

Beyond the familiar in Farmington

There's more going on than you might expect in this northwest New Mexico town

By Sharon Niederman

The Navajo called this place Totah—the meeting place of the waters—for its location at the confluence of the San Juan, Animas, and La Plata Rivers. Farmington is still a meeting place of sorts—it's a great jumping-off point for Four Corners attractions such as Mesa Verde National Park and Chaco Culture National Historical Park. But spend some time in the city itself and you'll discover reasons to linger.

First and foremost is the wild, tumbling Animas, one of the West's last free-flowing, undammed rivers. Along the 5-mile River Corridor—a strip of reclaimed waterfront that parallels its forested banks—eagles fish within plain sight of walkers and cyclists while curious mule deer wander through dense cottonwood groves. Paved trails open up into spacious clearings perfect for birding and picnicking, and a whitewater recreation area attracts kayakers and waders to make a splash.

Natural riches have been the town's lifeblood all along. In the 1870s, the settlement was named "Farming Town" by homesteaders who prospered on fruit orchards and ranches. But the area's oil, natural gas, and coal reserves resulted in industry supplanting agriculture: By the 1950s,



Not far from Farmington, at Aztec Ruins National Monument, you can ponder the significance of a mysterious vault inside the Great Kiva.

the town had grown beyond its original bounds.

Fortunately, in the 1980s and '90s, a renewed appreciation of the area's historic, cultural, and natural riches generated an effort to preserve the river and sur-

rounding open space, leading to creation of the now-thriving River Corridor. That movement also spurred the revival of the downtown. Today Farmington's Main Street is a made-for-browsers antiques district sprinkled with creaky old trading posts, quaint cafes, and a family-friendly brew pub, the Three Rivers Eatery & Brewhouse. Unusual stores like the Dusty Attic sell hard-to-find collectibles and homemade

chocolates. A couple of miles east of downtown, the gleaming new visitor center does double duty: It's also a museum that displays relics of local and regional history as well as Western and contemporary art.

Outside town, Salmon Ruins Museum and Heritage Park and nearby Aztec Ruins National Monument, with its restored Great Kiva, shed light on the Ancestral Puebloan civilization. Farther afield are Chaco Culture National Historical Park; Mesa Verde National Park; Four Corners Monument; Durango, Colorado; Shiprock Pinnacle; Navajo Lake State Park; and the trout-filled San Juan River—all within two hours' drive.

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