



KAYAKS IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

I always knew I would return to Chama, but this time it was to create a new family tradition.

BY CARLY HYLEN

The rushing water of the Rio Brazos flowed cold and clear around my waders, in marked contrast to the hot, dry bite of the high-country air as I played the beautiful 12-inch brook trout and finally guided her into my net. I knelt in the water with her while the guide shot a quick photo, and once revived, she glided from my chilled hands and back beneath the big boulder from where she had come.

Only then did Dad return from switching rods back at the truck and ask with a big, broad grin, "You mean you started without me?"

There are times when we encounter a place we know will have special meaning for the rest of our lives. I knew that day the mountains and streams of Chama, New Mexico, would become one those places. Even now, more than a decade since my first visit, the memories of those mountain lakes and streams remain as vivid and crisp as the day they were made—from the single boulder that sheltered my first brook trout to the haunting melody of coyotes at sunset.

Although I knew I would return to Chama, I never expected it would be for kayak fishing.

Just over a year ago I married my best

friend, Philip. For as long as we've known each other, we've shared a love of nature. He introduced me to kayaking, and I introduced him to fly fishing. Then, while we were planning our wedding, I began working with Hobie Cat Company, internationally recognized as one of the world's leading kayak and sailing companies, to promote their kayak fishing tournaments and newest products for aquatic recreation.

I soon bought a Hobie kayak of my own: their rugged and versatile Mirage Outback, powered by the company's signature MirageDrive foot pedals. Since its debut the MirageDrive has revolutionized kayaking and kayak fishing, and I have spent many afternoons on the water with Philip, enjoying the hands-free ability to maneuver my Outback while catching largemouth bass and bluegills.

But despite my growing experience with the company, I had yet to hear of anyone using their kayaks for fly fishing. They perform flawlessly on lakes and rivers with baitcasters and spinning rods, but fly fishing was an untried application for these superb little vessels.

So I talked to my friends at Hobie, and we decided to show through example just how

useful the MirageDrive kayaks could be for fly fishing.

We needed a location that combined the timeless elegance of trout fishing and deep, clear lakes surrounded by lush forests and high mountain peaks. I knew the perfect setting—that unforgettable place of my fondest fishing memories. I quickly made arrangements to return to the 36,000-acre Lodge and Ranch at Chama Land & Cattle Company, where Dad and I had caught so many beautiful trout more than a decade ago.

But I wasn't making this trip alone. Fly fishing is my family's legacy, so it was only right to share the experience with my husband and parents.

Dad had taught me to fly fish when I was barely old enough to hold a rod in my hands, and Mom had fished by his side for years before I was born. Philip and I hadn't traveled at all since our honeymoon, so we were all eager to share this time together.

We flew into Albuquerque, New Mexico, on a warm July afternoon and spent the next day meandering north through Santa Fe to Chama. The arid, high-desert climate was a stark contrast to our homes in Tennessee, filled with stunning ochre, red, and purple rock formations. As the day passed we climbed higher into the cool conifer and aspen forests of the San

Juan Mountains that soar above the Chama Valley and finally turned into the gated entrance of the ranch.

Stepping through the front doors into the massive great room of the opulent lodge was like stepping back in time. The soft lighting, plush leather furnishings, high vaulted ceilings, and towering stone fireplace were exactly as I remembered. Long hallways stretched out from either end of the great room to the lavishly appointed guest rooms and suites.

But it was the people who truly made us feel at home. Frank Simms, president and general manager of the ranch, who is family in all but blood, hadn't changed one bit since I'd last seen him. The fly fishing guides began trickling back to the lodge after a day on the water with their clients, who included individuals, groups of friends, and married couples enjoying their vacations. They heartily shook our hands and greeted us like old friends returning home.

Chama's head guide and Dad's virtual brother, Pat Carpenter, soon joined us to say we would start out fishing Charlie's Lake in the morning. He had guided Chama's hunters and anglers for 19 years and knew the high country like his own backyard. He and Dad had fished and hunted the ranch together for years, and with both of them as guides, we knew that we would be in excellent hands for the coming week.

The next morning after breakfast, while Pat was pairing up the guides with their respective clients for the day, Philip and I began unpacking and assembling the two Hobie Mirage i11S kayaks that had been shipped to the lodge before our arrival. Unlike my rotomold Hobie Mirage Outback, the Mirage i11S is inflatable, and therefore easier to transport. While we inflated the kayaks, attached the Vantage CT seats, and assembled the MirageDrive foot pedals, some of the guides began drifting over to ask questions. They had always fished the lakes with jon boats and float tubes, so the foot-powered kayaks were a completely new concept. Even Uncle Frank watched the proceedings with great interest.

"So you use these pedals to move the kayak?"

"Is the seat comfortable?"

"Do you think you'll catch fish in this thing?"

Curious questions came from all directions, and I assured them that not only would we catch fish, we would do it in comfort and style.

Philip and I rode with Pat while Dad chauffeured Mom to Charlie's Lake, a high-country jewel tucked with a massive rock formation at its center.

The past couple of months had been unseasonably warm, which made the fly fishing more challenging.

"We'll need to fish deep," Pat explained as he noted the lack of activity on the surface, so we rigged up our rods and reels with sinking lines and Woolly Buggers.

I was using a 9-foot, 6-weight Sage Xi3 with a Billy Pate "Salmon" reel from Tibor Reels. While technically a light saltwater rod, the Sage Xi3 was well-suited for the lakes with its ideal blend of weight and sensitivity. Philip and I each launched a Mirage i11S while my parents and Pat started out in jon boats.

I had never trolled with a fly rod before, but the concept seemed simple enough. I stripped out 30 feet of fly line as I eased forward onto the calm surface of the lake. I set an easy pace, one I could maintain for hours using the silky-smooth action of the MirageDrive, holding the rod out to the

side. I had three tentative strikes within the first ten minutes but somehow couldn't manage to set the hook.

"Getting any hits?" Pat asked a few minutes later.

"Yeah, but I'm having a hard time getting enough leverage to set the hook."

Pat thought for a moment, and then looked across the water at me and my kayak. "Can that thing go backwards?"

I knew immediately what he was thinking. "That's genius!" I called. "Yes, it can!"

I gave a quick tug on the plastic loop at my feet labeled "Reverse" and felt the propulsion fins flip 180 degrees and lock into place. As I started pedaling the kayak began effortlessly gliding backwards, my fly line straightening out in its nearly imperceptible wake, my rod held low and parallel to the water.

It didn't take long for the rest of the group to notice what I was doing.

"Carly, why are you pedaling backwards?" Mom called somewhere off to the left.

"Because it makes it easier to . . ."

I didn't get to finish my sentence because a big rainbow slammed the fly. The hook-set was nearly automatic, as was the fish's instant, violent response. She leapt high into the air before charging straight toward me. I accelerated backwards, almost subconsciously, as I played the fish, my rod, body, and kayak all working in unison until the big trout's brilliant coral sides and gill plates flashed just shy of the water's surface and I gently guided her into my net.

She was pristine, a perfectly proportioned 20-inch rainbow. I flashed Dad a huge grin, and he mirrored my expression with the

Clockwise from the top: Renowned architect John Russell Pope designed the 14,200-square-foot Manor House in 1936. • Clockwise from the top: Renowned architect John Russell Pope designed the 14,200-square-foot Manor House in 1936. •



comment, “Well, I guess it’s only right that you catch the first fish of the trip—again.”

Seeing the usefulness of this new backward-trolling technique, Philip quickly threw his kayak into reverse and was soon hooked into a rainbow of his own. By lunchtime he had out-fished us all, landing and releasing five more big fish. I was thrilled for my husband, but also determined to even the score.

A pair of ospreys and a bald eagle circled the lake as we enjoyed our shore lunch and then headed back onto the water. Our new backward trolling strategy continued to work wonders, as everyone began catching fish.

My first trout of the afternoon was a fat, healthy female. The second was slightly smaller but made up for it in attitude, shedding the barbless hook and flipping himself out of the net as soon as I landed him.

While everyone else headed for shore as the sun began easing into the western sky, I decided to make one more circuit. The trout that struck was an absolute monster, the rod bending sharply toward the water as she turned and headed for the depths. The Hobie became an extension of my body, and once again I wondered how I had managed so long without the ability to pedal in reverse.

For a moment the big trout surfaced, then darted away on a smoking run. I let her take line against the smooth drag of my fly reel. Then she doubled back directly toward me, but I quickly pedaled in reverse to

maintain tension on the line. Finally, her strength began to falter, and I was able to guide her into my net.

Her jewel-toned body more than filled my net, and she weighed well over six pounds according to Pat’s best estimate. Dad shot photos as I lifted her from the net and revived her, and after a few seconds, she gave a strong kick and slipped out of my hands—an ideal ending to a flawless day.

The next morning we were joined by our longtime friend Keeton Eoff, head of Strategic Development for Hobie Cat Company. He had arrived the previous evening with two Hobie Mirage Outbacks tied to his truck, adding to our ever-growing fleet. He couldn’t wait to experience the high-country lakes for himself.

We would be fishing Bobo Lake, another of Chama’s high-country gems, rimmed by a grassy shoreline that slowly gave way to the surrounding aspen and conifer forests. The trout were still holding deep, so we set up our rods for trolling while Mom and I gave Keeton the highlight reel of yesterday’s events.

“So let me get this straight . . .” Keeton asked quizzically. “You’ve been fly fishing while pedaling backwards?” Clearly he had not anticipated this particular application of the MirageDrive 180.

“Yeah, you’ve got to try it!” I replied. But for now Keeton decided he would leave the backwards pedaling to Philip and I, rigging up his fly rod with a dry fly and dropper combination instead. He and

Philip pedaled out onto the lake in the inflatable Hobies while Mom and I each took one of the newly arrived Outbacks.

I have often viewed fly fishing as a solo activity, or at least one that works best with fewer people. When I would fly fish the mountain streams back home with Dad, we always maintained a healthy distance to avoid interfering with each other’s casts. But fishing these lakes in the Hobie kayaks completely changed that dynamic.

We still maintained a safe distance from each other, but having four kayaks and two jon boats on the water at the same time created a decidedly more social and laidback atmosphere. We traded friendly banter in passing or inquired as to how the other person was doing.

I felt right at home in my Outback, and the MirageDrive 180 felt just as smooth and effortless in the heavier kayak. Once again trolling backwards paid off, as Mom, Philip, and I all began catching trout.

“Hey, Keeton, are you sure you don’t want to try trolling backwards?” I asked as I released my third rainbow of the morning.

“Nah, I’m good.” Keeton replied. “I guess they just like the color of your kayak better than mine.”

We continued our back-and-forth banter until Keeton suddenly hooked a trout on his dry fly, playing the fish with exquisite skill before netting, photographing, and releasing it.

Pausing for lunch, we noticed a few sparse, rain-laden clouds rolling across the sky, but the cloud cover brought the trout to the

surface, and Dad, Pat, and Keeton all began catching fish with dry flies and droppers.

But Mom, Philip, and I continued our well-proven backward trolling technique, and my final trout of the day slammed the fly with intense force. He was a stunning, mature male, with a prominent kype and rich, deep colors. By the time I netted and released him, the day was nearly done, so we all began gliding toward shore to load up the kayaks and return to the lodge.

Our time at Chama passed all too quickly, but we enjoyed every moment, spending our days fishing and our evenings in the great room sharing stories and partaking of the chef’s fine cuisine. The distinctions between friends and family no longer mattered, for we all shared a common passion for fishing, along with a deep respect and affection for each other and the enjoyment of fly fishing in such a pristine destination.

Most of all, I reveled in the dynamic of our new and expanded family. Mom and Dad had heartily approved of Philip long before our wedding, but now they could see firsthand that their love and trust in him was well placed. I sensed them take a step back from their parenting instincts and transition naturally into the roles of advisors and friends for a younger generation. As for Philip and me, the trip offered a welcome confirmation of the rewarding endeavor of establishing our new lives together.

And now that we’re all back home in Tennessee, the only question is when can we return to Chama. ■



IF YOU WANT TO GO

While the Lodge and Ranch at Chama Land & Cattle Company is recognized as one of the world’s legendary big game hunting venues, it is also one of North America’s premier fly fishing destinations. Men and women alike enjoy its myriad high-country lakes and streams, dramatic western scenery, abundant wildlife, and award-winning, 27,000-square-foot lodge with luxurious accommodations and world-class cuisine. Located high in the San Juan Mountains of northern New Mexico just two hours north of Santa Fe, Chama is perfect for friends, clients, business groups, couples, and individuals. Call (575) 756-2133 or visit LodgeAtChama.com.

GEAR LIST

The author thanks Chota Outdoor Gear, BUFF, Maven Fly, and Umpqua Feather Merchants for supplying such superb equipment and apparel. As always, we used our time-tested Sage fly rods and Tibor & Billy Pate fly reels. On an adventure such as this, we simply cannot afford to settle for anything less.

The author also wishes to thank Hobie Cat Company for providing the Mirage i11S and Mirage Outback kayaks for this trip, and for their continued friendship, both on and off the water.

Editor’s Note: You are invited to share your thoughts and comments at carly@thenaturalistsquill.com.

