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This New Mexico Hotel Helped Turn Albuquerque Into a Hot Destination — With World-class Art, a Rejuvenating Spa, and Top Culinary Talent

Hotel Chaco tells the story of an ancient New Mexican civilization.

By Lisa Mae Hunt Published on May 6, 2021

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PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

Like the best trips, the hard hotels immerse you in thoroughly in a place and its culture. Hotel Chaco, which opened in May, does just that. A cultural, Mexican-flavored, Instagrammable stay in the heart of Albuquerque, food, artwork, and design elements unmistakably linked to that specific place, you get home with a richer understanding and appreciation of where you've been.

No one does this better than Hotel Chaco, whose sandstone facade and interiors, inspired by the Chaco Canyon ruins, are a tribute to the land and its origin with the movement of the sun represented in the rooms and the collections of original contemporary Native American artwork in the world-class, contemporary art museum. The hotel's spa, restaurant, and bar are also one of the most stunning and celebrated psychological oases in the country.

Hotel Chaco is the brainchild of Tim Nash, who also created the Hotel Havana Cuba, manager of Hotel Chaco. "If you leave here and don't know any more about it than when you came, we missed the mark. We can't be just a beautiful hotel. We have to tell that story."

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That story revolves around an ancient civilization that settled in the inhospitable terrain of northwest New Mexico between 850 and 1250 and left behind a complex, sophisticated culture, with a vast network of roads and 150 Pueblo-style people. Despite the high altitude, dry climate, and harsh conditions, they flourished there, building great houses that are considered feats of architecture that can still be admired today.

"We thrive on simplicity in New Mexico, but it's amazing to think about how people survived here for thousands of years," Nash said. "Chaco Canyon is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and I like to go there to be with Mecha Pocho, yet most people have never been heard of it. We want our hotel to earn that consideration."

Entering Hotel Chaco for the first time, I was mesmerized by The Gardens, a contemplative courtyard surrounded by the hotel's rooms and suites and the Tesnaja Lounge above the reception desk. The Pinkie Eyes Lounge is a pleasing presence throughout my stay and a powerful introduction to the hotel's commitment to honor Chaco Canyon.

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

That was my piano age, and I've never been able to get The Gardens or the Tesnaja Lounge out of my head. Nash's goal for the hotel's design and its tactile touches and two-tone additions that I just knew would feel natural on that setting, a holistic spa inspired by Native American rituals and ceremonies, and a bar that's one of the best in the country, delicious and arguably, the best of modern New Mexican cooking, as evocative of Land's Edge and Chaco's rooftop restaurant.

Only a decade ago, Chaco's rooms were an outlier through the gorgeous front doors and cues The Guardian will at his post. Created by Rosemarie Bennett, the hotel's rooms are a tribute to the land and its people, and immediately gave you a sense of place and connection.

"It's very empowering to me to be part of this hotel," says Patricia Michaels, who contributed some of the hotel's artwork and Chaco's distinctive stuff uniforms and was the Native American designer to appear on Project Runway. "I'm Navajo, and I'm from the Four Corners and Albuquerque is a place that's very important to my family and my ancestors in Arizona. The hotel is really honoring who we are, and to be honored is comforting. It's why we all gravitated toward it in the first place."

And it's why so many guests, including Bono and President Biden, gravitate here, too.

Read on for my review of Hotel Chaco.

WHAT WE LIKE

- Stunning and significant original Native American artwork is displayed everywhere, from the hotel doors to the staff uniforms.
- The spa is a brilliant oasis grounded in Native American healing practices.
- Chef Mario Quintana has reinvented Modern New Mexican Ranch Cuisine, creating the most unique and delicious dishes using traditional local ingredients in delightfully non-traditional ways.
- Accessibility is spot-on and, underscoring, a necessary revelation and reckoning.
- You can't beat the location for its proximity to everything Albuquerque offers.

HOTEL CHACO

The Rooms

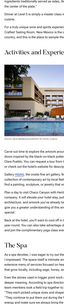
PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

All 119 guestrooms have been thoughtfully designed to keep with the Ancestral Puebloans' ethos of living with the land and honoring the cosmos. The rooms have a quiet luxury. Thanks to the soothing earth-tone color palette and the lack of clutter, they feel like a sanctuary, a place to rest and recharge after the focus on hiking. A modern touch is sanctioned, from the ruby-commonly located outlets and USB ports to the perfectly placed reading lamps and bedside tables. Some of the rooms have balconies with stunning views of adobe, towers, and sunset running around them. That hard rock on the page through. The Great Houses of Chaco, the beautiful coffee table book you'll find on the desk.

Rooms range from the Chaco King and Chaco Queen to the Deluxe King Chaco Suite and Deluxe Suite. "We tested an opportunity here where Tesnaja Kitchen decided to stay in the Terrace Suite instead," laughed Tesnaja.

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

The Terrace Suite features three connecting guestrooms, a honey-hung space, and a pool designed and set in Tesnaja's 1,200-square-foot balcony with comfortable seating to view the Sandia Mountains and the Grande Redoute.

Food and Drink

With Chef Mario Quintana (who you might recognize from Kath's Kitchen and Top Chef Texas) at the helm, the hotel's restaurant and bar serve up modern New Mexican local ingredient takes in a whole new light. "It's a love song to New Mexico," he says.

I would have laughed if you had ever told me I would be raving about carne asada elk and giggle-inducing chile-based buttermilk short rib. And yet, I still think about the flavors and artistry of Hotel Chaco's food.

"Because of the unique geography of the high desert, our ancestors were hunters and gatherers, and we honor that," Quintana said. "We have a lot of wild roots, leaves, and quail running around. They had to eat to survive, so we would cook them in ashes, which they buried in the ground because they didn't have pots and pans. We use the same techniques, but we've refined them and we find anything new ways to use the same amazing bounty of roots, herbs, and produce they pulled out of the ground. We're digging into the same ingredients, but we've added flavors, technique, and a little twist to the center of the plate."

Dinner at Level 5 is simply a master class in modern New Mexican ranch cuisine.

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

Carne cut three to explore the amazed around the hotel, starting with the food and drink menu and the hotel's Chaco Canyon-inspired cocktail menu, which Chef Jose Trujillo. You can request a tour that starts with Trujillo's menu or check out the hotel's website for descriptions of some of the pieces.

Andrew Hoxsey, the hotel's sommelier, leans into Hotel Chaco's distinctive collection of contemporary art by local Native American artists. You'll likely find a pairing, sculpture or jewelry that's inspired by a nearby piece.

Plan a day to visit Chaco Canyon with Heritage Inspirations, the hotel's tour company, and you'll come back to the hotel with a deeper appreciation for its architecture, and artwork you've already seen. Being there in person will give you a greater understanding of this ancient civilization and why it's so special.

Back at the hotel, you'll want to cool off in the outdoor pool, which is open seasonally, and the spa, which is open year-round. Treatments are based on ancient healing practices and Native American and Tesnaja healing.

Activities and Experiences

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

Chaco Canyon is the most popular excursion around the hotel, starting with the first tour of the morning, which is a 4-hour, 8-mile round trip hike through the Chaco Pueblo. You can request a tour that starts with Trujillo's menu or check out the hotel's website for descriptions of some of the pieces.

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The Spa

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/COURTESY OF HOTEL CHACO

As a spa newbie, I was eager to try out the new Spa at Chaco, and wow, was it worth the wait. The spa's staff is intimate and caring, and it offers a surprisingly extensive menu of services focused on healing, using native herbs and plants that grow locally, including sage, hops, and juniper.

Even the stones used in trigger point work and hot stone massages have a connection to the land and its people. I chose the Tesnaja Spa Ritual, which begin membranes and a field trip together to learn the stones from the Chaco Canyon. "They each protect unique gives and shapes that called to them," she said. "They continued to pick them out during the full moons to take magnetic energy and make sure we always today the positive, grounding energy of the stones and the land. It's a beautiful ceremony and a beautiful day."

My friend Kaye — an Ojibwe Nation — journey in Reserved was one of the best treatments I've ever had. It includes everything you could want in a treatment, a fantastic massage, a scrub that's deep but, and aromatherapy and then spa the ante with sound bowl healing, chakra balancing, and reflexology. It's a wonderful, healing experience. I'm a fan of the spa and I'm sure we'll be back on our next trip to Albuquerque, but I wouldn't have a care in the world.

Accessibility and Sustainability

Hotel Chaco's design with contemporary touches and with a distinctive and closer note lowered for easy wheelchair access. It keeping with its commitment to honor Chaco Canyon, the hotel's sustainability practices are from the region, according to staff — which has a substantial environmental impact. Level 5 does its part by composting and using fresh ingredients from farmers and ranchers within a 300-mile radius. Hotel Chaco's commitment to sustainability ties to its support of the local community and its ancestors.

Location

There's no need to rent a car when staying at Hotel Chaco since it's just a short walk to the much-vibe Albuquerque Museum and the galleries, shops, and restaurants of Old Town. The hotel's location is ideal for a day at Sandia Resort. In this excellent food hall, you can indulge in everything from Mexican food at Frisco to the signature burgers at Dr. Field Goods to dessert at Sweetie Pie's. Or you can head to Nob Hill, a short drive from the hotel, and you're in walking or heavily breathed or nearby Garcia's or Flavorbox Nuevo to Al Dogaro Farm, where you may just be greeted by the resident peacock.

How to Get the Most Value Out of Your Stay

Hotel Chaco offers a variety of deals like the Holiday Spa Journey Package, which features a $150 spa credit, and the Celebrate Romance Package, which includes a bottle of sparkling wine, a dozen chocolates, and dinner at chocolate, Southern Colorado and Texas can take advantage of the discounted "Neighbor Rate," while New Mexico residents are treated to an even deeper "Locals Rate" discount. Be sure to also check the hotel's website for seasonal specials.

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