

# The *Philadelphia Inquirer* Travel Get on 'the rez'



*White House Ruin in Canyon de Chelly National Monument, on the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. The steep sandstone walls of the canyons have been home to native peoples for more than 5,000 years. (ELLEN SCOLNIC)*

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The Navajo Reservation covers more than 27,000 square miles, stretching across four states, yet most visitors to the Southwest simply drive through it. "The rez" is on the way to the Grand Canyon, on the way to Lake Powell, and on the way to Monument Valley. But if you decide, as we did, to stop at a few places on the rez, you'll remember forever the people, their stories, and the astounding canyons, mesas, and natural beauty.

Canyon de Chelly (pronounced d'SHAY) is three miles from Chinle, Ariz., and it's the center of the Navajo Nation in more ways than one. The steep sandstone walls of the canyons have been home to native peoples for more than 5,000 years. Throughout the canyons, ruins of cliff dwellings, grain storehouses, and petroglyph carvings of men, horses, and handprints are the visual remnants of ancient pueblo peoples. Today, 40 Navajo families maintain homes and traditional hogans (the eight-sided Navajo dwelling used for ceremonies) inside the canyons. These families consider themselves very fortunate to have land inside the sacred canyon, and the parcels are passed down through generations.

Visitors to Canyon de Chelly, which is a National Monument jointly administered by the National Park Service and the Navajo Nation, can drive along the road and stop at scenic overlooks at the top of the

canyon, but visitors can go in only with a Navajo guide. Several Navajo companies offer Jeep tours. We went with Leander Staley, whose great-grandfather Chauncey Neboyia was a guide and translator who helped with the original excavation and restoration of the archaeological sites in the canyon. Today, Staley, his father, and uncle guide four-wheel-drive Jeeps along the canyon floor, sharing their history and family stories with visitors. They are also one of the families who maintain a homestead in the canyon.

The walls of Canyon de Chelly are soft sandstone, so it's easy to see how thousands of years of river currents and wind carved the canyons. In spring when snow melts, it's likely the canyon floor will be underwater. But when we visited in July, it was desert-dry, with piles of sand as deep as any beach. Four-wheel drive was needed several times to navigate the sandy terrain.

Staley drove us through the canyons, pointing out the petroglyphs - drawings of horses, people, stars, shapes, and more - carved alongside the ancient dwellings. Many of the pueblo ruins have been given names - Antelope House, Sliding House, and White House - much like rock formations throughout the West have names based on what someone thought the formations looked like. Spider Rock and Face Rock are two geologic locations in Canyon de Chelly.

On our drive through the canyons, we saw fruit orchards, corn, and other crops, cultivated by families with homes there. Staley pointed out the families' sheep pens that use the natural alcoves of the canyon walls as support, and the hogan where his family gathered to celebrate a cousin's wedding the month before.

The biggest local gossip, Staley told us, was that we had arrived just as the movie stars had left. Johnny Depp had just finished filming an updated *Lone Ranger* movie in the canyon. Slated for release next year, the film has Depp playing Tonto to Armie Hammer's Lone Ranger. Although Staley and several of his neighbors found temporary jobs with the film crew as guides and drivers, we agreed that it was ironic that so few actual Navajo were cast in a film about cowboys and American Indians. But we added the new *Lone Ranger* to our list of "canyon movies we need to see" along with *Mackenna's Gold* (1969), starring Gregory Peck and filmed partly in Canyon de Chelly.

As you drive through the rez, you'll see horses, sheep, and cattle grazing by the side of the road, even crossing the road, seemingly unfenced. That's because they are. Even though (maybe because) they live in vast open spaces, Navajo culture dictates that their animals roam free. As Staley told us, the tribe's "open range policy" sometimes makes it challenging to round up one's wandering livestock. He laughingly explained that's why the local Navajo radio station often has to broadcast announcements like "lost cattle, last seen near the Chinle school, please return to Begay family."

Our next stop in the rez was Window Rock, Ariz. (Highway 264, northwest of historic Route 66), the capital of the Navajo Nation. You can see the eponymous cliff that has a windowlike hole carved in it from thousands of years of wind and rain, and nearby there's a statue honoring the Navajo Code Talkers, the Navajo men who were recruited by the Marines and trained to use their native language as the basis for a United States code used against the Japanese in World War II.

Across the parking lot from the statue is the Navajo Nation Museum. Like many historic sites around the world where the best artifacts have been moved to other cities (the treasures of Egypt in the British Museum come to mind), the number of artifacts in the Navajo museum were limited. There was a full-size loom set up and several interesting posters with vintage photographs and explanations of the history of the Navajo. We learned that the Navajo word for themselves is Diné (din-EH), which means "the people." Driving through the rez, you will frequently see the word Diné used instead of Navajo, as in "Make sure you try the fry bread. It's a Diné specialty."

The Navajo Nation Museum also houses a library, which was busy with local residents, and a Community Center, which serves as a meeting place for tribe members with modern-day concerns. The day we visited groups were discussing everything from land use and water rights to job training and summer programs for kids. Adjacent to the museum is the Navajo Nation Zoo and Botanical Park, featuring animals native to the Southwest including hawks, coyotes, black bear, bighorn sheep, foxes, and more. Admission is free.

After all that culture, I was in the mood for some shopping. Luckily, the low white building out front houses the Navajo Arts and Crafts Enterprise (NACE), the official retail outlet of the tribe. On our trip, we bought American Indian jewelry only directly from artists (along many roads locals set up tables to sell jewelry

and crafts at scenic overlooks or roadside rest stops) or from reputable sources. Items made by American Indian artisans should have a label with either the name of the artist or the word *handcrafted* or preferably *handmade*. In some gift shops, factory-produced silver items that look very similar to American Indian jewelry are also for sale. But they almost always lack a "handcrafted" label. Price is also a clue. American Indian jewelry is usually sterling silver and usually not inexpensive. Like most consumer decisions, it's up to the buyer to purchase carefully.

NACE was established in 1941, and it now operates several retail stores and an online site ([www.gonavajo.com](http://www.gonavajo.com)). We perused display cases filled with silver earrings, bracelets, necklaces, bolo ties, silver money clips, and more. The walls were lined with handwoven Diné rugs and racks of the ubiquitous Western-style blankets. A separate room was filled with cowboy boots, moccasins, and other Western clothing. The store also sells raw materials - beads, silver, chunks of semiprecious stones - to Diné artisans. We purchased some earrings and a copy of the tribe's annual fund-raising calendar, showcasing girls in traditional Diné outfits - long cotton skirts, velvet embroidered shirts, concho belts, and lots and lots of silver and turquoise jewelry.

Although located smack in the middle of the rez, Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado, Ariz., is not Navajo. Founded in 1876 by Juan Lorenzo Hubbell, it is the oldest continually operating trading post in the Southwest. In summer, while the rest of the rez is on Mountain Daylight Time, this small chunk of federal territory goes by Mountain Standard Time. So when you cross the bridge over the wash to the trading post, you must set your watch ahead an hour to go back years in time. Run by the National Park Service, the trading post is stocked to the rafters with enamel teapots, sacks of sugar, flour and coffee, denim pants, groceries, hardware, and other necessities of daily life. If you can ignore the refrigerator of cold drinks at the counter and the Navajo teen clerk playing with his iPod, the interior of the trading post, from the squeaky wooden floors to the hanging horse tack, is almost unchanged in 200 years.

Juan Lorenzo Hubbell was a trusted trading partner of the local Navajos'. He became known for demanding excellence in American Indian crafts, and for treating the Navajo fairly. He had the foresight to realize that the rugs, baskets, and jewelry the Navajos made and used every day might be valuable in the future. The Park Service calls Hubbell the "foremost Navajo trader."

Once you've seen the interior of the post, be sure to ask for a tour of the adjacent Hubbell home. This adobe-walled, pine-paneled building is still crammed with the family's furniture, Navajo rugs and baskets, and walls covered almost completely in Western art. Nearly everything the Hubbells owned is preserved. The Park Service collection contains more than 350,000 individual items and the archive of 264,000 business records of the trading post.

Along with seasonal farmer's markets, sheep shearing festivals, and other events, the trading post hosts a massive American Indian auction twice a year, featuring rugs, jewelry, paintings, sand painting, carvings, and more. The next event is May 4.