

Lake Powell, Arizona/Utah

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Editors: For reprints, please contact cmwalter@claire-walter.com. Photos are available.



Houseboat holidays on Lake Powell combine drop-dead scenery, water sports, and utter relaxation.
(Claire Walter photo)

By Claire Walter

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I have a love/hate relationship with Lake Powell, the enormous artificial lake – “Fake Powell,” as some have called it – that was created by the Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River at the Utah/Arizona border.

Environmentalist me hates the idea of big dams on big rivers, but recreationist me loves floating on this stunning rock-rimmed, mid-desert body of water. It is the second-largest man-made lake in the U.S. Houseboats tuck into secluded bays, anglers fish, hikers explore side canyons, kayakers and canoeists paddle on smooth water, scuba divers plunge into the deep, and water skiers and jet skiers skim the surface, enjoying their motorized pleasures. Even with some 3 million visitors a year, there seems to be room for all.

The 186-mile-long lake is the centerpiece of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. It is administered by the National Park Service, which prohibits excessive and flagrant commercial exploitation, monitors water quality, tries to keep the beaches clean and attempts to protect natural and cultural resources. The nearly 2,000 miles of shoreline are longer than the entire Pacific Coast from Seattle to San Diego, but still, the lake comprises only 13 percent of the recreation area. Additional nearby land is part of the huge Navajo Nation.

Of course, there are other places to kayak, fish, water ski and so on, but nowhere else can you do so amid such eye-popping, picture-postcard scenery. Due to a multi-year drought, the lake is only at 36 percent of capacity. In my view, lower water makes Lake Powell more dramatic and more interesting, because the cliffs, mesas, buttes, towers and spires rise higher above the lake surface than when it is full.

Like the Grand Canyon, just downriver, Glen Canyon is composed of layer upon layer of sedimentary rock in hues of red, taupe and beige that give silent testimony to the canyon's geologic history. The palette deepens in the first light of dawn and at dusk, but every time of day invites photography. A white "bathtub ring" is a telltale reminder of previous high water, which last occurred eight years ago.

The 87 non-lake percent of the National Recreation Area is a rich wildlife habitat. Tamarisk, reeds and willows grow quickly behind the retreating waters. Mule deer, bighorn sheep, rabbits, chipmunks, ground squirrels, and others are among the 80 species of mammals found there. Thirteen kinds of bat skittle across the twilight sky, and coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and foxes inhabit higher, more remote upland areas. Birders have logged more than 270 species, including North America's largest population of peregrine falcons and occasionally California condors.

While the best fishing is usually in winter, anglers report excellent spring catches of stripers, walleye, bass, catfish, shad, bluegill and more. Because many non-native sport fish prey on indigenous varieties, Lake Powell is not a catch-and-release site. The park service is happy to have finned predators removed from the lake.

The classic way to enjoy Lake Powell is on a wide-beamed houseboat. They are anywhere from 44 to 75 feet long and accommodate anywhere from eight to a dozen people, often in astonishing luxury, and can haul sailboats, windsurfers, canoes, kayaks or pontoon boats for getaways from the noisy and choppy parts of the lake. Often, people moor in a congenial bay and use the houseboat as a floating private lodge. Another option is to overnight in an RV campground.

Whether you trailer in your own boat or rent a houseboat, you'll find five marinas and boat-launching ramps around Lake Powell. Hite Marina at the northeastern end of the lake, the closest one to Colorado, is closed as long as lake levels remain at historic lows. The two closest to Page, Ariz., are Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas and Antelope Point Marina, the newest and swankiest.

Water sports abound on Lake Powell, but my favorite way to enjoy it is to lounge on the shaded upper deck of a houseboat, with a cold drink, a good book and some Navajo flute music playing gently on the sound system. Blissful!

If YOU GO

WHAT: Houseboating and water sports on Lake Powell.

WHERE: Page, Ariz., is 400 miles from Boulder.

COST: Houseboat rentals, 7 days, about \$2,200 for a basic model to \$11,000 for an ultra-luxe model, plus fuel and insurance. Rates lower after summer peak season.

DIFFICULTY: Rental firms teach clients how to maneuver and moor the boats, or can shuttle them to a desired site.

ETC.: Lake Powell is “open” year-round.

MORE INFO: (888) 261-7243 or visit www.pagelakepowellchamber.org

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