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MEETING GHOSTS AT THE INN OF THE FIVE GRACES

By Anne Z. Cooke (310)396-0924— Images courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld, and of the Inn of the Five Graces

Imagine. People have been living on this same place, on the storied Santa Fe Trail, and even in this casita, for nearly 400 years. What were they doing on this same July day, four centuries ago? Exploring Santa Fe's narrow streets I can feel them, ghosts, shape-shifters roaming the Palace of the Governors, wandering down narrow alleys and crossing the Plaza. At the Inn of the Five Graces, in the town's oldest neighborhood, they provide silent company, and I like the sensation.



"But why five graces," I ask the concierge, midway through a four-day visit to Santa Fe. Cosseted and pampered in a suite that could pass for a small Moroccan palace, I've been infused with "good cheer, mirth and splendor," the very attributes of Greek mythology's three goddesses, also known as the "the three graces." Now I learn that though the Inn's design and décor flow from a half-dozen cultural strands, "five" refers to the ancient East Indian belief ascribing life's greatest pleasures to the senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

It's two of those senses, sight and touch, that make these suites (casitas) pop. Shimmering with color and textures, they blend adobe and stone with fabrics, tiles and wood. Joists and rafters support pueblo-style ceilings; traditional wood-burning kiva fireplaces, stucco or stone, are tucked into corners. Wood floors feel warm on your feet. The furnishing -- tables, chests, night stands, mirror frames and lamps -- shout out Spanish colonial hacienda or perhaps a raja's palace. Persian, Turkish, Moroccan and Indian textiles in red and blue figured patterns compete with green, yellow and brown on bed coverings, fat armchairs and deep sofas.



Decorative mosaic tiles climb up walls, around tubs, behind sinks and over counters. Carved Nepalese screens add a touch of fantasy, along with one-of-a-kind sculptures, pots and carvings found in distant latitudes. We marvel at the variety and complexity of the designs, each one butting up against the next, border to border. Was it planned, or did the upholsterer run out of one fabric and finish the job with another? It's hard to tell, since they meet and fit, and even match. A five-course meal for the eye, the rooms are colorfully kaleidoscopic, a rainbow on steroids, beautiful to see and even restful, as a symphony is restful when it engages the listener.



The Inn of the Five Graces is an award winner, of course. In 2012, **Condé Nast Traveler Magazine's Readers' Choice Awards** named it Inn #1 in the Southwest. This year, 2013, the Inn was a shoe-in for a place on the same magazine's "Gold List: Best Hotels In The World." As you're exploring Santa Fe's narrow streets, look for Seret and Sons, the 80,000-square-foot antiques store from which Sylvia and Ira Seret, owners of the Inn and the store, have drawn on to furnish the Inn, their pet project. That they are also artists, designers, world-travelers and importers accounts for their success.



But awards depend equally on prompt and professional service levels -- personal attention paid to travelers' needs, friendly staff and special amenities -- are a given. The daily room rate includes full breakfast, served indoors in the dining room, outdoors on the patio, or by room service. The suites come with robes and slippers, a kitchenette, sitting room or area and a complimentary mini-bar stocked with non-alcoholic beverages. Arriving guests are welcomed with coffee or tea, and chips and salsa. A weekly wine and cheese reception brings everyone together.

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You can order a cappuccino, latte, espresso, coffee or tea at any time, day or night, without charge. Also included are valet parking, concierge services, use of the fitness center and a one-hour guided tour of cultural Santa Fe. Small meals are conveniently available at the Inn's own café, 315 Bistro Wine Bar, next door. Ask the concierge about other activities, including horseback riding, fly fishing, golf, skiing, hot air ballooning, hiking and river rafting, gallery walks and museum tours. Call 509.992.0957, or visit fivegraces.com. The Inn, a member of the Relais & Chateaux hotel group, is at the corner of the Old Santa Fe Trail and 150 East DeVargas Street.



Santa Fe photos courtesy of Steve HaggertyColorWorld; photos of the Inn of Five Graces, supplied courtesy of the Inn. Writer/traveler Anne Z. Cooke welcomes comments about this or any other travel topic.

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