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Albuquerque: The good, the bad and the ugly as fans take a trip to Breaking Bad lands

The New Mexico TV drama has swept the Emmys and gripped millions. As the final episode is shown, the location is making a killing too...

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Rory Carroll

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Tour guide Harold Davis dressed as drugs baron Walter White in Albuquerque. Photograph: Russell Contreras/AP

It took a while for Albuquerque to embrace *Breaking Bad*. The depiction of a good man turning evil and unleashing drugs and violence across the city was a bleak showcase. Only after the fourth season, when the show started to win acclaim as a television masterpiece, did this sleepy corner of New Mexico begin boasting about hosting it.

"The drugs and violence were the reasons we didn't have anything to do with it at first," said Megan Ryan, tourism manager of Albuquerque's convention and visitors bureau. "Then we began to see the cult following in the US and abroad, and the awards. It turned a really dark subject into a great tool for awareness and visibility."

The final episode of the AMC show is expected to draw a huge audience today, and fans have been flocking to Albuquerque in their thousands to see where fictional chemistry teacher turned drug lord Walter White and his sidekick, Jesse Pinkman, played out the Emmy-winning drama.

Tourism authorities have set up a website to guide them, and local businesses are offering tours and merchandising spinoffs, including blue confectionery and doughnuts inspired by the ultra-pure, blue crystal meth cooked by the two lead characters.

"*Breaking Bad* has been amazing for the city. Film tourism is at an all-time high," said Mike Silva, co-owner of ABQ Trolley Co, a tour company whose *Breaking Bad* location tour is booked out months in advance.

The show's grisly content – throat-cutting, acid baths, junkie overdoses – initially

worried the city, but authorities and businesses are now on the bandwagon, said Silva. "Everyone is on board."

The mayor, Richard Berry, said the series highlighted Albuquerque's low-tax, sun-kissed, scenic lure to film and TV productions which have spent \$416m in the past four years. The show's creator, Vince Gilligan, has said Albuquerque is a character in the show but viewers knew it did not reflect the real city, said the mayor. "I've never run into anybody that doesn't understand it's a fictional drama."

He indicated the view from his 11th-floor office: tree-lined streets giving way to desert, mountains and a big blue sky. Crime is at its lowest in decades. "There is great quality of life here."

Indeed so. Yet there is no disguising a brittle wariness, a defensiveness, behind the "proud home of *Breaking Bad*" spiel. For art has to some degree imitated reality. Beyond the shiny civic facade, Albuquerque and other parts of New Mexico suffer all-too-real drug trafficking, addiction, violence and corruption. Cheap, pure heroin together with prescription drugs have fuelled a statewide epidemic of overdoses twice the national average. Depending on the drug – heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine – teen drug use here is double or triple the national average. The drugs are so pure that many can be smoked, yet an estimated 25,000 addicts in the state use needles.

Henrietta, a 62-year-old former addict and convicted drug smuggler who declined to have her surname published, painted a shadowy world of crack houses, prostitution and gang warfare as frightening as anything in *Breaking Bad*.

"It's a scary life," she said, "because you go into the dark side. It's a cycle, the same thing over and over again. If you're an addict, you're going to take what you can get. If there's no heroin, you take meth. If there's no meth, you take crack cocaine."

Raped as a girl, she ran away from home and used alcohol, pills, crack, meth and heroin to "self-medicate". Henrietta recovered, earned a degree and worked as a social worker before succumbing to addiction again two decades later. She dealt drugs to fund her habit. "I tried meth, but it didn't taste right. I preferred crack."

She moved between the family home, doss houses and the street in a perpetual quest for the next hit, encountering squalor and prostitution. "Women go out to hook to get high and have a place to stay." A cousin who smuggled meth across the border from Mexico

consumed it rather than selling it, angering his cartel-linked supplier. "They sent people across and shot him in the head to make an example." He survived, but lost an eye and suffered brain damage.

Henrietta was caught smuggling crack across the border in 2005 and sentenced to 18 years. Released in 2009 to the care of a non-profit group, Crossroads for Women, last week she "graduated" from a four-year treatment and rehabilitation course. "God was looking out for me. I've been given another chance."

Not all are so lucky. Dozens of homeless or incarcerated addicts are waiting for places at two Crossroads centres in Albuquerque. "The need far exceeds our abilities," said Amanda Douglas of Crossroads.

Breaking Bad's depiction of addiction is "sadly realistic", said Deni Carise, an expert in substance abuse treatment with CRC Health Group. "The ease with which Jesse [Pinkman] relapses is very well portrayed."

New Mexico is the second-poorest state in the US, according to census figures, and many at the bottom lack jobs, proper nutrition and healthcare. Low-income neighbourhoods like Albuquerque's Trumbull Village, popularly known as War Zone, are plagued by drug-related shootings. Unlike Walter White's homegrown meth lab, most of the state's meth, heroin and other illegal drugs come via Mexico, which continues to endure horrific violence, with an estimated 80,000 killed since 2006.

And unlike the show's honest cops, some real ones have "broken bad". Angelo Vega, a former police chief of the town of Columbus, has admitted being on the Juárez cartel payroll. Darren White, Albuquerque's public safety director, publicly warned last year that cartels sought officials willing "to go dirty".

Not just police, it turns out. Danny Burnett, a former school supervisor from the town of Carrizozo, was convicted last week of leaking information about a federal investigation into drug and gun smuggling. His wife, Paula, is an assistant US attorney. She has not been charged with any offence.

But *Breaking Bad* fans visit for the fiction, not the reality, and few are disappointed, according to Silva, whose trolley company does location tours. "They are so excited, they love it all."

They visit the homes of Walter and Jesse, the fast-food restaurant of Walter's nemesis

Gus Fring, and the carwash where Walter's wife Skyler launders their money. They also snap up "[Bathing Bad](#)" bath salts, lotions and soaps.

With the show due for wider syndication and repeats, Silva expects his *Breaking Bad* tour to continue for several years. He is crossing his fingers and hoping that a mooted spinoff show featuring Walter's crooked lawyer, Saul Goodman, will go ahead. "That would be awesome for us."

Staff at the Dog House, a greasy spoon featured in several episodes, shrug and smile when fans cluster into the tiny restaurant. "They travel from all over," marvelled Lucille Martinez, an assistant manager. The owner of the house where Jesse lived, a mile up the road, was less enthused by the gawkers. "Most are pretty respectful, but it has become a hassle."

Albuquerque is awash with speculation over how the show will climax today. In bars, cafes and offices, people debate whether Walter will rescue Jesse and kill the neo-Nazis, and whether Jesse will then kill Walter. Asked if he had inside information, Berry, the mayor, shook his head: "Sadly, no."

Despite the nightmare of her own addiction, Henrietta confessed a soft spot for Walter, the tormented, ruthless meth manufacturer played by [Bryan Cranston](#). "He, too, knows suffering."

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