The gods walk here

Enshrined in myth and motion picture, Monument Valley is also a living landscape of wonder and surprise.

BY MATTHEW JAFFE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM GAMACHE

From the floor of Monument Valley, here on the border of Arizona and Utah, it’s about a 1,000-foot climb to the flat summit of Hunts Mesa. That figure tells only part of the story.

It is said that the gods use the valley’s mesa tops as steppingstones when they walk the Earth. I’m not sure the Navajo have a word comparable to instructors or chutziCoach. But looking up at Hunts Mesa, with its red sandstone walls rising into the deep blue desert sky, I’m convinced we’re pushing our luck, by any name.

Still, the opportunity to get a god’s-eye view from atop rather than below one of Monument Valley’s landmark formations seems too good to pass up. And so we set out in my photographer friend Tom’s vintage Chevy Blazer, bouncing along to the rhythm of the rutted road, trailing our Navajo guides. They’re driving one of Monument Valley’s traditional tourist vehicles: a pickup truck with rows of bench car seats mounted on the open bed. The word conversation will do.
Not that I really need any confirmation, but our Navajo guides provide some clues that this is not just any view. They too have brought cameras.

This geologic evolution by no means stops here. Back in another millennium or so and the buttes and towers will be gone. “There is no contract, no completion date,” says retired geologist and sometime Monument Valley guide Gert Foushee. “It is ongoing.”

Past the pressboard souvenir stands near the highway and the even more ramshackle kiosks where tour operators try to entice customers, we meet Foushee at the tribal park visitor center. He has told us to look for a tall skinny guy of about 70 wearing a plaid shirt. We find him easily, although he is sporting a bright orange hooded sweatshirt to ward off the day’s unexpected chill. He still carries the accent of his native North Carolina and greets us with a voice as sweet as a country preacher’s.

Foushee first visited Monument Valley 50 years ago. Then 19, he came out from his father, driving the sand-track from the south. He had seen pictures of the formations in his geology textbook—scant preparation for an actual visit. “We found a spot where we could

View from atop Hunts Mesa stretches across noisy remnants of an ancient sea.

As we venture into the backcountry, the guides seem intent on testing Tom’s driving chops by taking us through deep sand. The only way to reach the base of the mesa without getting stuck is to get out of our truck. Our guides, David, Emmett, and Leonard, look up at the mesa’s steep, sandstone face. They tell us in Navajo, gesturing at possible routes, to follow their hands and struggle to identify the subtleties that distinguish the agreeing upon path from the remainder of the slickrock.

The initial ascent is simple: straight up a gradual, grooved slope. We begin to zigzag, tightropeing along barely discernible ledges no wider than a boot, then climb hand-over-hand, dependent on rock handholds, to arrive at the base of the mesa. As we reach the top, I resist the temblor to look back, saving my first glance for the summit.

I have seen Monument Valley hundreds of times. In John Ford’s classic Westerns, movies like Stagecoach and She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, which turned these sandstone monoliths into iconic expressions of a mythic American West. In car ads and Road Runner cartoons. But as I turn and look out, I see Monument Valley, perhaps for the first time. And somehow Monument Valley doesn’t look like Monument Valley.

We stand, after all, above the monoliths. From this vantage point they seem smaller, less brooding, almost delicate and vulnerable: survivors, not victors. When you are on the valley floor, it swallows everything to become a world unto itself; up on top, we see Monument Valley as part of a larger realm, the Colorado Plateau.

Our view takes in a vast area of the Four Corners region, including landmarks like the Comb Ridge; according to Navajo lore, it is one of four arcoheads used to carve the Earth and today helps protect Navajo land. Seventy miles to the north are the twin 9,000-foot buttes known as the Bear’s Ear—huge and imposing when we drove between them the day before, now faint silhouettes breaking the horizon.

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“We always say they want to do a hike, but most of them turn around when they see what they have to climb,” says David. “I’ve worked as a guide for 15 years. This is my second time up here.”
pull off and not get stuck,” he says. “We were a few miles southwest of Monument Pass. The north was Eagle Rock Mesa and Brigham’s Tomb, although we didn’t know the names. We cooked supper and watched the sun go down. Then a waning full moon came up, creating splendid silhouettes.”

“So how did that affect you?” I ask.

“It blew me away, that’s how it affected me,” says Foushee. “I could not imagine a landscape such as that.”

On the day we head out, Foushee seems no less passionate. At several stops, he drops into a crouched to cagily trace our geology lessons in the soft, red sand. Billowing, threatening clouds move across the sky above the formations. Through the clouds are dark and purple, they also reflect a reddish sheen from the valley’s reddish rock.

Foushee tells us several times that we’re quite lucky to catch the valley on a day with such an unmettled and lovely sky. “You start off with something extraordinary,” he says. “So anything you add to Monument Valley makes it that much more spectacular.”

Foushee has seen Monument Valley under all sorts of conditions. In 1939, he moved to Bluff, Utah, opened the landmark Recapture Lodge, and soon started guiding visitors into the valley.

Monument Valley’s tourism started more than 50 years earlier, when rancher Harry Goulding arrived from Arizona in 1923 to run sheep. Goulding opened a trading post and later a lodge, turning his encampment into the closest thing Monument Valley has to a downtown.

By 1937 the valley was enduring the ravages of the Depression, and Goulding was desperate. He had heard that United Artists was planning to shoot a western and looking for a location. Armed with photos taken by friend and noted landscape photographer Joseph Stanch, Goulding and his wife, Mike, drove to Hollywood with $60 and no appointment.

In jeans and beat-up boots, Goulding arrived at the studio, only to be told he needed an appointment. He began spreading out his bedroll and

According to one account, said, “I can wait. I’ve lived among the Navajo so long that I don’t get so busy that I can’t wait. I’ve got plenty of time, so I’ll just stay here.”

Within minutes, Goulding was showing his pictures to John Ford. Three days later, production began on Stagecoach in Monument Valley. Ford eventually made nine films in the valley, although somehow it seems like more. Few directors have been so closely associated with a landscape. Ford loved running his own show, far away from the studio bosses—and in 1938, no spot in the United States lay farther than a railroad. The independent-minded director was able to reconfigure shots as he saw fit, using the valley to best scenic advantage.

In this way, Ford helped define the myth of the West as landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt had so memorably a couple of generations earlier.

RED ROCK Totem Pole (left) puts in its last appearance in the Arizona desert, and New Mexico in Stagecoach. For the ride, the local Navajo played Gomache, Arapah, Cheyenne, and Apache. In this way, he helped create the image of the hogan in the world.

Wrote J. A. Place in The Western Films of John Ford: “The grandeur, beauty, and legend of the hogan proportions necessary to an epic tale are offered by Monument Valley. Ford uses it as Homer used the sea. It is rather like the sea in its changes, its colors, its moods.”

Or as Ford himself put it, “I think you can say that the real star of my Westerns has always been the land.”

Like John Wayne, the star of many Ford films, Monument Valley always played itself, even though none of the Ford movies were officially set there. The valley was Texas in The Searchers, Arizona in My Darling Clementine, and New Mexico in Stagecoach. Along for the ride, the local Navajo played Gomache, Arapah, Cheyenne, and Apache. In this way, he helped create, he helped break up the cans out of the dance.

In Navajo country, the traditional survives against the march of the modern. Sheepherders carry cellular phones even as their parents tell time by marking the movement of a shadow across a patch of sunlight on their hogan’s floor.
adjacent to Monument Valley known as Mystery Valley.

We had met Jensen the day before at Oljato Trading Post. Ten miles west of Goulding’s, Oljato actually predates the more famous trading post by a few years. Jensen bought the business eight years ago and is the first Navajo to own it. She was born and raised in a hogan at Black Mesa, where her mother still keeps a flock of sheep. One grandmother wore rags. A grandfather appeared in some John Ford films, including Cheyenne Autumn.

“He was tall and handsome,” says Jensen. “People used to refer to him as the Navajo John Wayne.”

We head into the backcountry and end up in a terrain considerably different from Monument Valley. Monument’s broad desert plains and crumbling monoliths have given way to more intimate valleys surrounded by broader, flatter slickrock mesas. The Navajo distinguish between the two terrains. Classic Monument Valley is the “land of standing rocks.” Where we are is called the “spaces between the rocks.”

As if determined to refill those spaces, a gritty sand-filled wind swirls about the rounded mesas. We climb to the top of sandstone arches, follow a set of diorama tracks, and explore Anasazi sites: Baby House ruin and its invariant foot- and handprint embedded in the floor; a petroglyph of a man pulling on a sheep, both in angled postures that suggest the strain of their tug-of-war; and the multiple handprint pictographs along the cliff above the remains of a spot called House of Many Hands.

The Monument Valley is said to have one of the highest concentrations of Anasazi sites anywhere. The Navajo, however, did not descend from the Anasazi. Instead, they may have arrived in Monument Valley as late as 1867, hundreds of years after the Anasazi had left the Four Corners area behind.

Jensen, too, has lived elsewhere but returned to Monument Valley to reconnect with her culture. Her own parents had abandoned traditional Navajo ways, and she rediscovers the chance to rediscover Navajo customs through her friendships with elders in Oljato.

“I’m definitely not here to get rich,” she says. “Most of it has to do with the grandpas and grandmas. I try to spend as much time as possible with them. I have a sense of having my grandparents because I stay in touch with their ways. I find it quite helpful to have that guidance, just being in tune with the Earth.”

She tells the story about an old Apaloosa mare with a two-week-old colt she had last seen one fall in a pasture out at Black Mesa. Jensen hoped to bring the horses back down to a lower elevation, but winter came early. She feared the pair wouldn’t survive.

Then in spring, while chasing cattle, she spotted some small hoofprints. Jensen heard a whimper and saw the colt.

“I approached him and he ran six circles around me,” she recalls. “I started talking softly and stuck my hand out. He came over and sniffed it, and I thought to myself, ‘I’m taking this baby home.’ He followed me back, it miles.”

Invariably in this land, you hear or see things that transcend simple explanation, be it in millions of years of geology, in the tale of a medicine man on John Ford’s payroll who used to conjure the proper skies for the day’s shoot, in the pure poetry of watching the light slide up one of the valley’s sandstone terraces, or in the near-miraculous survival, through a cold winter, of a young colt.

Strange, too, how in a place where the Earth is at its most spectacular, people resort to uncanny terms to describe it. John Wayne put it this way: “Monument Valley in 1958 was heaven.” When I asked Gene Fouchey about the valley in the late ’60s, he, too, uses that word. Heaven.

I can’t say for sure that Monument Valley in 1998 is heaven. I think it may be too dusty for that. But, I can say this. If the gods do walk anywhere on Earth, they walk here.

The essential Monument Valley

Monument Valley lies within 30,000-acre Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. The park stretches along the Arizona-Utah border, approximately 400 miles south of Salt Lake City and 300 miles north of Phoenix. (For a map, see page 76.) Average temperature in November is 52°

Gatesway cities are Kayenta, Arizona, and Bluff and Mexican Hat, Utah.

TOURING THE VALLEY: Your first stop should be the Monument Valley Visitor Center (open daily: 435/277-3937) off U.S. 163. Operated by the Navajo Nation Parks and Recreation Department, it will supply you with much information about the valley. Jewelry, ceramic pottery, and souvenirs are for sale.

Most people choose to see the valley with a Navajo tour guide. To get a comprehensive list of guides before you begin your trip, call the Navajo Tourism Department at 520-877-6136. The staff at either visitor center should also be able to assist you when you arrive.

Guided tours can vary from a minimum of two hours to a full day. On the longer tours, some guides will introduce you to traditional Navajo foods or show you how native plants and herbs are used for ceremonial purposes.

You can also tour the valley on a self-guided horseback or auto tour. Brochures for both options are available at the Monument Valley Visitor Center.

Dining

STAGECOACH DINING ROOM: At Goulding’s Museum & Trading Post, the restaurant features American food and a few Navajo dishes. While you’re here, you may want to visit the nearby museum (open daily) that showcases the Hollywood directors and actors who helped introduce Monument Valley to the world. 1000 Main St., 2 miles west of the Monument Valley Tribal Park turnoff from U.S. 163; (435) 727-3231.

HASKÉ REINH Restaurant: Run by the Navajo Nation Hospitality Enterprise, the restaurant features dishes from Navajo tacos to fry bread. Monument Valley Visitor Center, (435) 727-3287.

NAVAJO MARKET PLACE: Local residents offer homemade traditional dishes such as Navajo dumpings. U.S. 163 at (435) 727-3231.

Mitten View Campground, Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. Campsites $5 per night. (435) 727-3955.

—Roheta John