

Church

Thousands of pilgrims trek through New Mexico desert to historic adobe church for Good Friday

MORGAN LEE

Associated Press

CHIMAYÓ, N.M. — A unique Holy Week tradition drew thousands of Catholic pilgrims to a small adobe church in the hills of northern New Mexico, in a journey on foot through desert badlands to reach a spiritual wellspring.

For generations, people of the Upper Rio Grande Valley and beyond have walked to reach El Santuario de Chimayó to commemorate Good Friday.

Pilgrims began arriving at dawn. Some had walked through the night under a half moon, carrying glowsticks, flashlights and walking sticks.

Some travelers are lured by an indoor well of dirt believed to have curative powers. Throughout the year, they leave behind crutches, braces and

canes in acts of prayer for infirm children and others, and as evidence that miracles happen.

Easter week visitors file through an adobe archway and narrow indoor passages to find a crucified Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas at the main altar. According to local lore, the crucifix was found on the site in the early 1800s, a continent away from its analog at a basilica in the Guatemalan town of Esquipulas.

A SPIRITUAL PLACE

Chimayó, known for its artisan weavings and chile crops, rests high above the Rio Grande Valley and opposite the national defense laboratory at Los Alamos that sprang up in the race to develop the first atomic weapon.

The iconic adobe church at Chimayó was cast from local mud at the sunset of Spanish

rule in the Americas in the early 1800s, on a site already held sacred by Native Americans.

Set amid narrow streets, curio shops and brooks that flow quickly in spring, El Santuario de Chimayó has been designated as a National Historic Landmark that includes examples of 19th century Hispanic folk art, religious frescoes and saints carved from wood known as bultos.

A separate chapel is dedicated to the Santo Niño de Atocha, a patron saint of children, travelers and those seeking liberation and a fitting figure of devotion for Chimayó pilgrims on the go.

Hundreds of children's shoes have been left in a prayer room there by the faithful in tribute to the holy child who wears out footwear on miraculous errands.

There are even tiny boots tacked to the ceiling.

Pueblo people who inhabited the Chimayó area long before Spanish settlers believed healing spirits could be found in the form of hot springs. Those springs ultimately dried up, leaving behind earth attributed with healing powers.

A WAY OF LIFE

Photographer Miguel Gandert grew up in the Española valley below Chimayó and made the pilgrimage as a boy with his parents.

"Everybody went to Chimayó. You didn't have to be Catholic," said Gandert, who was among those who photographed the 1996 pilgrimage through a federal grant. "People just went there because it was a powerful, spiritual place."

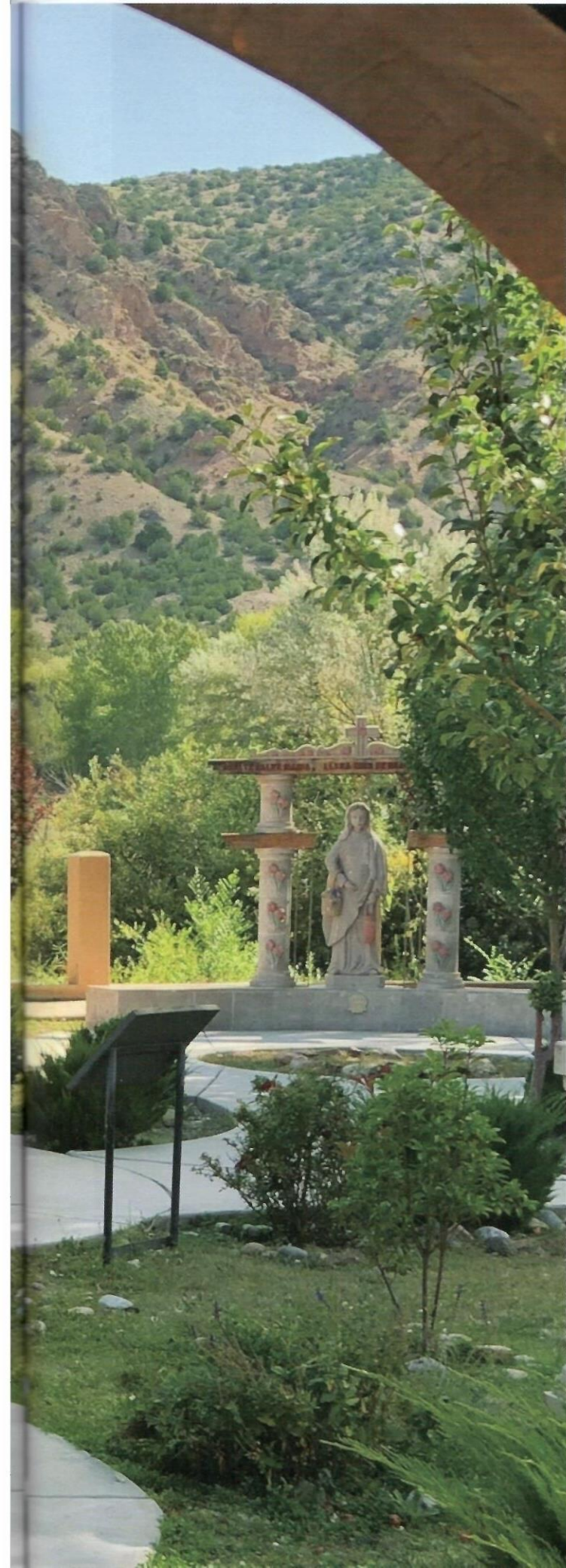
THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Enchanted

A desert monk's guide to Catholic New Mexico

FAITH

El Santuario de Chimayo is nestled in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near the path of the Old Spanish Trail.



By Brother Chrysostom Christie-Searles

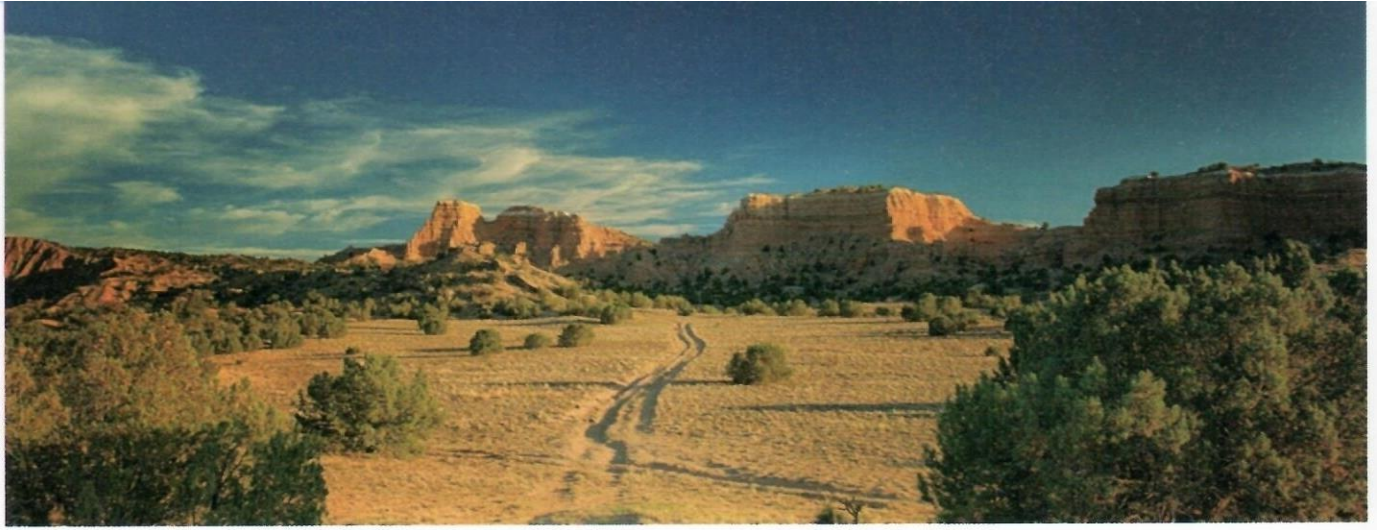
New Mexico, known as “The Land of Enchantment,” is indeed a place of mystery. My first encounter with the state dates back to 2005. I flew into the Sunport, as Albuquerque’s international airport is named, rented a car — a convertible so that I might enjoy the expansive views — and drove to the Sangre de Cristo Retreat Center, tucked away in the Rio Chupadero Valley, just 20 minutes north of Santa Fe.

I was more impressed that the legal speed limit on the straight, vegetation-deprived highway was 75 mph than with the expanding urban sprawl of Albuquerque. The city was founded in 1706 by Don Francisco Cuervo y Valdés, governor and captain general of New Mexico, and graced with its name by the Duke of Alburquerque (the first r was later dropped), then viceroy of New Spain. After leaving the city limits, I reveled in my choice of vehicle as I enjoyed verdant grasslands, mesas and peaks from the road.

Upon arriving at the retreat center, I spent the next day or two settling into a routine — attending lectures, spending time in silence and enjoying the grounds. Soon I wanted to get out and experience the beauty of New Mexico. To do that, I was told, I must travel north to where the water was.

Jumping back into my rented red Chrysler Sebring, I drove up Interstate 25 and then onto I-85, stopping at the historic home-turned-art-museum of Russian-American painter Nicolai Fechin. The open space and natural beauty of Taos were arresting. However, when I asked a shop owner there, originally a Midwesterner like myself, what she missed most being in the desert, she replied with mild desperation, “Trees and seasons!” Upon completing my one-week retreat, I could sympathize with her foliage withdrawal.

I also made a stop at Ghost Ranch, a 21,000-acre education and retreat center (now owned by the Presbyterian church) containing the former residence of Georgia O’Keeffe. At the time, I was unaware that a monastery rested in the Chama Canyon, less than an hour’s drive away. A 13-mile, undulating gravel road led to a place that would feature prominently in my spiritual life narrative.



What compelled me to make a retreat in New Mexico, you ask?

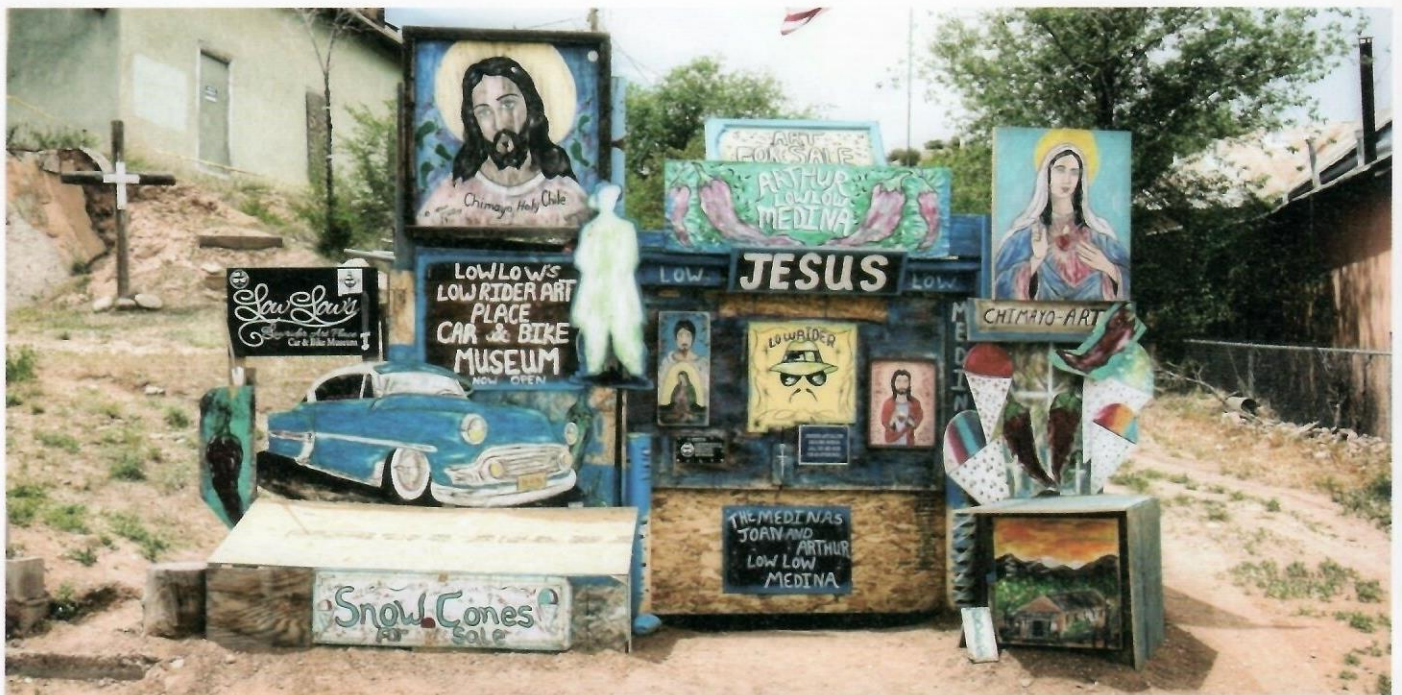
Before my initial visit to the Sangre de Cristo Retreat Center (which is no longer open), I was a gyrovague monk in the making. A gyrovague wanders from monastery to monastery, staying for short stints and then moving on. In his Rule, St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, strongly cautions against this lifestyle, comparing gyrovague monks unfavorably to anchorite monks, who live as hermits, and cenobite monks, who live in community.

Although I had developed a spiritual practice of visiting a different monastery every year for a week, I had no intention — or perceived vocation — of becoming a cenobite monk. My gyrovague tendencies took me on retreats to monasteries throughout the U.S.: St. Meinrad in Indiana, Gethsemani in Kentucky, Mount Saviour in New York, Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina, Glastonbury Abbey in Massachusetts, New Melleray in Iowa and others. I planned to return to New Mexico in 2007 for a retreat at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert outside of Abiquiú — the place I just missed visiting in 2005 — but I had to cancel because of conflicting commitments. Six years later, I finally made it. Fast-forward 10 years to 2023: I became a solemnly professed monk at the monastery. As I said at the beginning, New Mexico is a mysterious place.

Over the years in my new home state of New Mexico, a number of places near Santa Fe have enriched my faith and my vocation. Santa Fe's original name was *La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís*, "Santa Fe" meaning "Holy Faith" in Spanish. Governor Pedro de Peralta founded the city in 1610, making it the oldest capital city in the United States, predating the founding of the country.

The history of Catholicism in the Santa Fe area began in the mid-16th century, with the arrival of the Spanish. While conquistadors had passed through what is now known as New Mexico in search of gold and silver as early as 1527, the first permanent settlement did not arrive in the area until 1598. In that year, Juan de Oñate arrived from New Spain with a few hundred Spanish settlers, including a handful of Franciscan priests, and more than 5,000 head of livestock. Oñate's stated objective was to spread the Catholic faith, and houses of worship reflecting a blend of Indigenous culture and Hispanic piety were among the first buildings constructed.

Let's jump into our imaginary convertible and cruise to the hidden and not-so-hidden places of spiritual interest in and around Santa Fe. This will by no means be an exhaustive tour, but it's a good start. Seeing how I have embraced the region as my home — or vice versa — who knows how the Land of Enchantment will call you, and to which of the special sites listed below. Buckle your seat belt.

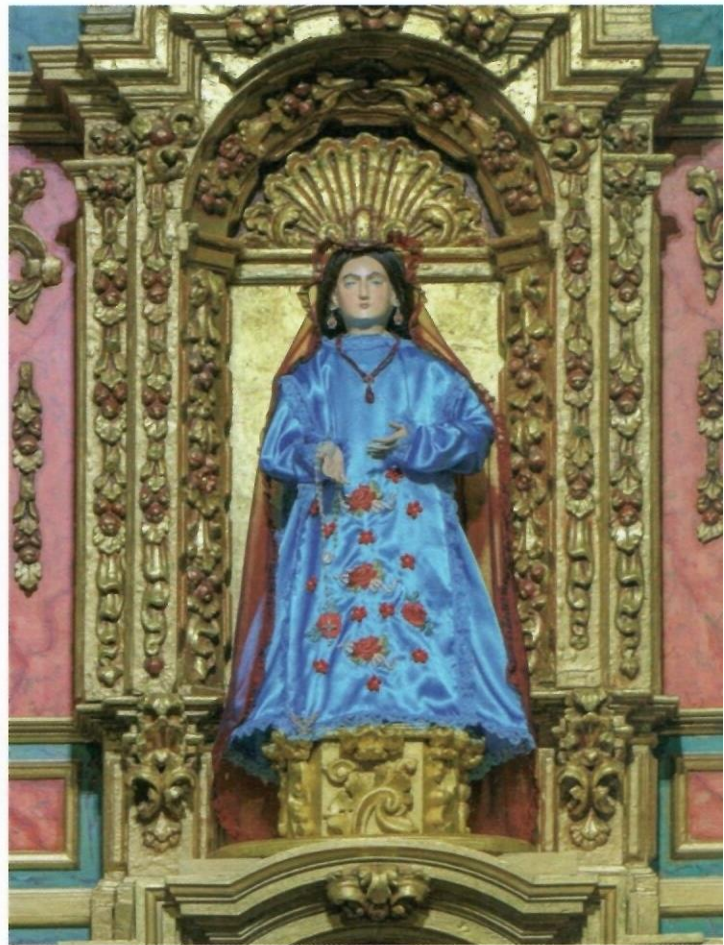


The Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi

Tourists flock to the historic neighborhood surrounding Santa Fe Plaza because of its art galleries, museums and delicious Southwestern cuisine, but the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi beckons from most every angle. It would take a great deal of effort to resist the pull of stepping inside the imposing French Romanesque Revival structure. Visitors are greeted at the entrance by a full-color statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha.

Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy built the cathedral between 1869 and 1886. Similar to churches in Rome, it was built on the ruins of other churches that occupied the same site. La Parroquia, an adobe structure built 1714–1717, preceded the cathedral. It, in turn, was built upon another church dating to 1626.

Feast day liturgies in the cathedral are spectacular. An angelic-sounding music ministry enriches the worship experience encompassed by works of traditional religious art known as santos. Making santos — sculptures and paintings of the saints — has been central to Hispanic culture in New Mexico for more than 400 years, providing generations of New Mexicans with symbols of identity and faith. For New Mexicans of Hispanic descent, sacred images are as rooted in their culture as the language itself. Inside the cathedral, in her own private chapel, you will find La Conquistadora, the oldest Madonna in the United States. The statue, hand-carved in willow and European olive wood, arrived in 1625, though its date of fabrication and exact place of origin remain obscure. La Conquistadora has more than 300 outfits corresponding to the liturgical calendar. These are changed at least monthly by members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary.





Making two full turns as it climbs 20 feet into the air with no central support, the Loretto Chapel staircase is considered a marvel of craftsmanship even today.

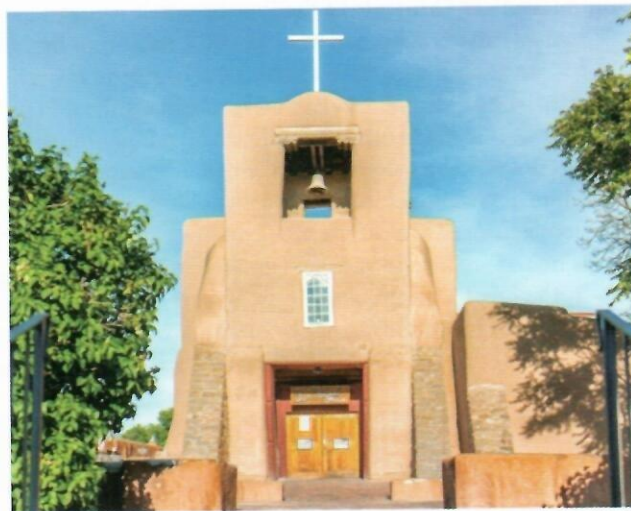
A reliquary containing relics of some of the most revered saints in history is also located within the chapel. This storied cathedral gained another claim to fame when Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass here in 1987.

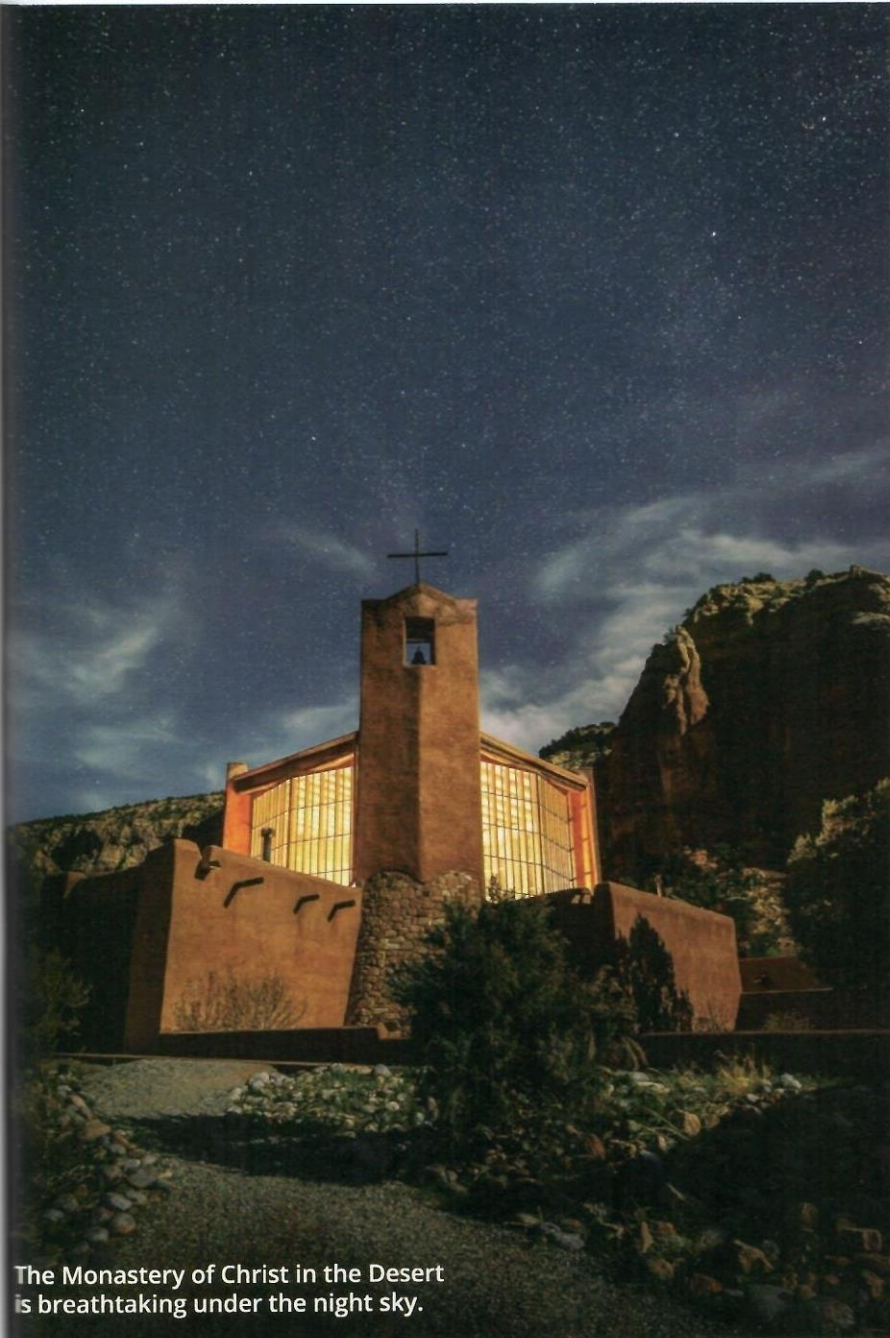
The miraculous staircase of the Loretto Chapel

A quick walk from the cathedral is the Loretto Chapel, home to a mysterious spiral staircase. The story goes that as the chapel was nearing its completion in the late 1870s, the architect died before he was able to design a staircase that could access the choir loft. Other carpenters balked at the idea of creating a staircase within the chapel's narrow walls. Instead, they recommended that the sisters who tended the chapel use a ladder to reach the choir loft. Hoping for another solution, the sisters made a novena to St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. Tradition holds that on that ninth and final day of the novena, a man arrived with a donkey and toolbox and offered to help with the staircase. He did not give his name and had one condition: that he be left alone when he worked in the chapel. The mysterious carpenter was able to construct a staircase in the space of a few short months. Making two full turns as it climbs 20 feet into the air with no central support, the staircase is considered a marvel of craftsmanship even today.

San Miguel Chapel

From the Loretto Chapel, you can take a walk along the Santa Fe River to San Miguel Chapel, the site of the first Spanish mission and one of the oldest churches in the continental United States. The Tlaxcalans, who had been Indigenous allies of the Spanish against the Aztecs in Mexico, built the original adobe walls and altar in 1610, but much of the structure was rebuilt in 1710.





The Monastery of Christ in the Desert is breathtaking under the night sky.



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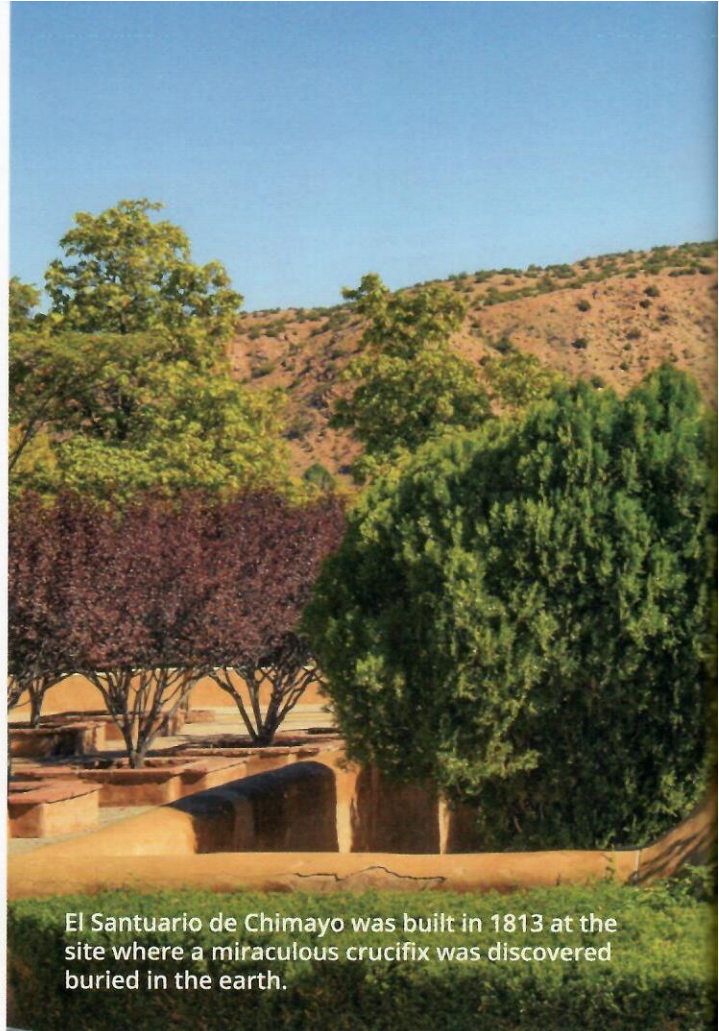


GREEN, RED OR CHRISTMAS?

The existential question of all New Mexicans is, "green or red?"

This refers to how they will consume their delicious enchiladas, quesadillas and just about everything else. Will it be with green chiles, red chiles or both: Christmas, as New Mexicans call it.

Try it all at The Shed, a family-owned restaurant a short walk from the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe. Or, in September, buy your own chiles and have them roasted right in any grocery store parking lot!



El Santuario de Chimayo was built in 1813 at the site where a miraculous crucifix was discovered buried in the earth.

If you're there on the first Sunday of the month, you can catch the 3 p.m. Mass. Otherwise, take a moment to pray before the beautiful hand-carved wooden reredos containing a statue of St. Michael the Archangel dating from 1709.

El Santuario de Chimayo

To really grasp the Catholic spirit in the Santa Fe area, we'll have to drive outside the city into the expansive deserts and mesas. After a leisurely stroll to the convertible, the next place on our tour is El Santuario de Chimayo. About 25 miles due north of Santa Fe, El Santuario de Chimayo is a small shrine located in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near the path of the Old Spanish Trail, a historic trade route that once connected Santa Fe with Los Angeles.

The shrine was built in 1813 at the site where an apparently miraculous crucifix was discovered buried in the earth. For generations, people of faith have traveled to El Santuario to pray before the crucifix and obtain some of the shrine's "holy dirt," which has been associated with healing. With its organically curving adobe walls, El Santuario de Chimayo is one of the most beautiful examples of Spanish Colonial architecture in New Mexico, as well as one of the most important Catholic pilgrimage centers in the United States.

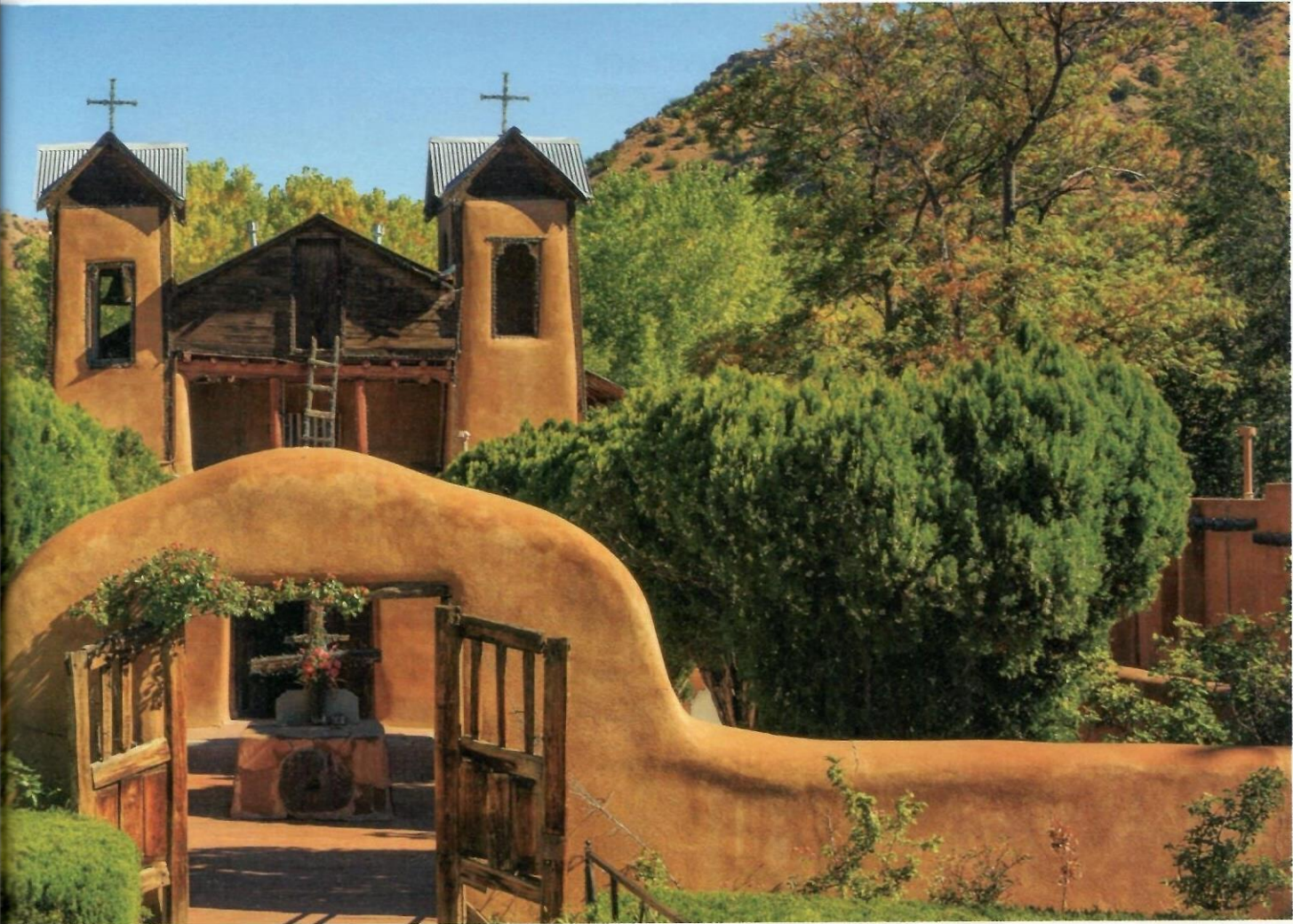
The Monastery of Christ in the Desert

To conclude the tour, I welcome all comers to visit my monastery, about a two-hour drive northwest of Chimayo. The Chama Canyon walls are impressive with the top down, although our convertible's low-hanging differential makes for a challenging driving experience.

The Monastery of Christ in the Desert in Abiquiu was founded in 1964 by Benedictine Father Aelred Wall, accompanied by monks of Mount Saviour Monastery in New York state. There is a guesthouse for private retreats during which men and women can share in the Divine Office and Mass in the abbey church with the monks. The monks engage in crafts and the entire maintenance and operations of the monastery for the community and its overnight guests. A gift shop also provides part of the monastery's income.

As we drive back to the Sunport, spiritually refreshed, I encourage you to visit the pueblos we pass along the way. Laguna Pueblo, west of Albuquerque, and Santa Clara Pueblo, north of Santa Fe, host Indigenous Catholic celebrations of saints such as St. Joseph, whose feast they celebrate Sept. 19. Bring a good memory, as photographs of the celebrations are not permitted. Vibrant costumes displaying symbolic patterns with feathers, beads and leather adorn traditional dancers of all ages, and drummers and singers may create a delightful earworm for you to savor long after the celebratory events have ended.

Time for you to take a solo drive. *Vaya con Dios!* +



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