

Kayaking in O'Keefe Country:

A Trip to Abiqui Reservoir

by Terry Chase



An early season jaunt in May of 2000 took us, two people, two dogs and two boats, to Abiqui Lake in northern New Mexico. Nestled in the Rio Chama valley alongside Highway 84 this gem of a location, offers many hours of water as well as land exploration opportunities. Abiqui Lake is located 8 miles from the tiny town of Abiqui, site of the original Georgia O'Keefe home and studio. Abiqui Lake is located on the Rio Chama, a tributary of the legendary Rio Grande. Surrounding attractions include: Ghost Ranch, Georgia O'Keefe Museum, San Pedro Wilderness, Cumbres-Toltec Railroad with close access to the communities of Taos and Sante Fe. Abiqui Lake borders the property of the Ghost Ranch Conference Center an archeological site and museum. Ghost Ranch, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, is a busy place with year-round paleontology, theology, education and artistic seminars open to the public regardless of religious affiliation. Ghost Ranch has rooms to rent and camping facilities and is situated among beautiful rock formations and stunning scenery. Many of the views, buildings and sites were featured in O'Keefe's works.

Camping at Abiqui is available at the Riana Recreation Area that surrounds the lake. The Riana Campground has 54 sites available by reservation. A variety of sites offer vehicle camping, tent and groups options. Restrooms and showers are available as well as drinking water and sanitation stations for the campers. Reservations are easy through the www.reserveusa.com website. Rangers are available by phone at 505-685-4371. Reservations are recommended as the weekends can fill up quickly. We were lucky at our site, #1, with an unobstructed view of the lake. The campground is situated up on bluff so most sites offer great views of the lake and surrounding vistas.

The lake itself offers a variety of kayak exploration. Canones Creek is a no-wake zone, which narrows to a boat-width at its farthest point. As we paddled up the creek, canyon walls narrowed, stillness enveloped us and the wildlife greeted our presence. This area is a 2-3 hour leisurely paddle. Along the northern shores many inlets and interesting shoreline await the explorer. The water of Abiqui Lake is crystal clear way beyond the reach of a paddle's length. We spent an afternoon paddling this stretch and met up with a couple local paddlers on the return leg who chatted with us all the back to boat ramp. They told of early morning calm waters and not very many boaters in the fall, spring and winter months. Late spring and summer weather can produce high winds through the lake area. Abiqui Lake fills a deep and narrow canyon, high wind come up quickly making rough waters for boaters. High wind warning systems along the shoreline, alert boaters and signal if a quick trip to shore is necessary. The far western arm of the lake is still another option for exploration fed by the Chama river. This route offers more canyons and

area to be explored for a full day trip. This section will have to wait until our next visit to Abiqui.

Many different routes can be used when traveling to Abiqui. The standard I-25 south to Walsenburg, west on 160 to Alamosa, then south on 285 to Antonito and then work your way over to Chama, NM via Highway 17 is probably the most direct. Once at Chama you'll go south on Highway 84 all the way to Abiqui Lake. Many other routes will take more time but the scenery through this whole area is great--so no way is the wrong way unless you on a time crunch. Be sure to take in the other natural wonders along Highway 84, Echo Canyon Amphitheater, a natural rock formation that really echoes back at you and maybe a side road trip over to the monastery of Christ in the Desert if time allows.

We'd recommend a minimum of 4 days for travel, paddling, and exploring the surrounding area. It's a great location for southwestern beauty and the warmth of the high desert.



Camping at Riana Campground, Campsite #1, Abiqui Reservoir, New Mexico