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Blazing New Trails in Native American Lands



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

A Navajo guide, Nathan James, in Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona.

By BONNIE TSUI

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ON the road through the tree-studded high desert toward the small town of Chinle, Ariz., the car radio was bringing in the local Navajo station, with a playlist heavy in Top 40 hits, peppered with Navajo-language station breaks and car commercials. The sky was a cloudless blue, and I was on my way, with my childhood friend Esther Chak, to Canyon de Chelly, a geologic maze of towering red cliffs and deep-cut gorges dotted with pictographs and ruins of ancient cliffside villages. Lying in the heart of the 21st-century Navajo Nation, it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in North America, a window into both an ancient world and a modern one.

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It was late afternoon when we reached the mouth of the canyon. As we stood at the visitors' entrance, dazzled by the 360-degree horizon beckoning us from every direction, Merlin Yazzie, a cherub-faced park ranger with a ponytail, gave us a friendly wave.

"Is this your first visit to the area?" he said. "Welcome to Navajoland."

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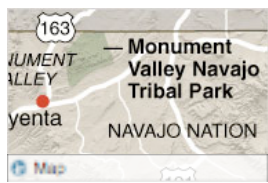
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Arizona and New Mexico

The stereotypes of glitzy casinos and a kitschy cowboys-and-Indians past have long dominated popular notions about visiting Native American lands. Even where the more genuine attractions are obvious, as at the majestic [Monument Valley](#) straddling Arizona and Utah, it has often been difficult for outsiders to find an accessible and comfortable way into the nuanced realities of Indian country: its venerable history and distinct cultures; its remote, rugged natural beauty.

It was an emerging change in this old pattern that had brought us to Canyon de Chelly (pronounced de SHAY). A new generation of Indian entrepreneurs and leaders is making its influence felt in tourism, bringing a sensitive, updated sensibility to hospitality, along with a renewed emphasis on authenticity. In some of the most gorgeous, intriguing and remote places of Native American territory, the focus is shifting toward a more modern and higher-end travel experience.

In three days at Canyon de Chelly, we found that shift playing out at the Thunderbird Lodge, a historic trading post renovated into a modern hotel run by an all-Navajo staff, and in well-designed tours led by knowledgeable Navajo guides. Our room was one of 73, all with wireless Internet and simply but tastefully decorated, with prints and paintings by Navajo artists on the walls, and curtains and bedcovers patterned in tribal motifs.

About 150 miles away, a hotel has appeared for the first time in the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. Aptly named [the View](#), it is owned by a local Navajo family and designed with meticulous care to blend into and capitalize on the splendor of the landscape.

Rust-colored and avowedly eco-sensitive, it frames the iconic Mitten and Merrick Buttes with its balconies, and it is furnished with a carefully curated collection of rugs, pottery and jewelry by Native American artisans. Its chef, MacNeal Crank, 33, reinterprets Navajo recipes he learned from his grandmother with the help of training at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago's Le Cordon Bleu program.

In [New Mexico](#), a new cultural center and restaurant serving Native American and New Mexican cuisine has opened at the foot of Acoma Pueblo, or Sky City, a traditional Pueblo community perched high on a mesa. The center offers tours through the pueblo. Elsewhere, Indian tour companies have sprung up to guide travelers through off-reservation sites that also offer insight into Indian life and the Native American past.

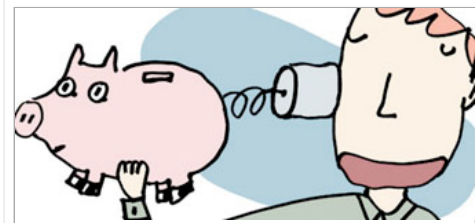
And in Canada, the new tribal tourism is showing itself in Wendake territory just north of Quebec, where a strikingly modern hotel-museum has been constructed of glass and wood to emphasize the Huron Wendat tribe's concept of "absence of limit" — the connection between human beings and the natural world. Its 55 rooms and interpretive biking trails are on the banks of the Akiawenrahk (a k a St.-Charles) River.

In all of these instances, a respect for heritage and environmental consciousness has been blended harmoniously with 21st-century sophistication. The trend reflects not just the new ideas and marketing savvy of Indian entrepreneurs, but a new pool of customers that is eager to engage with the Native American world.

"People are a little more open-minded these days when it comes to visiting Native America," said Sarah Chapman, international coordinator for Go Native America, a Montana-based tour company featuring indigenous guides and interpreters. "On the one hand, you have that flashy eco-building endeavor going — that's very much the case with younger people in tribal tourism — but I think the other new flashy thing going on here is that people want to connect more."

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Go Native America was founded 15 years ago by Ms. Chapman's husband, Serle Chapman, a writer and photographer of Cheyenne and other tribal heritage. One of its trips, called Yellowstone Is Indian Country, visits ancestral sites and explains origin stories in [Yellowstone National Park](#).

Of course, sites like Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley have long been familiar icons. Monument Valley served as the backdrop for many of John Ford and [John Wayne](#)'s Westerns. (Ms. Chapman says she usually spends about five minutes apprising each new group of tourists of "John Wayne's irrelevance to Native American history.") And [Ansel Adams](#)'s 1940s-era photograph of the 13th-century White House ruins in Canyon de Chelly is one of his most spellbinding images of the American Southwest.

The canyon — actually a system of interconnected canyons — was established as Canyon de Chelly National Monument in 1931 and is officially part of the national park system even though it is not on federal property. Encompassing 83,840 acres (131 square miles, roughly the size of Philadelphia) of Navajo tribal trust land, it is home to a living community of some 80 Indian families and is managed jointly by the [National Park Service](#) and the Navajo Nation.

Mr. Yazzie, the ranger, told us that the visitor center gets only about 300 or 400 visitors a day — "a drop in the bucket compared to the [Grand Canyon](#)." No tour buses caravan through Canyon de Chelly. Except for one trail, visitors are allowed to enter the canyon backcountry only with a Navajo guide.

Besides Thunderbird Lodge, the single other option for staying within the park is a campground adjacent to the inn, though some guided overnight trips to the canyon floor also allow you to pitch a tent. But the appealing comfort of a well-maintained hotel and restaurant makes a longer, more meaningful stay in this remote region accessible to more visitors. And it is well worth the stay to experience a deeper interpretation of place.

THUNDERBIRD offers daily group tours of the canyons in rugged four-wheel-drive vehicles, but Esther and I chose to explore on horseback with the help of Cedric Aragon, the 28-year-old co-owner of Totsonii Ranch, which is reached by a dirt road off the South Rim Drive. The relaxed rhythm of horseback made it easy to talk and exchange cultural anecdotes, and with Mr. Aragon, the access we had to the ruins and prehistoric sites was immediate and stunning.

With the horses balancing nimbly along narrow cliff trails, we picked our way down 1,100 feet to the canyon floor. Through cottonwoods and silvery stands of Russian olive trees, the vertiginous views of sky and rock were mesmerizing.

At the base of Spider Rock, a sheer-walled 800-foot sandstone pinnacle that shoots up out of Canyon de Chelly near its intersection with Bat and Monument Canyons, Mr. Aragon motioned to a shallow cave just behind us. There on the wall above our heads was a series of cave paintings, white pictographs probably made sometime between A.D. 1 and 1300 by the Anasazi, the ancient predecessors of the Hopi and other Pueblo people.

Mingled among these paintings were darker ash drawings of horses running across the red sandstone, done more recently by the Navajo, who entered Canyon de Chelly some 300 years ago; first introduced to horses by the Spanish, the Navajo soon became skilled riders and herders themselves. A rock overhang was marked with black X's, signifying the stars in the sky.

After peering up at the drawings, the three of us climbed down to a nearby rock, where I soon found myself in a shouting match with Mr. Aragon.

"Hooeee!" he bellowed. A hundred other Cedric Aragons, planted at various locations around the 20-mile-long canyon branch, shouted back.

The real one sat back, pleased, on a red sandstone boulder, and said, "Now you."

I took a deep breath before letting loose with a holler. My alter egos answered back promptly, if a bit anemically.

“They might be able to hear you over at the next overlook, but they’d never be able to find you,” Mr. Aragon said. “That’s the beauty of these canyons — they protected our people for a long time.”

I stared up at the rust-colored spires juxtaposed against a brilliantly blue spring sky. We were the only people for miles around.

Making the canyons yell back was tradition for Mr. Aragon, whose family land is near the lip of the canyon that overlooks Spider Rock. Given the fact that people have been living there continuously for about 4,000 years, it seemed right to call on them. Their spirits were still around, he told us, not to mention the physical evidence of their lives.

Hundreds of feet up, the superbly preserved ruins of multistory villages and ceremonial sites were tucked away on rock ledges and alcoves that appeared all but impossible to get to. The ancients, it seems, were pretty amazing climbers.

When we had entered the park the previous day, we had stopped to look at the example there of a hogan, the traditional Navajo home built with logs and mud. Mr. Yazzie had explained the traditional design: a whorled pattern of logs on the roof representing the heavens, crossed logs by the doorway to resemble a mother’s folded hands, door to the east to greet the rising sun.

Now, as we traveled across the landscape on horseback, we saw many a modern hogan, some built with plywood or aluminum. Mr. Aragon pointed out wooden sweat lodges, recently used, and explained the uses of desert plants and trees, from yucca to pine and sagebrush, for food, medicine, herbs, dyes.

Mr. Aragon told us about his grandfathers, Navajo code talkers during World War II, who provided encoded information for Marine units using Navajo words. I asked whether he preferred to be called Navajo or Diné.

“I’m very proud to be Diné,” he said thoughtfully. “That’s what we call ourselves — it means ‘the people.’ ”

In getting to know these people, in listening to their stories of local life, exploring the ancient canyonlands and relaxing in our comfortable room, we found our expectations for a new kind of travel well met.

“We would welcome anyone who came here with a good heart and honest interest,” Mr. Aragon told us. “I like to be a part of people’s memories.”

RUGGED TRAILS AND COMFORTABLE HOTELS

Canyon de Chelly

Canyon de Chelly National Monument (928-674-5500; www.nps.gov/cach; no park fee, donations accepted) is about four hours northwest of [Albuquerque](http://www.albuquerque.com), N.M.; from Route 191 in Chinle, Ariz., drive three miles west on Indian Route 7 to the visitor center, where you can pick up maps and tour information. The North and South Rim Drives are self-guided and open all year, as is the White House Trail, a steep path that drops 600 feet in elevation in just over a mile (it’s the only trail in the monument that visitors can use without a guide). The trail winds along the canyon floor and leads to the foot of the White House Ruin; dramatically perched on a ledge, the ruin is of an Anasazi village that dates back to A.D. 1200.

Thunderbird Lodge (half a mile south of the visitor center; 928-674-5841; www.tbirdlodge.com; doubles from \$109), a red adobe inn, is the only lodging (aside from campsites) in Canyon de Chelly. The cafeteria-style restaurant is in an 1896 trading

post, which also functions as a rug gallery (the dining room is centered around a vault where valuables were once stored). On the menu are everything from hominy and short ribs to tuna salad and Jell-O. At every meal a traditional dish, like chili verde, is offered.

On an unpaved road off South Rim Drive, **Totsonii Ranch** (928-755-2037; www.totsoniiranch.com) offers guided explorations of the canyon by horseback; rates are \$15 a person an hour, plus \$15 an hour for the guide.

For a sampling of local food, stop at the parking lot across from the Best Western in Chinle; you'll find food stands selling roasted hominy, Navajo burgers (on fry bread), blue corn stew and fragrant roast mutton fry-bread sandwiches with crackle-skinned green chili (\$6.50).

Monument Valley

The 90-room **View Hotel** (435-727-5556; www.monumentvalleyview.com; summer rates from \$195) opened last October on the border of Utah and Arizona, four miles east of Highway 163 in Monument Valley. It was built to eco-friendly specifications, with low-flow water devices, reflective roofing and a program with a local Navajo high school to grow seasonal vegetables and herbs for the restaurant. The chef, MacNeal Crank, serves a mix of Navajo and American cuisine, including fry-bread tacos and stews, and a local flute player performs at dinner.

The owner of the View, Armanda Ortega, a 25-year-old sixth-generation trader in Indian crafts, has made careful use of detail to create a tradition-meets-modern-luxury feel. Each room has etched pottery lamps, a unique woven Navajo rug and dye charts that illustrate how the rugs were made. Navajo-designed Pendleton-style blankets cover cushy beds, and spacious bathrooms with granite countertops echo the rock landscape outside the hotel. The lobby displays [art](#) and heirlooms, including sand paintings and four-foot-tall kachina dolls.

The hotel is a jumping-off point to a host of Navajo heritage and cultural experiences, including guided hikes of the Monument Valley Tribal Park.

Also in the Navajo Nation, the **Explore Navajo Interactive Museum**, which opened in 2007 in Tuba City, Ariz., (928-640-0684; www.explorenavajo.com; general admission, \$9) uses murals, film clips, maps and cultural displays to inform visitors about Navajo artifacts and traditions. Guests can also enter a re-creation of a log hogan and watch live weaving demonstrations, compelling reminders of how tradition melds with today's culture.

Quebec

The **Hotel-Musée Premières Nations** (866-551-9222; www.hotelpremieresnations.com; rooms from 156 Canadian dollars, about \$140 at 1.12 Canadian dollars to the U.S. dollar, but ask about packages) opened last year. The on-site museum, free for hotel guests, spotlights the culture of the Huron Wendat, while a high-end restaurant serves authentic First Nations-inspired dishes. Guests can buy the works of First Nations artisans displayed throughout the property.

Nearby attractions include the 455-million-year-old Kabir Kouba Falls and canyon; Tsawenhohi House, which was built for a grand chief in the 1800s; and a bike trail that depicts animal totems for the eight clans of the Huron Wendat.

Pueblo Country, New Mexico

At the **Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum** on the Acoma Pueblo (800-747-0181; sccc.acomaskycity.org), about an hour west of Albuquerque, visitors can buy camera permits or tour tickets (\$20) to visit the pueblo, which sits serenely atop a 367-foot-high sandstone mesa. At the Yaak'a Cafe, traditional Acoma dishes include blue

corn pancakes and feast-day plates of beef and vegetables.

Hotel Santa Fe (1501 Paseo de Peralta; 800-825-9876; www.hotelsantafe.com; rooms from \$158) is the only Native American-owned hotel in [Santa Fe](#), owned by the people of the Picuris Pueblo. The Hacienda section of the hotel is secluded, with 35 unique rooms decorated with Native American art and with butler service. The hotel has a spa whose treatments include Indian healing rituals and ingredients, and the Amaya restaurant serves modern American Indian cuisine.

Much of the staff is Native American, and the arts-and-crafts gift shop is also owned by the Picuris. The Native American package includes a tour with a local historian to the San Ildefonso, Santa Clara and Picuris Pueblos and through the landscape of northern New Mexico.

Tours

Based in Montana, **Go Native America** (888-800-1876; www.gonativeamerica.com) specializes in small-group trips to visit different nations, including the Lakota, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, Apache, Crow and Shoshone. Guests learn about the cultural history and impact of places like Sand Creek and Wounded Knee, watch local competitions like the All Indian rodeo, and stay in tribal accommodations whenever possible.

REI Adventures (800-622-2236; www.rei.com/adventures) offers a Havasu Falls family adventure (seven days from \$2,299 a person; discounts for children) that puts the Grand Canyon in a Native American context. This weeklong backcountry [hike](#) through the remote Havasu Falls branch of the canyon includes a trek through Havasupai lands (Havasupai means “people of the blue-green waters”) and a visit to a local village. Guests might see a demonstration of the traditional split-twig figurines that are associated with the hunting and gathering culture of the Grand Canyon in the Late Archaic period (roughly the last 2,000 years before the Christian era).

BONNIE TSUI is the author of “American Chinatown: A People’s History of Five Neighborhoods” (Free Press).

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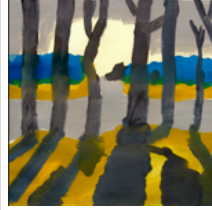
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