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Las Cruces, New Mexico

Beautiful sunsets and starry night skies in a desert haven with a rich infusion of Mexican culture.

May 5, 2003: 11:43 AM EDT

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When Lee and Donna Haeger decided in 1991 that suburban Chicago was too cold, too expensive and too fast-paced for retired life, they sought out its polar opposite. And they found it, they thought, in the tiny and newly popular retirement town of Silver City, N.M., situated less than 100 miles from the Mexican border.

As it turned out, Silver City was a little too tiny (with a population of about 12,000) and far too popular. "When the folks from California discovered Silver City, housing prices went up drastically," says Lee Haeger. So the couple took the newcomers' money -- their house brought twice what they had paid for it four years earlier -- and hightailed it to Las Cruces in 1995. They haven't looked back.

For the Haegers, both 68, Las Cruces offers all the benefits of New Mexico -- great weather, amazing scenery, beautiful sunsets and arguably the country's best Mexican food -- without the expense of Santa Fe, the congestion of Albuquerque or the remoteness of charming little hot spots like Silver City.

Las Cruces is actually the second-largest city in the state, after Albuquerque, and sits about 45 miles from Mexico. Many residents pop across the border to Juarez for inexpensive pottery and jewelry.

The Mexican influence on Las Cruces is palpable and welcome. Many of the city's biggest celebrations are

Hispanic-themed, like the hugely popular Mariachi Conference in November or the Whole Enchilada Fiesta in September. Then there are New Mexico's renowned chiles. Diane ReVeal, who retired here in 2000 from Kentucky with her husband Steve, explains the hot-food index: "The further north you go, the weaker it gets."

Las Cruces, New Mexico

- Population: 85,400
- Nearest big city: El Paso (45 mi.)
- Sunny days a year: 287
- High July temp: 91
- Low January temp: 20
- [More statistics](#)

When you're not eating, there's plenty to do. Water sports, of course, are limited, especially during the summer when the Rio Grande mostly dries up. But hiking in the nearby mountain ranges is extremely popular, as is nearly year-round golfing and tennis. The dunes of famed White Sands National Monument are a huge draw. So are extension classes from New Mexico State University and activities planned by the Munson Senior Center.



Sculpture at New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum

And, in part because of a low-wage employment market, prices are reasonable. "Your retirement dollar goes a long way here," says Lee Haeger, who says their average dinner out on the town runs \$20 -- and that's with the tip.

But for all its affordability and climate, it's the beauty of its landscape that draws most new residents to Las Cruces. The ReVeals bought a home with large picture windows that look west at cottonwood trees lining the Rio Grande Valley, with the soaring Picacho Peak in the background. And, of course, there are the stars. And the sunsets. Says Diane ReVeal: "It's the view that sold us." ■

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