

Bike to Work Week: Rider's 7-mile tour offers art, history, food and views

By Tom Sharpe | The New Mexican

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These days, when flowers are blooming, grass is greening up and the days are long, my daily bicycle commute seems like something one would savor on vacation.

I especially enjoy the ride home in the early evening, gliding silently through parts of town little known to motorists — like the Santa Fe Rail Trail along the railroad spur.

For decades, this virtual spine of the city, between the backyards of secluded residences on one side and light industry on the other, was mainly a utility right-of-way and hideaway for truants, taggers, hobos and substance abusers.

The recent paving of the Rail Trail, which reopened late last year when the Rail Runner train began its runs to Santa Fe, has created the potential for entirely new business districts accessible by bicycle. Tourists would love it.

In the nearly six years I have been riding to work on the bike trails from my home on the south side, I frequently encounter puzzled-looking bicyclists from around the world trying to figure out where they are and where they should go from there. Last year, the city published a map of hike-and-bike trails as well as city streets with bicycle lanes and others recommended for bicycles. You can pick one up for free at City Hall or at local bike shops. But they lack a certain user-friendliness and tips on what you see or where you might stop. And the trails' signage leaves much to be desired.

The other day, as I pedaled along the Arroyo Chamiso Trail, Randy Christensen caught up with me on an uphill stretch near Santa Fe High School to ask where the trail leads.

The 68-year-old retiree from the University of Oregon in Eugene, who often bicycles 30 to 40 miles at a time, had started from the Los Campos de Santa Fe RV Resort on Cerrillos Road, where he and his wife were staying. But he got lost after he headed the wrong way on the Arroyo Chamiso Trail, encountered the trail under construction south of Rodeo Road and wound up in the Santa Fe Place parking lot, where a mall security guard reoriented him and sent him back toward downtown.

"I'd really like to have a good layout of the bike paths in the Santa Fe area," he told me. "You kind of like to know how they all interconnect and what your options are. ... One would be really cool, neat historical places to see in the Santa Fe area where you could bike from place to place. ... The other would be notable restaurants and cafes and, if they have them, brew pubs."

So, in the interest of bicycle tourists and locals who would like to see Santa Fe from a fresh perspective, I present my bicycle tour from the Santa Fe Plaza to the Santa Fe Place mall. This is an easy, mostly downhill, 7-mile trip that should take less than an hour. You can ride back or catch a city bus on the south side of the mall parking lot. The buses have bike racks. Any bus will return to the Sheridan Avenue terminal near the Plaza, though I recommend Routes 2 and 4. Buses run Monday through Saturday, but not Sunday. My tour uses odometer readings in miles. Happy pedaling.

Santa Fe Plaza to Santa Fe Place

0 — Starting at the Santa Fe Plaza, you have two choices.

The legal but more dangerous option takes you from the Plaza's northwest corner west on Palace Avenue, straight through the stop light for Grants Avenue, bending left or south at the Eldorado Hotel, where Palace Avenue becomes Sandoval Street. Continue south across the Santa Fe River and turn left at Montezuma Avenue.

I prefer to start at the Plaza's southwest corner and zigzag through downtown, going the wrong way on three one-way streets. I advise riding this only if traffic is light. Otherwise, walk your bike. Go west on San Francisco Street (one-way heading east). Turn left, or south, on Don Gaspar Avenue. Turn right or west, on Water Street (again, one-way heading east). Turn left, or south, on Ortiz Street (one-way heading north), a sort of alley with no business fronting it. Ortiz runs along the impressive back side of the Hotel St. Francis, built in 1924 as the De Vargas Hotel. At Alameda Street, turn right and continue to Galisteo Street, turn left, cross the river and continue south to Montezuma Street, then turn right, or west.

On either route, you will notice a huge hole in the ground on the northeast corner of Montezuma and Sandoval. This is the site of Santa Fe's new state District Court complex. But the project has been stalled since petroleum contamination was encountered in the excavation earlier this year.

.5 — On Montezuma, look for the railroad tracks in a gap between the old state archives building — with "What is past is prologue" inscribed above the front door — and the New Mexico Film Office with the old Jean Cocteau Cinema marquee. If the New Mexico Rail Runner train is at the Santa Fe Depot (circa 1912) or the area is full of pedestrians, walk your bicycle through the area. Follow the path south on the east side of the tracks into the Santa Fe Railyard — a 40-acre tract of land purchased by the city over a decade ago, now being developed into a food, arts and entertainment district.

Cruise the "alameda" around the big wooden water tank and through the covered porch. To your right is the Flying Star Cafe, one of the city's newest restaurants. The long, metal building to your left is the Santa Fe Farmers Market — open Tuesdays and Saturdays. The metal building to the right is El Museo Cultural. The entrance is on the other side. If you hear drums, it's from the African dance class at the Railyard Performance Space.

Cross Paseo de Peralta between SITE Santa Fe, a private art museum, and Warehouse 21, a teen art center. Continue south on the asphalt path alongside the Railyard Park — a peaceful, less commercial part of the Railyard. The new metal building to the right, across the railroad tracks, is the ArtYard Project, with apartments upstairs and retail shops below. The "gabions," or wire baskets of rocks along the trail, are aimed at mimicking the railyard's original "gritty" style. The little irrigation ditch just before Cerrillos Road is the Acequia Madre, or "mother ditch," that is diverted from the Santa Fe River upstream.

1.1 — The trail ends abruptly at Alarid Street. If you continue straight between the bollards, you will drop off the curb. Curb cuts are to the right and left, requiring a delicate maneuver. This sort of flaw in the infrastructure — along with light poles and fire plugs in the middle of sidewalks — makes bicyclists natural allies of people who use wheelchairs. Dismount, walk cross Alarid and continue on the sidewalk for a tenth of a mile to the northeast corner of Cerrillos Road and St. Francis Drive.

Santa Fe's busiest, most complex and most confusing intersection presents some perplexing problems for bicyclists, as well as motorists, pedestrians and trains. The railroad spur runs diagonally through it. My worst bicycling accident to date came several years ago when I whipped through the roadway on an English-racer road bike and caught one of its thin tires in the space between the metal track and the asphalt. The bike flipped onto its side so quickly that my first sensation was the sharp sound when my helmet hit the pavement. I slid on my side into the intersection, causing one motorist to call an ambulance. My shoulder was bruised, my leg scraped, my pants torn and my nylon jacket stained, but

I walked away, declined the ambulance that arrived in minutes and continued riding home. Had I not been wearing a helmet, I would have been hospitalized.

City planners have proposed building a pedestrian and bicycle overpass over St. Francis Drive, just north of Cerrillos Road, to connect the Railyard with the Acequia Madre Trail that runs east behind the New Mexico School for the Deaf. Others want to tunnel under the roadway. But I'm unconvinced that overpasses or underpasses are justified. I'd rather keep the Cerrillos/St. Francis intersection as open, simple and unencumbered as possible. The proposed St. Francis crossing would not help bicycles crossing kitty-cornered — as on this tour. I advise bicyclists crossing here to stay off the motorized roadway and use the button-controlled pedestrian crossings.

On the southwest side, weave between the utility equipment and follow the dirt path that runs behind the Brewer Chevron station. Over the years, barriers have been erected here, but determined bicyclists or pedestrians have bent them out of the way. Continue south to Pen Road — named for the state penitentiary here in the late 1800s to early 1900s. This area is in dire need of a bike path — and there appears to be plenty of room between the roadway and the railroad for it.

To the right, you will notice a *descanso* — a small roadside memorial, common in New Mexico — dedicated to Gerardo Espinoza, who died of exposure on this spot a few years ago. To the left is Ohori's — a coffee shop that makes great herbal iced tea in town, with a pleasant vine-covered patio. Also worth a stop a little farther up Pen Road is the Barkin' Boutique, where sales benefit the Española Animal Shelter.

1.6 — Beyond Cordova Road is the South Capitol Complex — another stop for the Rail Runner. Local arts and real-estate mogul Gerald Peters had planned to redevelop the state property around the terminal as commercial and residential space, but after some questioned his relationship with Gov. Bill Richardson, the plan was scrapped.

You can turn right on Cordova, cross the tracks, then turn left and continue south on the unnamed road behind the state Department of Transportation complex. The roadway is wide with bike lanes on either side, but cars picking up or letting out passengers for the train often block the bike lanes.

Instead, I suggest you continue straight from Pen Road across Cordova Road and through the state parking lot to Alta Vista Street. You will see the entrance to the Santa Fe Rail Trail on the other side of Alta Vista.

1.8 — Now you can get away from motorized traffic — a paved straightway for almost a mile. On your left are three multistoried apartment buildings in an industrial style like something in Brooklyn. Notice that the first building has a cut-out that lets sunlight reach the skylight atop the small, adobe building to the south — an alteration in the original plans to comply with the state Solar Rights Act. On your right are the backyards of residences on Santa Rosa Drive in the Kaune or Casa Linda neighborhood. At 2.2 miles, a dirt path to your right leads through a narrow opening between fences into the shady neighborhood.

2.3 — Just before the graffiti-covered telephone-equipment shelter is a discrete wooden gate leading to the Lena Street Lofts. Inside, you will find a half-dozen metal buildings with a rusted patina and photovoltaic cells on the roofs. Facing the bike trail, between Dynamic Kettleball Fitness and a hair salon called Adorn, is Frankie Flats, a bike-repair shop. Owner Frank Sotomayor and Scott Hauptert, who is working with him, hope to make the business more accessible from the bike trail. On the other side of the complex is the Tree House Pastry Shop and Cafe. Owner Maria Buscamante-Bernal says most of her customers still come by car, so she's offering a free cookie, muffin or scone with the purchase of a meal by one who arrives by bicycle, foot or in a carpool of three or more. "Anything to encourage people to get out of their cars," she said.

2.6 — The Rail Trail crosses Second Street — another evolving food, art and entertainment district. Directly across Second Street on the trail is the Second Street Brewery — a friendly place for good

food, beer and lively music, with a shady beer garden and convenient bicycle racks.

The trail continues between the brewery's parking lot and a landscaping-stone yard for two-tenths of mile to another tricky crossing at St. Michael's Drive. City planners want to reduce this six-lane thoroughfare to four to make it more pedestrian-friendly. They should begin with a button-activated pedestrian/bicyclist crossing. In more civilized states, motorists are required to stop when bicyclists are waiting. But in New Mexico, it's optional. Although some drivers will stop and let you pass, they are not obligated to yield to bicyclists — despite the bright yellow, diamond-shaped signs with a bike logo and an arrow pointing downward at the crosswalk.

On the south side of St. Mike's, the Rail Trail runs downhill, crossing a bridge over an arroyo. Earthen berms to your right are left over from an old railroad triangle that diverted trains to a military hospital during World War II. The wedge of land was deeded to the Santa Fe school district, which sold it to develop businesses fronting Warner Avenue. Now the city is considering further development. I hope some of the new businesses will aim to serve bicyclists on the path.

The Rail Trail dips down and crosses another arroyo — this one channeled through underground culverts — then begins the steepest uphill climb on this tour.

3.4 — Take a break at Siringo Road. From this highest point on the south end of town, you can see Sandia Peak looming above Albuquerque to the southwest; Los Alamos and the Jemez Mountains to the northwest. To the west is Ivan Head Stadium and the campus of Santa Fe High School.

On the south side of Siringo, the trail splits in two. The left fork follows the railroad across Zia Road and continues more than two miles before the paved surface runs out near Interstate 25. The dirt trail continues more than a dozen miles through the Eldorado area and to the town of Lamy.

This tour, however, follows the right fork, which becomes the Arroyo Chamiso Trail, following the Arroyo de los Chamisos — the major drainage for the south part of Santa Fe. It's usually dry, but a few times a year, it becomes a raging torrent that alters the landscape, slams boulders together and washes away anything in its path. As the trail nears the arroyo, it bends right and runs through the first of two tunnels. On both sides is the high school campus. A paved path to the right will lead you into the campus. But stay straight on the main trail, cross the footbridge and continue to Yucca Street.

Beyond Yucca, the bike trail curves through a wide-open space on either side. This is one of the most beautiful stretches of this tour, with sizable shade trees, occasional pieces of public art and a few benches. The trail crosses Camino Carlos Rey and continues through this pastoral setting with residential neighborhoods on either side.

5.2 — At Avenida de las Campanas, you will see Monica Lucero Park to the right — a well-irrigated patch of green grass with a baseball field. Ahead and to the left is the Genoveva Chavez Community Center, a large metal building with a rounded roof. A paved path splits away to the left through a Frisbee-golf course to the 9-year-old recreation center with indoor pools, an ice-skating rink and exercise equipment. But stay on the main trail, passing a city fire station and an emergency-vehicle crossing of the arroyo. Farther on, there's barely room for the bike trail between the arroyo and an apartment complex.

6.6 — Santa Fe begins to look like Albuquerque or Phoenix as you reach the end of the trail at Rodeo Road. To the left is Sam's Club, which has a huge bike rack that is seldom used. To the right, across the broad arroyo, are the backsides of the Zafarano Drive shopping district. The city has begun to build a paved bike path beneath Rodeo Road and farther south. But turn right and follow the sidewalk to Rodeo's intersection with Zafarano Drive. Cross to the south and pedal through the parking lot of Santa Fe Place to the south side of the mall. Here you will find a city bus terminal — exactly seven miles from where you began at the Plaza.

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