

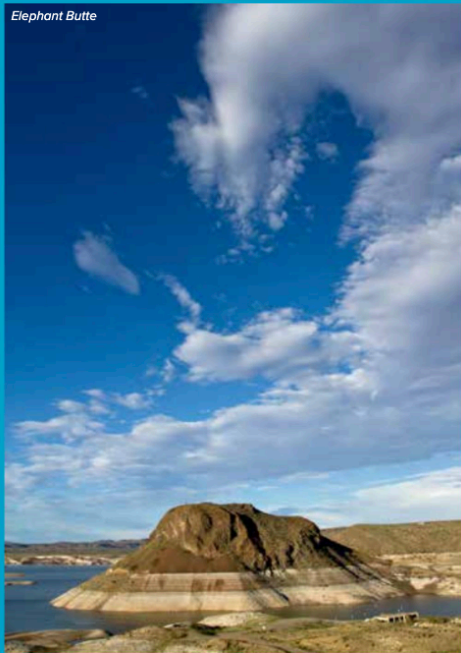
# Cody Johnson

TELLING NEW MEXICO'S STORY

ARTICLE BY KERI BRIDGWATER | PHOTOGRAPHY  
COURTESY NEW MEXICO TOURISM



Cody Johnson



Elephant Butte

Cody Johnson's New Mexico roots run deep. Born and raised in Albuquerque, his understanding of the state is less about any one place and more about how they connect—from Truth or Consequences, where his grandfather has owned property for decades and childhood summers were spent at Elephant Butte, to college years in Las Cruces.

That experience shapes his work as Communications Director for the New Mexico Tourism Department. Since taking the role in 2019, Johnson's view of tourism has shifted well beyond promotion. What's often seen from the outside as "just marketing," he explains, is a much broader ecosystem—one that spans storytelling to workforce development, infrastructure, and the experiences communities can offer.

## A BROADER VIEW OF TOURISM

He expanded the communications team and helped revive the state's travel trade program, part of a larger effort to focus less on short-term visibility and more on building lasting value for both visitors and the places they come to experience. Across New Mexico, he's also seeing a shift toward slower, more intentional travel—longer stays, fewer stops, and a desire for deeper connection. "People are really looking for relaxation and rejuvenation—what we refer to as 'slow travel,'" he says.

Hot springs and spa experiences are booming—nowhere more so than Truth or Consequences, where Johnson returns often. "I usually find time to take a soak or two at Riverbend Hot Springs," he says. His unofficial "license plate test"—spotting cars from Texas, Arizona, and Colorado—offers a quick read on how strongly the area appeals to out-of-state visitors. Dark-sky tourism is on the rise, and train travel—once a nostalgic afterthought—has reemerged as a draw, from the historic Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad to the Rail Runner commuter line linking Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

## BEYOND THE USUAL STOPS

Beyond well-known anchor cities, Johnson sees momentum building in places that many travelers are only beginning to discover. Las Cruces is undergoing

a transformation he's observed directly. "When I was in college, downtown was kind of an afterthought," he says. "Now it's the place to be." With a revitalized main street, a growing food scene, and proximity to agricultural hubs like Hatch, Las Cruces is emerging as a destination for travelers looking to go beyond the familiar. But Albuquerque itself remains central to the state's tourism story—and to Johnson's own.

## ALBUQUERQUE, EVOLVING

"Albuquerque is always going to be home and hold a special place in my heart," he says. Describing the city as a collection of distinct districts—Nob Hill's "live like a local" energy, Old Town's historic charm, and a downtown core that continues to evolve. Newer additions, like boutique hotel brand ARRIVE and the former Firestone Tire building—now reimagined as Ex Novo Brewing Company—are bringing new energy to the area, creating fresh reasons to linger.

At the same time, Albuquerque's growing presence in film and television has added another dimension, drawing a new wave of "set-jetting" travelers curious to experience the city they've seen on screen. This year, the city finds itself in the spotlight as New Mexico marks the Route 66 centennial. "There's a lot of renewed attention on Albuquerque," Johnson says, pointing to events such as Route 66 Summerfest. The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in October, he adds, remains a global draw.

For Johnson, though, the best way to experience his hometown is simple. An ideal morning starts in the North Valley, walking or biking through open space near Los Poblanos. From there, it's less about a fixed itinerary and more about what he calls "serendipitous discovery"—a mural, a tucked-away shop, or chile roasting stand you might miss from the car. It's an approach that reflects how he thinks about tourism in New Mexico—not as a checklist of attractions, but as a way to move through a place with curiosity and care. The goal isn't just to bring people here, he says, but to make sure what they experience is worth coming back to. For Johnson, that balance is the real story New Mexico has to tell.

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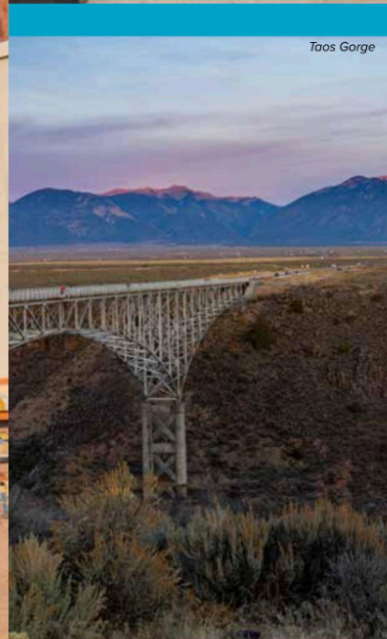
ABQ downtown



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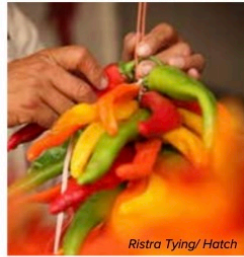
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“Albuquerque is always going to be home and hold a special place in my heart.”



Railrunner/ Santa Fe



ABQ murals



Pueblo culture



Old San Miguel/  
Mission/ Socorro



Richardsons Trading Post/ Gallup



White Sands Balloons



Taos Pueblo



Zuni Olla Maidens/ Red Rock Park

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