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AWAY GAME: SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

## The Big Draw

Mixing a little art and a lot of golf in Santa Fe



**Another magical sunrise at Black Mesa Golf Club.**

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACK MESA

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Arnold Palmer famously said, "What other people may get from art or museums, I get from the flight of a good drive." In Santa Fe, N.M., you can have both. The art market ranks behind only New York and maybe San Francisco for the largest in the nation. And with an elevation of 7,000 feet and perpetual sunbaked weather, the air's so thin you might well hit the longest tee ball of your life.

Travelers from all over the world come to Santa Fe, but usually not to play golf. The open-air opera house, more than 250 art galleries and 17 museums are why there are so many fine places to stay and eat in this city of fewer than 70,000. The golf happens to be terrific, inexpensive, and the fact it's a small part of the city's tourism adds to the appeal. There are no cart boys dressed in plus-fours hustling for tips, nor starters with walkie-talkies playing soldier. If not for the carts corralled outside like livestock, I would've mistaken the clubhouse at [Black Mesa Golf Club](#) for just another ranch home--albeit for a large family--dug into the severe landscape. I'd taken a left some time ago at a small bridge and was thinking this was a wrong turn. Mine was the fourth car in the dusty lot. Granted, my friend and I were visiting after the peak summer months, when even Scottsdale golfers venture north to escape the heat. But with only 15,000 rounds annually, the pitch at Black Mesa, I'm guessing, never rises much higher than low-key.

We slung our clubs on our shoulders, and because we were already wearing our street-style golf shoes we sidestepped the problem of not knowing where to put them on.

The first person we encountered was Pat Brockwell, the superintendent. All golf-course superintendents in the Southwest dress somewhat like cowboys, and Brockwell's moustache and soft-spoken voice make him a ringer for the actor Sam Elliott.

"Fellas gonna get you some golf in?"

We said we aimed to, and Brockwell smiled proudly. Past the heaving rugs of fairway and immediate buttes, we could see for 50 miles. "Good day for it," Brockwell said.

Course architect Baxter Spann also speaks in the succinct cadence of a frontiersman. "I wanted to make a layout that was wild and untamed, like a mustang, and they let me," he says. Spann's first order of business when designing a course (his credits include the city's terrific munny, Marty Sanchez Links) is a camping trip to see how the property looks at dawn.

A word of advice: Put your bag on the cart's driver side if you don't want to relinquish control of your life. I let my friend David Haase drive, and he (wrongly) thinks he could've been a NASCAR driver. The paths are all sand, and the potential for power skids into and through the steep desert formations is considerable.

### COURSE GUIDE

- 1 **Black Mesa G.C.** ★★★★★, \$62-\$87, [blackmesagolfclub.com](http://blackmesagolfclub.com), 505-747-8946

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- 2 **Towa Golf Club**, not yet rated, \$69-\$89, [buffalothunderresort.com](http://buffalothunderresort.com), 505-455-9000

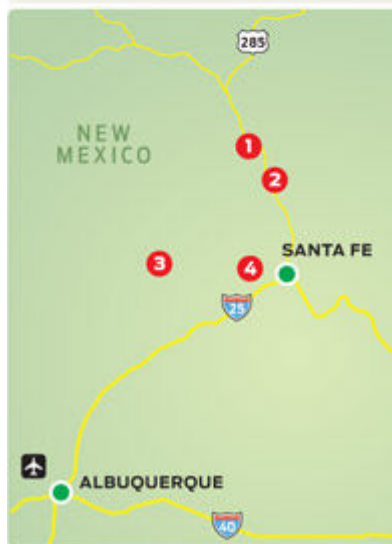
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- 3 **Cochiti G.C.** ★★★★★, \$38-\$68, [cochitigolfclub.com](http://cochitigolfclub.com), 505-465-2230

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- 4 **Marty Sanchez Links** ★★★, \$34-\$52, [linksdesantafe.com](http://linksdesantafe.com), 505-955-4400

★ Star listings from 1 to 5 are derived from readers' Best Places To Play ratings. For more, visit [courses.golfdigest.com](http://courses.golfdigest.com).



**Map: Kagan McLeod & Jonathon Rivalt**

With the sun an inch above the horizon, we played an emergency nine (this time walking), and it struck me how the experience was very "links-y." Our distance from the ocean precluded the term, but with the right imagination, the cactus-dotted topography transmuted into the sand dunes and gorse of Ireland. Not just pretty scenery, the eroding buttes have an integrated presence that truly influences how shots are played. And with the areas off the fairway more fine sand than chunky rock, you get chances at successful recoveries without ruining your clubs. Just ask Haase.

On the other side of Highway 285 is [Towa Golf Club](#), which has a complicated history of openings and closings. At present, 27 of the planned 36 holes are open. Barring a major change in the effluent water supply, this is how life will stay. The course superintendent, Jimmy Rodriguez, dressed like a cowboy but speaking like a chemist, has a plan to revive the course to grandeur despite the unusually salty topsoil.



**A walk to the tee at Towa.  
Photo: J.D. Cuban**

From what we saw, Rodriguez is close. And since the opening of the attached Hilton Buffalo Thunder Resort & Casino in 2008, the course has become more stable. The greens were pure and the grassless patches in certain fairways were few--playable concessions for environmental sustainability.

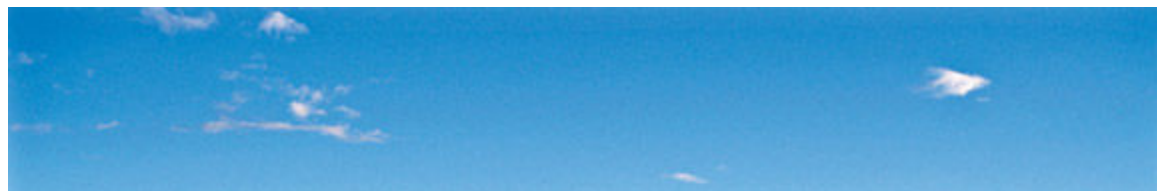
Jointly designed by Hale Irwin and William Phillips, Towa maximizes panoramic views of the Pojoaque Valley while narrowing your concentration with tight demands off the tee. A common criticism of desert golf is that holes often blend together, but that's the fault of the cart, not the architect. Every Santa Fe course we played offered a walking rate, and it's funny how hoofing it distinctly burns a course's features into your mind.

Don't let the 30-mile drive from downtown Santa Fe to [Cochiti Golf Club](#) be a deterrent. The remote location is a reward, and awaiting is the best Indian fry-bread steak sandwich for six bucks you'll ever have. Nevermind the bodice-ripper soap opera the staffer is watching as she makes your sandwich. No Golf Channel in this clubhouse.

For my argument that golf in Santa Fe is world-class without being touristy, look no further than this mint Robert Trent Jones Jr. design. With bluejeans and scraggly long hair, the starter looked like an ex-roadie for Metallica. His sidekick was an aging Doberman pinscher who feebly ran behind his cart, and the duo joined us on the 10th tee without asking.

"I hate playing by myself" was his simple introduction.

The dog, Thor, trampled my putting line a few times, but nothing could shake my high of regularly outriving Todd Kersting--the head pro at [Puerto del Sol Golf Course](#) in Albuquerque as well as Golf Digest's [No. 1 Teacher in New Mexico](#)--by 30 and 40 yards against backdrops of the Jemez Mountains. All my life I've suffered short-hitter shame, but on this day a sublime combination of heat, altitude, wide fairways with elevated tees and a few tips from Todd had me knowing power I've never known. In the desert, underclubbing with irons becomes addictive, and on par 3s the tendency is to push it as far as it can go.





**Cochiti Golf Club is on a Pueblo reservation in the Jemez foothills.  
Photo Courtesy of Cochiti**

As for the downtown, there's little I can say you won't quickly figure out for yourself. Stay anywhere in the historic district, where the narrow streets and low adobe buildings offer a sense of what the city looked like when it was founded in 1610 by Spaniards. Tia Sophia's has the best breakfast burrito, and it's almost impossible to make a wrong turn at dinner. If you go to a bar, don't think that because these people are artists they're pushovers. After a misunderstanding over a spilled drink, I barely blinked before a local in a black beret stood squarely in my face.

In the spirit of Arnold Palmer, we'd come to have our souls uplifted by big drives. I kept my right hand where it wouldn't get hurt.

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

### PLANNING HELP

Golf on the Santa Fe Trail ([golfonthesantafetrail.com](http://golfonthesantafetrail.com), 505-922-1323) is a marketing entity supported by courses in Santa Fe and Albuquerque. It offers packages and customized trips. You can save money, hassle or both by using it to book tee times and hotels.

### PLAY 'N FLY

A drawback of travel to Santa Fe is that flight options to the municipal airport are limited. You're probably going to fly into Albuquerque and then drive. However, Twin Warriors Golf Club is just north of ABQ International, making it the perfect get on the way in or out.

### BUYING ART

There's so much good art in Santa Fe, a watercolor hanging in a public bathroom might give a moment of arrest. Canyon Road is the famous half-mile strip of galleries and studios, but less serious collectors can meet artists and find trinkets of rare quality in the city's regular street fairs (*right*).



**Photo: J.D. Cuban**

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