

O'Keeffe Country: Looking for Georgia

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A painting made me do it. I'm not sure whether it was "*Purple Hills II*" or "*Lavender Hill with Green 1952*" that gave me the itch but when a friend gifted me with a coffee table book commemorating Georgia O'Keeffe's artwork, I knew I had to set foot on the land that inspired so many of her paintings. I had to see the terrain of O'Keeffe's American Southwest, climb the mesas and red rock hills and stand on the bank of the Chama River that flows past her formerhome. When I learned that the Ghost Ranch Foundation, site of O'Keeffe's first home in New Mexico, gives tours through what is now a restricted area of the ranch, I booked a date. The tour's route encompasses actual locations that O'Keeffe painted and of course, I was free to explore the entire area outside the ranch on my own.

Two Homes in the Desert

During the last fifty years of her long life, O'Keeffe lived in two homes located about an hour north of Santa Fe. She came upon Ghost Ranch in 1934 while exploring the surrounding desert in her Model A Ford. Set amidst coral colored rocks, the isolation and hominess of the ranch suited her. She rented a bungalow room for the night and ended up staying the entire summer. Before long, she fell in love with the location and returned every year.



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One of the places she most cherished was Mount Pedernal. From the backyard of the ranch she could see this flat-topped mountain rising from the desert floor. She once jokingly said, “*It’s my private mountain. God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it.*” By 1940, she had purchased the adobe ranch home along with seven acres and the view was hers for the rest of her life. Then, in 1945, O’Keeffe planted more roots in Abiquiu with the acquisition of an abandoned hacienda on land overlooking the Chama River. She spent three years restoring this second home where she converted the former corral into her studio.

The Drive to Ghost Ranch

Golden-leaved cottonwoods glittered in the sunlight as I drove north from Santa Fe along Highway 84. I had spent my first day in this old Spanish capital city at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, probably the only museum in the country dedicated to one woman’s art work. The museum’s exhibits and displays make a fitting prelude to a day immersed in the high desert

Motoring past massive red rocks and jutting mesas, I felt convinced that certain of them were ones I had seen depicted in an O’Keeffe painting, only to come upon another setting just as convincing and surreal. The New Mexico blue sky seemed to go on forever and I felt a profound sense of appreciation for what O’Keeffe once called “*the best place in the world.*”

I drove through the tiny settlement that is Abiquiu, once inhabited by Anasazi Indians. Mesas, farmlands and orchards embrace the settlement while stately old cottonwoods, ablaze in gold, formed shimmering bands of light along the banks of the winding Chama River. The road soon passed the turn leading to O’Keeffe’s Abiquiu home, the restored hacienda where she often spent summers painting and tending her organic gardens. Knowing that it is forbidden to enter her driveway unattended, I remained on the sleepy two-lane highway leading to Ghost Ranch, some fifteen miles to the north, with plans to visit the hacienda on tour later that day.

Ghost Ranch

As I approached Ghost Ranch, the sense of isolation and serenity grew palpable. The spaciousness of the desert and mountains dwarfs the center’s main building. Just in time for the tour, I watched a preliminary slide show before joining Karen Butts, the center’s excellent guide, along with several other participants. At pivotal points on the route, Karen held up copies of O’Keeffe paintings so we could compare the raw landscape with her interpretation. We were able to stop at each location and were never rushed.

At Chimney Rock, red and yellow sandstone cliffs rose from the desert floor, sharply etched against a sprawling blue sky. I stood transfixed as the midday sunlight, shifting under fast-moving clouds, caused the canyon walls to sparkle. A soft wind came up carrying with it a scent of sage, pungent, dry and sweet. The day was clear and bright and one could see great distances. I imagined O’Keeffe had once stood here and wondered if the land somehow felt her absence.



While we were not able to enter O’Keeffe’s Ghost Ranch home due to its poor state of repair, what she loved most — the red and yellow mesas, Chimney Rock, majestic Pedernal Mountain, the canyon walls — was all on wide open view. This was what I came to see: Georgia O’Keeffe Country — solitary, spacious, and breathtaking.



The Abiquiu Home and Studio

Later that day, I toured the Abiquiu hacienda, its rounded exterior and earthy stone walls blending into the surrounding hills. The simple modernist interior looked out on the winding road that curved east while an interior courtyard, decorated with rocks and bones the artist found on her desert rambles, created a “less-is-more” Zen elegance.

I spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the hills and desert on my own. In all of this, I was joining a long line of O’Keeffe pilgrims. Her life has spawned a bouquet of biographies, each seeking to tell the story of her ultimate flowering in the desert, a place now called “O’Keeffe Country.”

Everywhere I went I felt the presence of the artist who once possessively said, “*When I got to New Mexico that was mine.*” In a way, it still belongs to her. In another way, through the decades she spent capturing the sun-bleached animal bones, her beloved Pedernal, the ochre and crimson cliffs,

through the intimate connection to it all expressed in her paintings, she gave it to us.

As darkness fell, I said farewell to the hills that had turned purple in the fading light of dusk with a toast to Georgia and a promise to return.

Where to Stay: I chose to stay in Santa Fe at the **Santa Fe Inn**, not only because it was highly recommended for its personal service but because I was told it is the only Native American-owned hotel in town. Impressed by its authentic looking Pueblo-style exterior, I explored the grounds where a number of large, magnificent American Indian sculptures are strategically placed. Outstanding examples of Pueblo art and artifacts throughout the interior add another authentic flair. It’s an easy walk to the plaza and the hotel shuttle takes guests to all the high points in town very regularly. Out to dinner one evening, I called the inn when I was ready to return and the shuttle promptly arrived to carry me back. My mini-suite offered quiet and comfort at the end of the day and I appreciated the on-site Amaya Restaurant, where I enjoyed a sumptuous dinner my last evening in town. (www.hotelsantafe.com)

Ghost Ranch: With rustic, comfortable housing accommodations reflective of its origins as a working ranch, a stay at Ghost Ranch places travelers in the heart of O’Keeffe Country. Every unit offers vistas of the sandstone cliffs, cottonwoods and distant mountains. Amenities are basic but after sundown, expansive skies light up with panoramas far more dazzling than those of city lights. (www.ghost ranch.org)



Georgia O’Keeffe Museum: Housed in a Pueblo Revival-style building two blocks from Santa Fe’s historic plaza, the collection encompasses more than 1,000 O’Keeffe paintings, drawing and sculptures. Throughout the year, visitors can see a changing display of these works as well as special exhibitions featuring O’Keeffe work along with that of many of her contemporaries. (www.okeeffemuseum.org)

For more information: Santa Fe Convention and Visitors Bureau, 201 W. Marcy St, Santa Fe, New Mexico. (www.santafe.org)

