 1028, www.taospueblo.com; tours available from \$10).
- The Historic Taos Inn (001 575 758 2233, www.taosinn.com; doubles from \$75) – great atmosphere, comfortable rooms, live music, excellent restaurant.

Albuquerque

- The 2008 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (001 505 821 1000, www.balloonfiesta.com) runs from October 4 to 13.
- Nativo Lodge (001 505 798 4300, www.sterlinghotels.com; doubles from \$89) – close to the balloon fiesta park.
- Adobe Nido B&B (001 505 344 1310, www.adobenido.com; doubles from \$109) - cosy and welcoming, with spa.

Guidebook choice

New Mexico (Insight Guides, £14.99) gives excellent background on culture, history and folklore (www.insightguides.com).

Nick Thorpe is the author of [Adrift in Caledonia: Boat-hitching for the Unenlightened](#), published by Abacus (www.nickthorpe.co.uk).
