

SANTA FE - ALBUQUERQUE - TAOS
FEBRUARY 2009

Local Flavor

ALL ABOARD!
ROMANCING THE RAILS

STEPS FROM THE STATION
OUR LOCAL FAVORITES

MOONLIGHT ON THE CALDERA
COME SKI WITH ME

AGAPAO ROASTERS
WAKE UP AND LOVE THE COFFEE!



Romancing the 'Fe



story by Ruby Peru

It's Valentine's season, so I have pulled out all the stops for a date whose romantic overtones will resonate in the tender hearts of daters and would-be daters for many months to come. This is no first-date joyride, nor is it a bonanza of cards, flowers, and chocolates. For this date I have taken Panda to a far-away place to experience unprecedented physical pleasures. I've taken him to the village of Jemez Springs. Set among giant cottonwoods and tall pines in the Jemez Mountains, Jemez Springs is known for its natural hot mineral springs and also boasts proximity to the Valles Caldera, one of New Mexico's most majestic natural areas. Once closed to the public, the Caldera has, in recent years, been inviting hikers, skiers, mountain bikers, and horseback riders to enjoy its vast wilderness, its herds of elk and deer, its fog-shrouded mornings and star-speckled evening skies.

Once in Jemez Springs, long ago, I found out about this adorable little cabin that gets rented out by the night. There isn't any public sign drawing attention to the getaway; it's the sort of thing you have to know about. After doing some research, I found it was still there, tucked away behind the shop and studio of Linda Vozar Sweet, of Jemez Mountain Pottery. Although the Garden Cottage is situated right by the river in a setting so secluded and adorable that it looks like something out of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is also smack-dab in "downtown" Jemez Springs. This suited me nicely, as I anticipated the desire to eat at some point during the weekend jaunt, and preferred not to have to go hunting for wild game. In addition to the romantic cottage, I had a few other tricks up my sleeve as well, so I told Panda how to pack and whisked him away.

With a check-in time of 2 p.m., we were in no hurry, so a luxurious breakfast and a late start suited us



The hot springs at Jemez

just fine on this delightful, nearly-Valentine's Day morning. A nearly two-hour drive took us from Santa Fe to Jemez Springs. As directed, I parked in front of a blue sawhorse and followed a nicely mulched path that wended through the snow. We arrived in a minute at a wintry garden that looked well-loved and ready to pop right back into action come springtime. Passing over a teeny tiny bridge and under a cute little arbor, we found ourselves listening to the sounds of a rushing river, eyeing a tempting string hammock, and inserting a key into the door of the cutest, coziest little dwelling to pop up since Kanga moved out of Pooh Corner.

A note beside the masonry fireplace beckoned us to light a fire inside to ensure plenty of heat for the night ahead, which we did. Seemingly hand-made out of two-by-sixes, picture windows, decorative tiles, and pure ingenuity, the cabin provided an inviting little foyer and a comfortable bedroom where the scent of the fire and of the many potted geraniums melded to create that



Cross County night ski

mysterious *je ne sais quoi* -- that elusive, indescribable thing called -- romance. After settling in, Panda and I walked across the street for an early dinner at the Laughing Lizard, one of the four public dining establishments in the town.

But was I willing to settle for a simple overnight in a cabin guaranteed to light the fires of love? Well no, actually. In my typical style, I had to take things one step further. We had brought along cross-country skis, rented from the good folks at Alpine Sports in Santa Fe, and intended to enjoy an unusually romantic outing: moonlight skiing at the Valles Caldera.

It is a program offered specifically on full moon evenings, and this night was particularly special. It was the perigee moon, or the biggest full moon of the year, when the moon is closest to earth. A forty-five minute drive past the green rolling hills and forested countryside of the storybook Jemez mountain region brought us to the Valles Caldera Visitor Center, where a good number of others had heard of the activity as well and were eagerly strapping on their bindings by the light of both the moon and the campfire that officials had lit to welcome and warm us. We headed off on a well-groomed path, admiring the glow of the moon on the new-fallen snow and the sight of Orion rising over the mountain. Side by side most of the way, this skiing was far more romantic than the usual, where partners go shushing past each other at breakneck speed, or spend all the time huffing and puffing over hill and dale. The bowl of the Caldera is relatively flat, so it is a very easy cross-country ski or snowshoe outing that allows for plenty of chatting and exploring.

Returning to the Garden Cottage that night, Panda was thrilled about the adventure. Not just because of the skiing or the cottage, but because it was a date. The most salient characteristic of a date being: that you take someone on it. This wasn't a trip we had planned together, saved up for together, compromised on the details of together. It was a trip that I had designed with him in mind, knowing what he likes to do. I just told him what to pack and I took him on it. That is what he really loved.

The next morning we hit the hot springs next door at Giggling Springs. This is the only private bathhouse in Jemez Springs. It offers one hot pool surrounded by deck chairs, gazebos, and hammocks, and a funky little cabin used as a changing room to get into your bathing suit. From a little waterfall, the 139 water cascades gently into the pool, which is cooled to about 103.

They allow no more than eight visitors at a time, and two other couples came and went during the two hours that we were there. So Panda and I got in the pool and commenced to continue our romantic getaway demeanor. We were snuggly, but in a relaxed, public-place kind of way, we thought. Long story short, the woman who runs the pool came out after a little while and told us to "break it up." Indeed. It's a nice pool, though.

Later, we specked out the public bathhouse and it was equally couple-unfriendly in that the soaking tubs were the size of ordinary bathtubs and the best you could do was get in booths next to each other for your respective soaks. Locals recommended the woodsy Spence Hot Springs, a free pool in the Santa Fe National Forest, off State Road 4, but they also noted it is frequently crowded and turning into a bit of a party spot. It was closed that weekend anyway.

So, considering Jemez Springs is a hot springs town, I have to admit that the soaking situation was the least romantic aspect of an otherwise lovey-dovey Valentine's Day weekend. However, our cabin was first-rate, and the moonlight skiing was a wonderful adventure few can claim to have had, especially under the once-or twice-a-year perigee moon, whose brilliant gleam shone upon the endless fields of snow in the Caldera so brightly the entire landscape glowed in a way that can only be called magical.

Considering this date is an overnight, it is obviously not for beginners. Hard-core daters only need apply. The Garden Cottage alone gets it five kisses for romance, with moonlight skiing as a plus, and soaking as an optional extra. (continued on page 13.)



The Garden Cottage



Casa Blanca's riverfront terraced yard with 100 year old cottonwood trees

Established couples: 🍷🍷🍷🍷
 First daters: 0 kisses