



THE SECRETS OF MONUMENT VALLEY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Experiencing **Monument Valley Tribal Park** with a **Navajo** guide provides the essential rush of freedom we associate with travel in the West. As Lorenz Holiday and I sped in a cloud of red dust past a wooden sign that blared **WARNING: TRESPASSING IS NOT ALLOWED**, he nudged me jauntily in the ribs: “Don’t worry, buddy, you’re with the right people now.” Visitor movement in Monument Valley Tribal Park, an area on the Utah-Arizona border measuring 20 by 30 miles, is tightly restricted by its Navajo owners: Only a Navajo can take outsiders away from the 17-mile-long scenic driving loop that runs through the heart of the Valley, a road that is bumper-to-bumper with tourist cars from dawn to dusk in high summer. From that main route’s official lookouts, the famous buttes and mittens look breathtaking but distant, like the sculpture garden of the Titans. Now Lorenz’s pickup truck flew over a lonely sand track directly underneath the phantasmagoric sandstone towers, which were carved by millennia of wind and storms from an ancient sea floor and made famous by Westerns such as the 1939 film *Stagecoach* and 1956’s *The*

Searchers. Not a soul was to be seen in that famously expansive desert dotted with sage and prickly pear cactus. Here was the West of myth, haunting and austere, embedded in our imaginations by Hollywood movie-makers. But it remains much as it was long before the cameras started rolling – a pristine Navajo homeland the outside world rarely sees up close.

Soon we pulled up at the base of **Hunts Mesa**, which looms 1,200 feet from the valley floor at its southern rim. To step off the tourist grid, I had arranged an overnight camping trip with Lorenz Holiday and his brother Emmanuel by contacting them directly at their family farm. This independently-arranged jaunt involved a touch of Western adventure. First we had to climb through a wire stock fence and follow a bone-dry river bed framed by juniper trees. Then we scaled a rippling sandstone ridge, which reflected the afternoon sun, and began creeping on hands and knees along a precarious smooth ledge. Lizards gazed at us in bemusement and then disappeared into the shadowy cracks. Lorenz, who wore a dignified black cowboy hat, riding boots, and silver Navajo buckle, was a farmer who had taken up guiding part-time. He and his seven Holiday siblings had grown up as shepherds. Like generations of his ancestors, he had lived a traditional “semi-nomadic” lifestyle, tending his family farm and taking herds of sheep and goats across the desert in search of grass. “When I was a kid, we traveled with our livestock all over Navajo land,” he told me. “It was only later that I really spent time in Monument Valley and found all its secrets.”

Curious about the scale of this Navajo-led tourism, I asked Lorenz how often he brought travelers to this remote spot. “Oh, pretty regular,” he said. “Once every five years or so.” Pausing for breath, he laughed ruefully: “This has got to be my last time.”

We had commenced hiking late in the day to avoid the intense heat, so it was already dark by the time we reached the top of the mesa.