The Ledger

NEWS

# Cultures, Arts Converge In Taos, New Mexico

**THERESA AGOVINO The Associated Press**

Nov. 22, 2003 | Updated Nov. 23, 2003, 11:03 a.m. ET

TAOS, N.M. -- From the art scene to the dramatic Rio Grande Gorge, to towering mountain forests and earthy Indian homesteads, Taos is a traveler's dream.

A first-time visitor, I was exhilarated by its diverse beauty, cultural offerings and outdoor activities. Not only is this small city steeped in history, but it is also a major artists' colony and a four-season destination featuring everything from fall hikes to whitewater rafting in the warmer months, and world-renowned skiing.

Taos is set at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico, which derives its charm from the blend of American Indian, Spanish settlers and Anglo pioneers' collective heritage.

My infatuation with the city began when I arrived at the Old Taos Guesthouse Bed and Breakfast. It is housed in a 180-year old adobe home set on seven flower-filled, treeshaded acres overlooking the mountains. The sunset views from the hot tub are amazing. And the day starts with delicious breakfasts of fresh-baked muffins and egg dishes typically doctored with cheese, chilies and spices. It would have been easy to sit on the patio, sipping coffee with a good book, but there was much to see.

Galleries abound on the city's Town Square. Agnes Martin, the well-known Minimalist, lives in Taos; locals know her by the big white Cadillac she drives.

Her stark white paintings hang at the Harwood Museum, along with other works by the painters who first settled in Taos and began its tradition as an arts center. I enjoyed seeing their interpretations of the surrounding landscapes, and then going out and comparing them to the actual sites.

The Millicent Rogers Museum is dedicated to the works of Hispanic and Native American artists.

Rogers, an heir to the Standard Oil fortune, fell in love with Taos. The museum houses her collection of jewelry, textiles, ceramics, sculpture, paintings and other objects. The museum's religious art infuses the traditional European style of the Old Masters with the more primitive, colorful painting of Latin America and American Indians. The collection includes diverse depictions of the Virgin Mary.

But don't spend all your time visiting museums. A must-see is the Taos Pueblo, the 1,000 yearold home to the Tiwa-speaking Indians. The brown squat houses are still made from mud and straw in the traditional manner and contrast beautifully with the surrounding mountains. There is no electricity or running water at the pueblo and bread is still baked in outdoor domed ovens.

Shopping at the pueblo gives you an opportunity to meet those who make the ceramics and turquoise jewelry that are sold all over town, and bargaining is easier there.

We visited during one of several annual "corn dances," performed throughout the year to pray for a good harvest. About 40 women and three bare-chested men, their long hair decorated with a single feather, danced throughout the pueblo while tribal elders chanted, drummed and shook rattles. These dances are authentic rituals, not just gimmicks for tourists, so no photos are allowed.

Make sure to explore the mountains and the Rio Grande that are so crucial to Taos' identity. Many flock to Taos in winter to ski, although beginners and intermediates may find the terrain difficult.

For non-skiers, locals say it's best to visit Taos in the fall because summer crowds have vanished and the August rains revitalize the landscape. There's great hiking through pine forests choked with wild flowers.

In summer or spring, you can whitewater-raft on the Rio Grande. (The water is not high enough in the fall.)

It offers a different vantage point from which to see the river and mountains. During my late summer visit, I fell out of the raft for a split-second, and I'm not sure I relaxed enough during what was left of the ride to appreciate the views. Unexpected dunk aside, rafting was great fun and a terrific workout.

The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge offers great views of the rushing river and the different gradations of the mountains as they slope to the bank.

My friend and I decided we wanted a closer view so we hiked down to where the Rio Grande converges with the Red River. We drove to Wild Rivers Recreation Area, via what is known as the Enchanted Circle, which meanders through some velvety forests.

On the way we stopped at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Angel Fire.

The memorial was initiated by a local man, Dr. Victor Westphall, whose son died in the war. Westphall and his wife used their son's life insurance payment as seed money to build the memorial's small white chapel. To this day, visitors leave personal notes and other remembrances on an altar adorned with a huge trident-shaped candelabra. A nearby hall exhibits moving home movies of soldiers, letters, photos and biographies.

Continuing on to Wild Rivers, about 35 miles north of Taos, we discovered that the pamphlet we got about the place didn't lie: The hike to the convergence was difficult.

The trail was rocky, steep and slippery, but the vistas were beautiful and the river bank is lush -- though the convergence itself was not as spectacular as some brochures suggest.

My only major gripe with Taos is that restaurants largely stop serving at 9 p.m. We had to cut post-hike soaks in the hot tub short just to grab dinner.

That said, there is a wide selection of restaurants.

The best meal we had was lamb at the very elegant Lambert's. Orlando's, a Mexican joint with its brightly painted interior and colorful ceramic to tables, has a real party atmosphere. The margaritas, which are made with beer, are among the tastiest I've ever had. And the entrees are served with puffed corn instead of rice.

Apple Tree has reasonably priced food and a great garden. But be forewarned: Locals say Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who owns a home in Taos, is a frequent diner for Sunday brunch, and his Secret Service entourage doesn't quite mesh with the laid-back atmosphere that makes this city such an appealing destination.

> WHERE TO STAY: Old Taos Guesthouse Bed & Breakfast: 1028 Witt Road, 800-758-5448. Ten rooms, rates range from $80 for a single to $160 for a suite. WHERE TO GO: Harwood Museum: 238 Ledoux St., 505-758-9826, www.harwoodmuseum.org. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. Admission $5. Millicent Rogers Museum: Four miles north of Taos Plaza, 505-758-2462, www.millicentrogers.com. Open daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission $7. Taos Pueblo: Two miles north of Taos, 505-758-1028, www.taospueblo.com. Open daily 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays except for certain tribal rituals and for several weeks in late winter and early spring. Call to check the schedule. Wild Rivers Recreation Area: Thirty-five miles north of Taos. Web site: www.nm.blm.gov/tafo/rafting/ rio--grande/wrra/wild--rivers. html Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Two miles north of Angel Fire, off Highway 64, 505-377-6900. Chapel open 24 hours a day. WHERE TO EAT: Lambert's: 309 Paseo del Pueblo Sur, 505-758-1009, dinner entrees $19 to $26; Orlando's: 114 Don Juan Valdez Lane, 505-751-1450, dinner entrees under $10; Apple Tree: 123 Bent St., 505-758-1900, dinner entrees $12 to $15. TO LEARN MORE: Taos Chamber of Commerce: 505-758-3873.

## IF YOU GO