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Blaze a trail through great golf in New Mexico

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By [Jason Scott Deegan](#),
Senior Contributor



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The view of the 15th green from the elevated 16th tee at Paa-Ko Ridge in Sandia Park, N.M. The 15th hole is a 640-yard par-5 named Turquoise Trail. (Jason Scott Deegan/Worldgolf.com)

New Mexico golf is often overshadowed by its neighbor to the west. But with great golf courses - including Santa Fe Golf Trail standouts Paa-Ko Ridge, Twin Warriors and Sandia G.C. - word is getting out about golf in New Mexico.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - *Red or green?*

This is a question asked every visitor in New Mexico. It's not about what local high school or college you root for. It simply refers to what type of chile pepper you would prefer in your meal.

The locals love their chile. The homegrown colored peppers come in mashed potatoes, on baby back ribs, in breakfast burritos and even in cookies. Meals in New Mexico only come in two flavors, spicy and "en fuego."

And yet, the golf is even hotter.

New Mexico doesn't get the love that Arizona receives from traveling golfers, but that just doesn't make sense. True, the state may not have the depth of quality golf courses that a place like Scottsdale has; still, it delivers where Arizona often fails. [Golf in New Mexico](#) can offer a similar desert experience, albeit much cheaper and generally with much cooler temperatures at higher elevations.

Eight quality courses comprise the Santa Fe Golf Trail, ranging from friendly resort tracks to treacherous mountain courses and challenging desert layouts that host national championships. And with family-friendly pursuits like ballooning and the world's longest tram ride, a trip to Albuquerque will impress even the most jaded world traveler.

New Mexico golf: Where to play

Most golfers will stick near Albuquerque, although the [Black Mesa Golf Club](#) and Towa [Golf Resort](#), both about an hour north of Santa Fe, could be considered as well.

The 27-hole [Paa-Ko Ridge in Sandia Park](#), named the only 5-star course in the southwest by *Golf Digest*, is a must. [Ken Dye](#) designed dramatic holes that dart in all directions. Pay close attention to the GPS in the cart on the fourth hole, a 183-yard par 3 with a three-tiered green that is more than 60 yards long. The starter encourages everyone to play the par-3 16th and par-4 17th holes from the tips. Your score will likely suffer, but the views from atop the signature ridge are worth it.

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The [Championship Golf Course at University of New Mexico](#) in Albuquerque, affectionately known as "The Monster," can dish out some humble pie of its own. [Architect Red Lawrence's](#) course regularly hosts top college [tournaments](#), most recently the women's 2009 NCAA Division I Championship.

Holes dance over arroyos, gullies and ridges to fickle elevated greens that repel wayward approaches. With fees topping out at \$70 during the summer, this historic track that dates back to 1967 remains a bargain.

Not to be outdone, [Twin Warriors Golf Club](#) in Santa Ana Pueblo hosted the 2009 PGA Professional National Championship. The nation's top PGA pros battled the [Gary Panks design](#), attempting to qualify for the PGA Championship with Tiger Woods and crew. The 7,776-yard Twin Warriors is both beauty and beast. A strong stretch along the back nine abuts a sacred butte, the Tuyuna, or "Snakehead" in English. The design team had to work around 20 Native American cultural sites, such as a cave visible from the 16th tee and an old horse corral near the 18th tee box.

The nearby 27-hole [Santa Ana Golf Club](#) isn't as seductive as its sister course at Twin Warriors. The tougher Star nine demands several blind tee shots to fairways hidden by desert scrub. Santa Ana played roughly five shots easier than Twin Warriors during the 2009 PGA Professional National Championship.

The [Sandia Golf Club](#) in the shadow of the towering Sandia Peak in Albuquerque gets the nod as the best resort course in New Mexico. Canted fairways keep stray tee balls in play... and when balls do find the scrub, it's usually clear enough for a recovery shot. Sandia [architect Scott Miller](#) might be the best designer you've never heard of. His work at [We-Ko-Pa](#) in Arizona and [Coeur d'Alene](#) in Idaho is second to none.

The 27-hole facility at [Isleta Eagle](#), a former U.S. qualifier and Futures [Tour](#) site [designed by Bill Phillips](#), doesn't deliver the magical setting of other golf courses on the trail. It's a no-frills layout that demands precise shots, with fairways bordered by mounding and thick rough. Thanks to its proximity to the airport, playing Isleta is a great way to start off a golf trip. Use it as a warm-up for the bigger challenges that lay ahead.

New Mexico: Where to stay

The 228-room Sandia Resort & Casino can be seen for miles, towering above the desert landscape. The decor in the large rooms reflects the pueblo heritage, which is nicely complemented by flat screen TVs. The Green Reed Spa can relieve the stress of losing money on the golf course or the casino floor. The hot and cold tubs and steam room and sauna in the locker rooms revitalize the senses before and after a treatment.

Dynamic style highlights the new [hotel](#) at the Isleta Casino & Resort. Built separate from the casino in 2008, the new building offers unique features, including elevators that ride a five-story all-glass casing; a conference room ceiling that projects voices without a microphone; and an outdoor hot tub for spa guests covered by a massive structure shaped like Isleta Pueblo pottery.

If gambling's not your thing, the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa is just a mile or so away from the Santa Ana Star Casino at the foot of the Sandia Mountains. But the mood at this intimate retreat across the street from the Twin Warriors Golf Club feels light years away. There are three separate pools, one secluded for adults only. Horse carriage rides and trails allow guests to interact with the natural surroundings in the shadow of the mountain, while the Tamaya Mist Spa provides another option for escape.

New Mexico: Where to eat

The food in New Mexico can be fabulous, just be careful about inhaling too much chile. The exotic menu of the Tamaya's Corn Maiden, named for the honored symbol of the Santa Ana Pueblo, runs the gamut from rose-salted beef ribeye and lavender-salted shrimp to wild boar cranberry sausage.

For a casual night out, try the Chama River Brewery Co. in Albuquerque, where you can mix house beers with staples such as ribs and meatloaf. The Sandiago's Mexican Grill at the Tram, located at the base of the Sandia Peak Tram, is a festive, family-friendly joint with Christmas lights hanging year-round to liven up your meal.

The TIWA Steakhouse at Isleta serves up tasty slabs of meat and seafood entrees galore - sea bass, lobster and king crab, to name a few.

El Pinto, however, delivers the most authentic New Mexican dining experience. The restaurant seats 1,000 people and manufactures its own salsa in a factory out back. Try combining dinner with a sipping-only shot of tequila. That's the local way.

New Mexico: Off the course

Rainbow Ryders, the world's second-largest [touring](#) company, can take any visit to Albuquerque to new heights - literally. Ballooning over the serene Rio Grande Valley is a year-round pursuit, highlighted by the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta every October. Ballooning can be both exhilarating - *Am I really floating at the mercy of the wind in this tiny basket?* - and supremely relaxing, as the pilot glides the lofty vessel casually about town and over the muddy Rio Grande.

The Sandia Peak Tramway is just as uplifting. The world's longest aerial tramway rides a cable 2.7 miles to the top of Sandia Peak at an elevation of 10,378 feet. Along the way, enjoy peering down into deep canyons and the surrounding Cibola National Forest. At the top, soak in the panoramic views or feast at the High Finance Restaurant. In winter, locals ride the tram to the top and ski down the other side.

New Mexico golf: Final thoughts

The top five courses of the Santa Fe Golf Trail - Twin Warriors, Paa-Ko Ridge, the University of New Mexico course, Sandia and Black Mesa - can compete with any combination in the country for value, scenery and shot-making. It is truly one of the nation's best-kept golf secrets. This trip should be on the bucket list of every serious player.

Gallery



October 30, 2009

Jason Scott Deegan has reviewed more than 400 courses and golf [destinations](#) for some of the industry's biggest publications. His work has been honored by the Golf Writer's Association of America and the [Michigan Press Association](#). He got his start writing with the WorldGolf.com Network in 1999.



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Golf in NM

Billie wrote on: Oct 30, 2009

You missed the Santa Fe portion of the tour. Black Mesa always gets high ratings, Towa has great views and Las Campanas has two courses that may be easier to play on these days.

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[Blaze a trail through great golf in New Mexico](#)

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