

## **MONUMENT VALLEY, GEM of the NAVAJO NATION**

Monument Valley is one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World and spans the Arizona and Utah border on the Navajo Reservation.

By DAN SIMMONS

In September of 2010 my wife Letha and I had the opportunity to ride our Morgans in Monument Valley for a week on the most awe inspiring equine experience we have ever had. The scenery was breath-taking and seemed to get better every day around every corner. It was much more than I had expected even though I had expected it to be a great trip. In the following weeks after returning from the ride, we spread the word of this incredible place to ride far and wide to many friends via our various Morgan horse connections. In September of 2011 we returned to Monument Valley and were joined by many of our fellow Morgan riders, many of them riding gaited Morgans, and Morgans in fact outnumbered any other breed there. Letha rode Ayla, her coming five year old mare, and I rode Dream Catcher Spirit Song, my nine year old mare.

There are various individuals who organize these rides and coordinate with the Navajos who host them. Our ride was put together by Blondie Bacal from Norco, California who has been doing this twice a year for several years. We met her on the annual Tucson Saddle Club Tierra Bella ride in 2009 where we first learned about this ride. The Navajo host and guide for our ride was Effie Yazzie; she can be reached at (928) 209-0303 and give you further information about future rides and specific organizers to contact.

Monument Valley's entrance is in Utah just north of the Arizona border, though the majority of it is in Arizona. It is part of the Navajo Nation and is administered as a park by the tribe. Entrance into the valley is strictly controlled by Navajo Rangers and requires permits and a pre-inspection by the Rangers of all appropriate documentation including driver's licenses, vehicle registration, proof of insurance, and health and Coggins certificates for the horses (and they look at the horses). I should also point out that the reservation is dry when it comes to alcoholic beverages, and if found the Rangers will make you dispose of them and may give you a citation and/or eject you as well.

Once we had all been inspected by the Rangers at the staging point near the entrance to the valley on Sunday afternoon, we were accompanied by our Navajo host, Effie Yazzie, and escorted by the Rangers to our beautiful box canyon camp site around six miles from the entrance. The initial steep descent into the valley on a dirt switch back road is a bit challenging especially in a big living quarters rig, but is very doable. Once in the valley all ride participants are required to be escorted by a Navajo guide whenever they leave camp other than driving back to the entrance.

The camp site itself is rather spectacular and is located inside a large box canyon with high red walls. There are some corrals available along the north wall for a modest price and the Navajo hosts, the Yazzie family, provide water for the horses twice a day and with advance notice can provide it for camping rigs as well; some of us brought along our own porta-corrals for our horses. On our ride the Yazzie's also provided three of our evening meals including Navajo tacos at their family compound nearby on Thursday night. The Yazzie's were always at our evening campfires to tell us stories of their life in the valley and its history; sing us native songs, and even taught us some Navajo dances. On Thursday while at their family compound for dinner Susie Yazzie, the matriarch of the family at about 92 years old demonstrated the process of taking wool from their native

four horned sheep and making the beautiful wool rugs the Navajos are known for. They are a very friendly people and possess a great sense of humor too.



*Our box canyon camp site looking east out of the canyon entrance.*



*Sussie Yazzie explaining the art of creating the beautiful Navajo rugs from raw wool.*

Over the next five days we rode everyday on rides ranging from as short as three hours to as long as seven, but they were all at an easy pace with frequent stops to take pictures and enjoy the spectacular scenery. Our guide, Effie Yazzie also told us frequent stories pertinent to the particular things we were viewing at the moment on these stops. Much of the areas we rode through are inaccessible to motor vehicles which makes them all the more pristine. The rides ranged from easy to moderate in difficulty with the exception of one portion of the seven hour ride that is rated difficult, and an alternate route was taken by those not wanting to do it.

Saddle up times during the week were on Navajo time; 9:00-ish, 9:30-ish, etc. Our guides took turns singing a Native American song once we were all saddled up and just before we rode out. Nez, one of our guides, showed his sense of humor one morning when Effie asked him to sing the morning's song; Nez began singing "One little, two little, three little Indians..."; we all cracked up on that one!

There is a lot of color in the rock formations of the valley; predominately shades of red; but there is much more green and vegetation than I had expected. There are some sections where the footing is rocky, but the vast majority of it is a sandy base, particularly on slopes, and there are some genuine dunes in places as well. The overall impression though for me was the immenseness of the valley and its formations, and its sense of history. On Wednesday we had our longest ride, about seven hours, when we rode to a remote canyon with several relatively well intact Anazazi ruins. It was a beautiful hideaway with lots of trees and a gorgeous view from the former inhabitant's front porch. The variety we experienced was incredible; huge arches, narrow canyons barely wide enough to ride through, hidden ponds in the shadow of towering walls, rock monoliths, and vast open vistas.



*Ear of the Wind Arch*



*Letha and Ayla framed by a hardy evergreen.*



*The group exploring a canyon during a break.*



*The long column being led down the hill by Effie Yazzie.*

There were a lot of gaited horses on this ride and even our Navajo guides were mostly riding Tennessee Walkers. Letha and I have been in Morgans for several years and are now focusing on gaited Morgans and there were many gaited Morgans on the ride, including the entire board of the Morgan Single-Footing Horse Association (MSFHA). Many folks on the ride knew little about Morgans in general and were surprised there was such a thing as a gaited Morgan. Morgans are generally acknowledged as America's first breed originated here, and registered gaited Morgans are in fact in the foundations of many subsequent gaited American breeds. These wonderful Morgans put on quite a display of not only their smooth gaiting talents, but their stamina and good looks as well.





*Jim Suddarth (right), President MSFHA, and Brent Skidmore, Vice President MSFHA, on their gaited Morgan geldings.*



*Letha and her Morgan mare Ayla posing on a rock perch. Many of the group who could get their horses to do it, posed on this rock during Wednesday's ride.*

Once in a while we would be in the limited area where the tourist driving loop is which would have some folks in their personal vehicles, but also had numerous open bed jeeps and trucks hauling tourists for a tour of part of the valley. These often had large numbers of European visitors on them and when we would approach on our horses they would always start clicking away with their cameras at the “cowboys” and our steeds. They especially enjoyed getting close to the horses and petting them if we allowed them to and liked to pose next to them for pictures. We all got a kick out of that!

There were horse folks on this ride from all over the country; Missouri to California, Idaho to Arizona, and all points in between. We made many new friends both years that we have stayed in contact with ever since. The riding was great, the scenery was awesome, and the camaraderie was wonderful. We ate pretty well too; the nights our hosts didn't cook, we had camp wide potlucks including contributions by some riders who specialized in Dutch oven cooking. Monument Valley is a destination that should be on every serious trail rider's bucket list of places to ride at least once in their lives!



*Letha and I (foreground,) and other riders silhouetted at the valley's "North Window" on Friday.*