

Water pipe parlors have descended on the Duke City, offering hipsters a smoky repose

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Photo by Erin FredrichsTribune

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Gabe Price watches Lauren Clark exhale, while Eric Harmon takes a drag from a hookah at Relux, one of three hookah parlors that have brought the Middle Eastern smoking tradition to Albuquerque. "It gives you a lightheaded feeling," said Clark. "I forget about everything else and just chill."



Photo by Erin FredrichsTribune

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A smoke ring drifts out of Billy Hammond's mouth after drawing a lungful of watermelon-flavored tobacco through a hookah. Hammond, 20, said he started using the traditional Middle Eastern water pipes at age 16 and now has the smoke ring perfected. He started frequenting Relux, a hookah bar on Juan Tabo Boulevard Northeast, shortly after it opened in January, he said.

An elderly Turk once said smoking a hookah "is nothing like smoking a cigarette."

"Cigarettes are for nervous people, competitive people, people on the run," said Ismet Ertep. "When you smoke a hookah, you have time to think."

The quick-and-easy cigarette may have won out as the smoke of choice in the Middle East, but the hookah - once a potent status symbol and key part of a centuries-old culture - didn't go away. Men and women, mostly older, puff away on the tall, ornate water pipes for hours at a time in cafes in Cairo, Damascus, Beirut and Istanbul, where it's considered one of life's great pleasures.

That small piece of the Middle East has found a surprising new home in the United States, including Albuquerque.

Hookah parlors are opening in cities nationwide, spreading to the world of hipsters and yuppies looking for an alternative to the boozy bar scene.

"I love the vibe," says James Stewart, 23, of Albuquerque, sitting at the posh, hip hookah parlor Relux in the Northeast Heights.

His voice floats above the soft gurgle of bubbling water.

People, deep in conversation, lounge on comfy couches under soft lights, cool music - from techno to Madonna - playing in the background. At the center of each group, a tall hookah sits on the floor.

Tobacco called shisha, flavored with fruit (33 flavors from kiwi to butterscotch) and molasses, fills a bowl at the top of the pipe. It is kept lit with red-hot charcoal, supplied by a waiter carrying a pot of fiery coals.

Smokers puff on long tubes, drawing smoke through a bowl of water. Pipes can have one tube or as many as six, so people can share the tobacco. It takes about an hour to smoke a pipeful, which costs \$10-\$12 depending on the flavor.

No alcohol is served, as is traditional in hookah cafes; instead, smokers sip coffee or tea.

Camaraderie fills the room.

"There are no fights," Stewart says. "This is something Albuquerque needs. It takes kids away from cruising Montgomery (Boulevard) to a safe place that's fun where they can hang out with their friends."

Steve Christensen and Nathan Green, both 18, recently joined the military, and say they've been coming to Relux once a week to talk before reporting to basic training.

"It's a really chill place," Green says. "It's a place for us to catch up, a cool, bonding thing. We smoke the hookah with each other; we interact."

Relux owner Mike Hickey says he and his childhood friend, Robert Zajac, opened the lounge two months ago at 1950 Juan Tabo Blvd. N.E. It's fast become a popular spot, with a line of young people out the door most nights.

Hickey, a 27-year-old Manzano High School graduate, said he was inspired after buying a hookah a year ago and smoking shisha at home with friends.

"I traveled a lot to Miami and Las Vegas (Nevada) and saw what they were doing and wanted to put my own spin on the hookah lounge," he says. "I took a little bit from everybody and made it my own."

He calls Relux a "South Beach-style club" for people age 18 and over, with plush, secluded seating; deep red walls; a VIP room with a stripper pole; wireless Internet; shadow dancing; and a DJ on Tuesday nights. It's open for lunch (bring your own) and at nights until 3 a.m. Hookah lounges often stay open until 3 or 4 in the morning while bars have to close at 2 a.m.

Albuquerque has two other hookah parlors: the Bubble Lounge on Central Avenue Downtown, which opened more than a year ago; and Hunab Hookah, which opened Feb. 1 at 3400 Constitution Ave. N.E.

Adam Moffett, owner of the retail shop Hookah Kings in Nob Hill, has been selling hookahs for six years. He says the first hookah lounges opened decades ago in big cities like Detroit and New York with large Middle Eastern populations.

Soldiers returning from the Iraq war who smoked and liked the hookah helped spread the practice to a wider public, Moffett says. "It's increased in popularity immensely in the past four years," he says.

The biggest problem for owners of hookah parlors in many cities is smoking bans. Mark Shoesmith, an Albuquerque assistant city attorney, says the new statewide smoking ordinance, as well as the older city one, appear to exempt

hookah lounges because they are retail outlets that sell hookahs and tobacco, and don't serve food or liquor.

"The smoking bans are aimed at workplaces, restaurants and bars," Shoesmith says.

There's also the health issue.

Hookah smoke is cooler than cigarette smoke, and smokers say the water filters out many of the harmful substances. Moffett says hookah smoke is more a steam that evaporates quickly, accounting for the relatively un-smoky air in hookah lounges.

Medical research is scarce on the effects of hookah, although doctors agree that smoking any kind of tobacco is not healthy. New Mexico Voices for Children recently issued a statement saying there are health risks associated with hookah smoking.

Hickey says the advantages outweigh the drawbacks.

"There's no rowdiness, no problems," he says. "It's not a bong. Kids are intrigued by it. It's something people do in a different country."

It also keeps teens from underage drinking and possibly being cited by the Police Department's Party Patrol for being a minor in possession.

"The hookah is a social thing," Hickey says. "I hear people talking about all kinds of stuff, elections, the president. It's better than hanging out and getting MIPs."

The New York Times contributed to this story.