

PAINTING NEW MEXICO'S HIGH DESERT

By John Meister

Some people get why it's called the Land of Enchantment the minute they step out of the airport; others spend years here before they realize it's part of them. For the visitor, the history, sights, and cultural diversity provide a host of experiences. This is a place where stories are born. This is New Mexico.

Santa Fe, one of the top art markets in the country, sits a 50-minute drive north of the state's largest airport in Albuquerque. The city's warm adobe walls cast shadows and pitch light in every direction; bright floral gates and windows trimmed in color provide alluring subject matter for visiting plein air painters. At this elevation, the zenith of the sky is a deep ultramarine, and an outdoor painter doesn't need much training to see this blue clearly reflected in shaded areas below.

People visiting for the first time, however, are often surprised to learn that this Spanish colonial city sits at an elevation almost 2,000 feet higher than the mile-high city, Denver, Colorado. The crisp, dry air feels like nature's air conditioning to those from more humid lowlands, but climbing a few steps into a cantina can leave one gulping for one's next breath. It's important to drink plenty of fluids in this arid climate, and even to hydrate a few days before coming from lower elevations to ward off the potential nausea and headaches of altitude sickness.

In springtime, temperatures can swing 40 degrees over the course of a day. But with our wide-open vistas, prepared painters are rewarded with views of cloud build-ups for miles. Combine that with layer upon layer of mountains and mesas, and the area's a feast of aerial perspective.

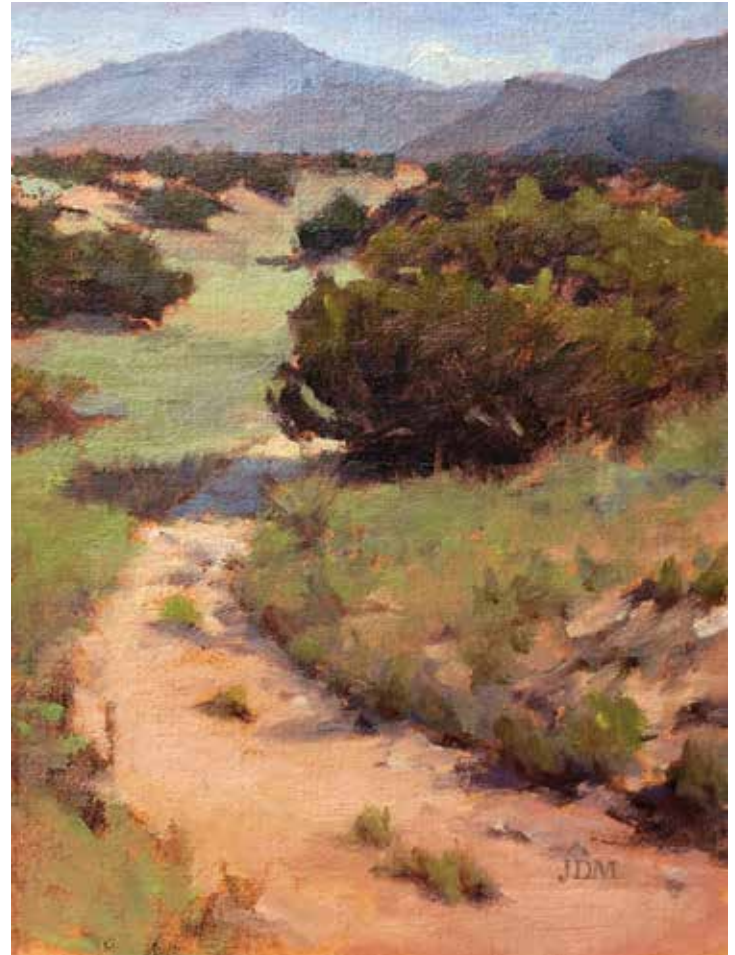
INSIDER TIPS

Here are a few basics the first-time high desert painter might find helpful. Let's start at the top — **a wide-brimmed hat**. Most plein air painters don't like to use sunglasses when painting because it distorts the color, but the high clear atmosphere here means that there's not a lot in the air to slow down a sunbeam before it bounces off the back of your retina. To counter the intense reflected light from lighter surfaces and snow, I also use a dark bandana, tied Old West bank-robber-style, to create eye protection from below. Bonus: it keeps the no-see-ums out of my nose.

On the topic of attire, it's best to **dress in layers**. I wear a T-shirt under a buttoned shirt with long sleeves that I can roll up and down as needed, along with a jacket for protection from rain and wind. I round out my wardrobe with sturdy shoes or light hiking boots, which offer my ankles protection from cacti, stiff grasses, and other pokey plants.

I also recommend **sunscreen**. What SPF? Well, a lot. And be mindful of reapplying; the crisp air feels good here so it's easy to forget the sun is beating down on you.

New Mexicans joke that wind is our fifth season. I use a **rock bag** or **tiedowns** to hold my painting setup in place. On blustery days, I also place a small rock in my trash bag to keep it from emptying its contents



Summer Path (oil, 8 x 6 in.) by John Meister

John Meister on location



A Sticky Afternoon (oil, 12 x 16 in.) by John Meister

onto the landscape. Plein air painters avoid chasing the light; I also avoid chasing my trash.

The exposed soils here accommodate a wide palette of color. Due to minimal plant life, these soils can be compact or loose depending on their particular bent. Rain greatly enhances their beauty, but what might seem like minimal precipitation in more verdant places makes a real impact in the desert, producing **washouts on dirt roads and flash floods in low-lying areas**. Arroyos (natural creek beds) may appear safe when dry, but they formed where they did for a reason. It's best to stay out of them on wet days, as spot storms upstream, even far enough away to be unseen, can send down a rush of water.

Due to the cool, dry climate, we don't have a lot of biting bugs or mosquitos in early spring. But as the rains increase and the air temperature gets warmer, clouds of **pesky gnats and midges** become more common.

Visitors to the Southwest also frequently ask about **snakes**. When temperatures remain consistently cooler, snake activity is relatively low.

On warmer days, these cold-blooded creatures like to come out of their dens and sun themselves on the surface. If you see or hear one, just step away from the area and give them room to move along.

Although the landscape looks wide open and inviting, much of it is **private ranch land**, or belongs to a Native pueblo or reservation. Some of these lands are considered sacred, and access to the public for painting, or even photography, may be forbidden. Make sure you have permission to enter and paint in an area that might be questionable. I use onX Hunt, a phone app that was developed for hunters, to find out about land ownership (what areas are public versus private). The app shows most roads and trails, and allows me to download area maps and set way points to use offline.

On the subject of offline, many areas in this vast state are just that: offline, or at least out of cell service range. **Plan ahead and let someone know where you're going**, or find a painting buddy or two to go with you. There are many

local painters willing to share their suggestions for painting locations. **Plein Air Painters of New Mexico** (papnm.org) is a good starting point for local outdoor painting information, events, and online contests.

New Mexico provides the plein air painter with endless opportunities for expression of both scale and color. Majestic vistas contrast with small, intimate scenes. Even our official state question, "Red or green?" referring to the color of chili you prefer on your New Mexican food, speaks to the artist through complementary colors. When in doubt, just order your plate "Christmas" and try both. Then sit by a fireplace or watch the sunset and let New Mexico steal your heart.

JOHN MEISTER (johnmeisterart.com) served as the 2018 president of Plein Air Painters of New Mexico and paints outdoors regularly with several Albuquerque and Santa Fe area painting groups.