

>escape to... **taos**

IN TOUCH, IN TAOS

By Cathie Arquilla

PHOTO BY LARRY LAMSA

I once dressed Billy Joel for a music video filmed on the Connecticut River. At the end of the shoot, he asked me for some of the shirts he wore while filming. I got out the designer ones, which were Armani and Ralph Lauren. He said, “No Cathie, what about the vintage rayon ones, the bowling ones?” I said, “Sure you can have those, but they’re used. I got them at Dompsey’s,” — a Brooklyn mega-thrift store where they cost a whopping \$2.50 each. He said, “Great, good is good.”

Sometimes great fashion has a direct correlation with its home. Think Scottish kilts, Indian saris, even Brooklyn bowling shirts! And when designers discuss their inspiration for a collection it is often a location.

I recently visited a place that I thought would be more about tumbleweeds and banjos than fashion and design. I stand corrected. Taos, New Mexico is an inspiring and artistic destination with its own fashion sense that sits well with the city’s historic aura. Taos is bursting with color and flavor like a chili bin at a green market. My new Yaqui/Apache friend, Mr. Crowfeather, says he often asks people, “Why go to another country to learn about a new culture? You can learn plenty right here in Taos about your own country, about your own history, and it will still be foreign to you.” I had to admit; coming from the East Coast, Taos was like visiting a different country: Native American Indian country.

It was no surprise to find this country rich in art and design, but I even found it rich in my passion — fashion. Taos is the Rio Grande of Bohemian Chic. Picture icons like Carly Simon and Frida Kahlo, or even more recently, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. In Taos they would find enough Bohemian Chic attire to fill a mule pack. What’s more, it would be the real deal, not a bunch of Soho knock-offs. Authentic and timeless was my impression of Taos. It not only provided me with fabulous stylistic inspiration, but it also grabbed me on the inside, awakening an unexpected connection to the land. The effect was a feeling of “letting go” — which is just what you want on a vacation.

PHOTO BY STEVE MESTDAGH

Opposite page: Art — raw, rural and polished; find it in Taos in every facet of design — interiors, fashion, fine art, everyday objects and food. This page: A National Historic Landmark, The Taos Pueblo, is inspiration to many a southwester architect, homemaker, tourist and Native American history buff.



PHOTO COURTESY EL MONTE SAGRADO

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EXPERIENCE CALM

El Monte Sagrado Living Resort and Spa was originally a drive-up motor lodge. Seven of the original “casitas” or garden suites from the turn of the century are still part of the luxury hotel. They are small by today’s standards with thick adobe walls, tiny rooms, small turquoise doors and little bathrooms, but they are authentic and charming. The company thought it was important to maintain these casitas as a living history salute to hotels “back when.” By “the company,” I mean the Kessler Collection, a group of 11 luxury hotels strategically located and privately owned by the Kessler family.

CEO Richard Kessler explained the company’s M.O. “We try really hard with every hotel to have our guests learn something or do something they haven’t done before, to give them a unique experience.” For me, El Monte Sagrado delivered. It plays homage to the pueblo architecture of the Taos area, grounding guests with a uniquely earthy, calming, “out west” feeling. The lobby is designed in the round shape of a “kiva,” a sacred piece of geometry used in pueblo architecture, a place where the men of the pueblo would go every seven years to spend a month. (An original male bonding getaway!) At the front entrance of El Monte Sagrado there is a grand “torreon” or tower. In the 14th and 15th centuries, torreons were round fortresses Pueblo Indians built for defense against Apaches, Americans or Mexicans. As you walk through El Monte Sagrado’s torreon there is a feeling of entering a protected, peaceful world — one without enemies.

El Monte Sagrado’s central garden, known as the Sacred Circle, was designed to mirror the Taos valley, which is surrounded by mountains. Mr. Crowfeather, who is the hotel’s landscaper, prides himself on maintaining natural gardening practices. “Our resort is a reflection of the Taos area ... we try to do the best we can with the earth using a natural way of gardening,” he says. And El Monte Sagrado has credentials when it comes to being eco-friendly. The entire hotel has sustainable systems that recycle, maintain and manage almost all of its natural resources (one of the first of its kind).

The famous Rio Grande is a gigantic gouge snaking right through Taos Valley, the landscape of cowboys and Indians, real and imagined.

Once I saw the Sacred Circle at El Monte Sagrado and later drove out to the Rio Grande, I had a better understanding of what they were going for in terms of the landscaping at the hotel. The famous Rio Grande is a gigantic gouge snaking right through Taos Valley, the landscape of cowboys and Indians, real and imagined. Mr. Crowfeather told me, “You can come here, but if the land does not accept you, you can not stay here.” I felt anxious. Would the land accept me? How would I know? He went on to say, “The Sacred Circle represents a point of contact,” but with what, the earth, each other? I had never hung out with a Yaqui/Apache before and I wanted to know more.

Even though I didn’t have enough time with my new Indian



PHOTO BY CATHIE ARQUILLA

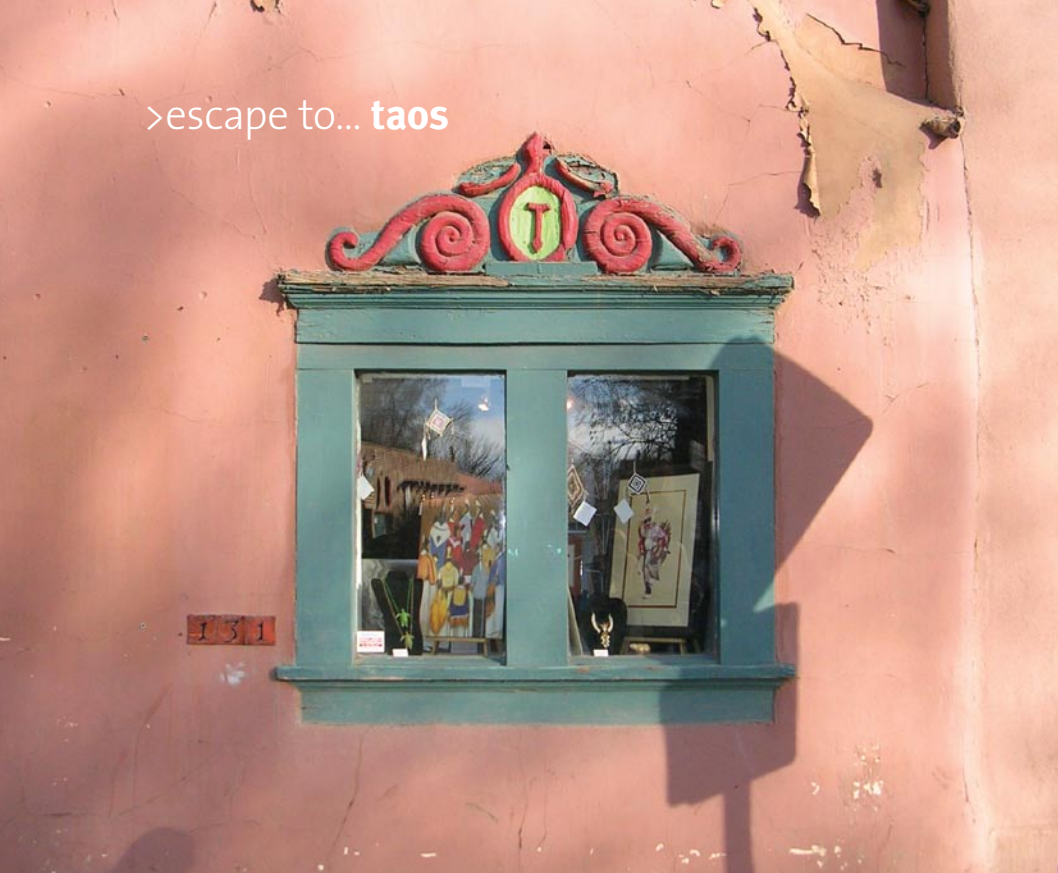
friend, there was a cowboy in my future. Lenny McNab is the executive chef of Kessler Canyon Ranch located just north of DeBeque, Colorado. Kessler Canyon is the newest luxury hotel in the Kessler family’s chorus line of hotels. Perhaps the one with the “best legs” and certainly center stage right now. Lenny happened to be a guest chef at El Monte Sagrado while I was there. Formerly a chuck wagon cook on a 257,000-acre ranching outfit in Arizona, Lenny is an expert on Dutch oven cookery. He shared a secret about cast iron pots, “Twist the lid slightly once you place it on the pot. The bitsy parts on the edge will become a sealant making the pot lock in and cook what’s in there. And you can cook anything in those pots!”

Besides giving me cooking instructions, he sang to me and our small group of guests. While we passed around a flourless chocolate cake, dense as a Russian novel, Lenny came high steppin’ into the dining room. His jacket was decorative with yoking, beads and stitching. He wore a big executive-looking cowboy hat and a guitar swayed comfortably against his belly. Like a sizzling popcorn kernel, he was dancing around ready to pop. His jolly spirit was infectious, inspiring buried talent in even the shyest of travelers. We were invited to the fire pit for hot cocoa and song. Of course I went. This was my chance to be serenaded by an executive chef/singing poet/cowboy! I was pretty sure that wasn’t going to happen again any time soon.

El Monte Sagrado is an ideal place to rock your earth mother fantasy and be inspired by western nature and culture. Guests are given a hip experience at a high-end resort, but at the same

Opposite page: El Monte Sagrado’s “Living Spa” provides a respite for any soul seeking to re-boot, unwind and dream. Above: Yaqui/Apache Mr. Crowfeather at an overlook on the Rio Grande. Guests at El Monte Sagrado can arrange tours with Mr. Crowfeather and other local professionals to get an insider’s perspective on Taos.

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Above (left to right): A colorful Taos gallery window; From chuck wagon cook to executive chef, Lenny McNab entertains with both food and fiddle; Bohemian chic goddess, Millicent Rogers, model, socialite, artist and activist. Each July, Taos Pueblo hosts a pow-wow that attracts Native American dancers from tribes across the country. For details: www.taospueblo.com

time they are introduced and invited to explore pueblo architecture, design and art. The art collection at the hotel itself is museum-worthy and there is a gallery on property. Mr. Kessler calls it an “experiential” place to be — with plenty to learn about, especially southwestern art. Whether I was being slathered with ancient sea-clay at the spa or sipping a Prickly Pear Margarita at the Anaconda Bar, or simply strolling, admiring the adobe structures, ponds, fountains, sculptures and gardens, I felt calm and reflective, like a wind chime at dusk.

DISCOVER STYLE

As a fashion stylist, I ask clients whom they aspire to look like and why. It can be a friend, preferably someone I know, or a movie star. Lots of women say Audrey Hepburn or Jackie O. Renee Russo also seems to be a big favorite, as does Jennifer Aniston. No one has said Millicent Rogers — but that’s only because they don’t know about her.

Millicent Rogers moved to Taos from Hollywood by way of East Coast society and heiress funding, with the goal of mending a broken heart. Apparently, Clark Gable dumped her (she could have done worse!). Friends Janet Gaynor and costume designer Adrian invited her on a road trip through the great Southwest to get over Gable. Taos was medicine for Millicent’s heart and mind. She was immediately captivated by the land and its people, asking herself, “Why didn’t I know about this place?” She never left. She adopted, cultivated and supported local artists. She donned turquoise jewelry, Indian booties and Navajo skirts, but she kept her Park Avenue roots in the mix, adding pearl earrings and diamond broaches. Her ability to mix styles was her drama, a legacy to fashion stylists everywhere!

But more importantly, Millicent was a humanitarian who took on several social causes throughout her lifetime. Specific to her time in New Mexico, she addressed the injustice that

Native Americans living there were not registered as citizens. Millicent, along with several well-connected friends (and some less well-connected Native Americans) went to Washington to lobby against this de-humanization. To her credit, the policy was changed and Native Americans were allowed to register.

Millicent arrived in Taos in her 40s, and from 1947 to 1953 accumulated a collection of local and valuable antiques and crafts. She established herself at the forefront of the vibrant art scene that was percolating in Taos and Sante Fe. Her collection of useful objects and adornments — as well as her own commissioned jewelry — became what is today the Millicent Rogers Museum.

The museum houses some 8,000-plus objects. Not all were selected by Millicent herself, but her collection is the benchmark by which acquisitions are made. It’s housed in what was once a hacienda and a visit there is an easy, fascinating addition to your Taos “to do” list. For fashion styling inspiration, it’s runway perfect! One look at Millicent’s jewelry gallery will have you grabbing for arrant turquoise in your own jewelry stash and lacing up some moccasins.

If you don’t have the right stuff to pull off a bohemian chic look, check out the museum store. It sells reproductions of Millicent’s own designs — she commissioned pieces and was a designer herself — as well as an extensive collection of Native American weavings, pottery and jewelry. While perusing the goods, I told the salesperson about a turquoise bracelet I have that has gotten very dull. Should I polish it? She explained that no, if you polish it you decrease its value. Wear it and it will become shiny again where it is supposed to, naturally.

FINDING ACCEPTANCE

Looking back on Mr. Crowfeather’s comments about the land accepting you and the Sacred Circle being a point of contact, I decided he was referring to a spiritual connection. Surrounded in every direction by mountains, the Taos Valley looks as if there was a halo placed over it. A friend asked me if I had felt “the

vibration” while in Taos. What vibration? She said she didn’t know. She didn’t feel it! I didn’t feel a vibration either. However, I did feel a calming of the spirit, a centering — as if “the land” or the divine spirit was saying, “I accept you, you can stay...”

Perhaps that is what Millicent felt too. Taos speaks to the soul. Its timeless cultural traditions and vibrant creative expression are carried on the strong breezes that pass over the Rio Grande, stirring a welcoming, intoxicating feeling of being accepted by the earth. It’s the reason some people come to Taos and never leave.

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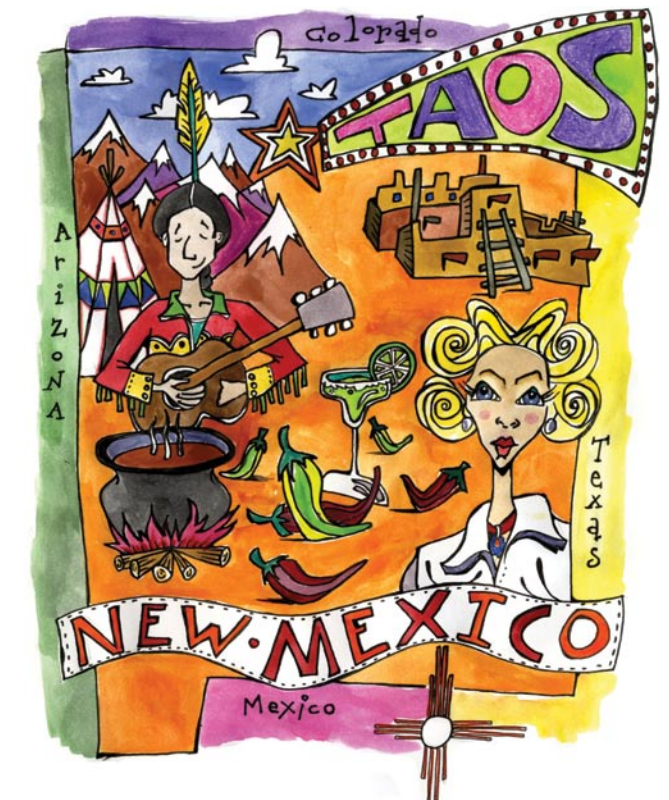


ILLUSTRATION BY KARLA TRAPP

Here are some cool things to see and do in Taos. Like turquoise in a squash blossom necklace, it’s not the whole necklace, but a few special gems that were standouts on my brief weekend away.

The Rio Grande: Mr. Crowfeather is available to take El Monte Sagrado guests on a hike down to the waters of the Rio Grande. You can arrange it through the hotel. I asked about the authenticity of the trail and he said, “I can take you the way my family goes.”

Taos Art Museum & Fechin House: Russian artist Nicolai Fechin related more to musicians than to fellow artists. He claimed he could see color the way a musician hears music. Fechin took his Spanish Revival home and incorporated everything he liked from Russian interiors. Part Russian cottage and part adobe pueblo, the Fechin house and studio feels both exotic and quaint. All of the furniture carvings and moldings were designed and executed by Fechin or local craftsmen. No two doors or windows are the same. The museum also includes works by the Taos Society of Artists and the Taos Moderns, as well as guest exhibitions. www.taosartmuseum.org

The Taos Pueblo: Home to the Taos (Northern Tiwa)-speaking Native American tribe of Pueblo people, The Taos Pueblo is generally open to visitors daily, except when it’s closed for tribal rituals. This National Historic Landmark is considered by some to be the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States — about 1,000 years old. San Geronimo Feast Day is September 30. Expect Buffalo, Comanche and Corn Dances as well as ceremonial foot races and a pole climb. www.taospueblo.com

Historic Taos: Take a guided or self-guided tour of the many landmarks, galleries and shops that make up the Taos Historic District. Be sure to stop by the bar at The Historic Taos Inn for libation, pop into Weaving Southwest to see the work of contemporary tapestry artists, and if kids are in tow, saddle up to the soda fountain at the Taos Trading Company. www.taoschamber.org