

EVERYONE HAS SEEN MONUMENT VALLEY. BUT HAVE YOU REALLY SEEN IT?

By Tyson Hugie

More than one of the world's finest, most famous and most scenic drive-through routes, Monument Valley is also a great place to explore up close and spend a night or two.

In the remote reaches of northeastern Arizona lies a special landscape with red sandstone rocks that tower upwards of 1,000 feet into the air. This place has been featured in Western films for decades, and it offers some of the most unique scenery, culture, and experiences in the world. This is Monument Valley Tribal Park.

While to some it may be just dirt and rocks, to me, this park is something entirely different: it's a place of solitude, of reflection and of appreciating nature's beauty. I can't think of a better 10-hour round-trip getaway from the hectic Phoenix area.

(cont'd)



(cont'd)

Monument Valley is part of the Navajo Nation, which is part of why it has been protected from fast-paced urbanization. It looks about the same as it did when I first visited the area in 2007, although amenities are better and infrastructure has improved. The drive took me in my boxy but trusty 1996 Acura SLX to Flagstaff, where I caught Highway 89 to Highway 160 and set off northeasterly. But instead of continuing toward Four Corners, turn north on US 163 at Kayenta (a great place to refresh and refuel), and you are in Monument Valley almost immediately. (US 163 merges with US 193 a little farther north

and may be familiar to you as the road to Moab; Monument Valley, in fact, spans a vast region in both Arizona and Utah.)

Entry to the park costs \$8 per person, and hours vary according to season. When I visited this winter, cars were allowed to enter the signature 17-mile dirt road loop from 8:00 am until 3:00 pm, with closure scheduled at 5:00 pm daily. I paid my entry fare in the early afternoon and had plenty of time to tool around.

The landmarks were unmistakable—from Mitten Butte to Three Sisters, each one was identified on a map that is issued when entering the park. By the time I was

three hours into my self-guided tour, I had captured some postcard-worthy photographs and managed to try out some of the all-terrain capabilities in my SUV. While convenience stores and vending machines were nowhere to be found, there were porta-johns throughout the property, and I managed to come across a vendor selling delicious Navajo tacos with chili beans. The frybread was fresh, and panoramic views that went along with the meal were included at no extra charge.

Lodging that evening was at The View Hotel, an aptly-named facility overlooking the Valley, with balconies and patios that

offered a front seat view. The in-house dining room was accommodating, and the gift shop begged for a visit after finishing my meal. I found a couple of must-have souvenirs for the trip home.

The Navajo people are a humble and generous type, and I came away from my tour with a greater appreciation for their hospitality and their respect for Mother Nature. One of the sayings I learned during my visit was, “Be still, and the Earth will speak to you.” There is no better place to be in communication with nature than among the sandstone monoliths of Monument Valley. ■

