

Raising ARIZONA

There's more to the rock star landscapes of this state than the Grand Canyon, writes YVONNE GORDON



We're going to chase the beams of light," says Cindy, our Navajo guide, as we enter the canyon. Walking from the hot sandy desert through a crack in the rock, suddenly we're in a striking cavern made of red Navajo sandstone, coloured rock walls curving around us like curtains of silk. The red and orange sandstone swirls and twists up and up, to where slivers of blue sky appear through slits in the rock. In the next cavern, a shaft of sunlight shines down like a torch beam, burning a circle of light onto the sand floor. Cindy picks up some sand and throws it into the light. It forms a ghostly illuminated shape, slowly disappearing as we click our cameras.

This is Upper Antelope Canyon, a slot canyon in Northern Arizona in Southwest USA. Most people have the Grand Canyon on their list, but this state has so many other amazing canyons and rock features to explore, and I'm here to see some of them through hikes, off-road drives and even by boat.

Antelope Canyon was created by the flow of water and wind through red sandstone over millions of years, creating this ethereal space with tall rocky chambers of brilliant oranges and reds. Located in the Navajo Reservation, the USA's largest Native American reservation, Cindy tells us that the canyon has always been a sacred place for the Navajo people. It is still being sculpted by nature — flash floods during rainy season can alter the floor level of the canyon from year to year.

It is at Lake Powell that I start to take in the magnificence and sheer scale of the canyons. The lake on the Arizona/Utah border was created when Glen Canyon — a vast area of canyons carved out over millions of years by the Colorado River — was flooded in 1963 to create a giant reservoir, and it's like a flooded version of the Grand Canyon.

The lake is 299km long and has 3,161km of shoreline — about the same as the entire coastline of Ireland — filled with narrow canyons and unusual rock formations. On a boat tour we pass Antelope Island, admiring the rust-coloured

arches, bridges and buttes which pop out of the clear blue waters. Along the way, we hear stories of the Native American tribes who lived here.

We admire the huge Glen Canyon dam and then glide into Antelope Canyon, marvelling at the loops and curves, sculpted and whipped into shape by wind and water. As the canyon narrows, we pass kayakers and paddleboarders and I feel envious that they are small enough to go further into the canyon.

I feel drawn to the rocks — there's something about the calm, clear water, the pristine canyon walls and the absence of man-made constructions that gives it all a timeless feel that inspires reverence.

It is usually in Sedona, further south, where people feel like this — the rocks are said to have a spiritual vortex that makes you feel alive with energy. Sedona is my first glimpse of the huge red rock formations, on a road trip driving north from Phoenix with a friend, where a desert garden blooms along the roadside, with flowering yucca, prickly pears and the saguaro cactus with its huge arms.

Our accommodation in Sedona is a chalet with views of Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte. At night, as we make s'mores by the campfire — toasting marshmallows and sandwiching them into crackers with chocolate — and then laze in the hot tub under the stars, I feel the draw of the rocks and the romance of desert life.

After Sedona, we explore the Lake Powell area, hiking at sunset to Horseshoe Bend, a scenic spot on the Colorado River. At Amangiri at Canyon Point, a resort that seems like it's in the middle of nowhere, our room looks out onto desert and it feels like a different planet, it's totally still and calm. I feel like I could stare into the empty space for hours.

But the desert is rich with life, as I learn on hikes around the property — we see cryptobiotic soil, learn the names of plants like desert marigold and shrub oak and see jack rabbits, lizards and birds. By day we explore; at night we watch as the sand-coloured rocks around the resort turn gold in the setting sun, and then see stars and planets appear overhead.

WHAT TO PACK

Light clothing, sunscreen, a hat, a large reusable water bottle and plenty of memory cards for phones and cameras. Bring proper walking shoes or sturdy sandals for hikes in sandy areas. If visiting more than two National Parks, buy an annual National Park pass (\$80, [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)).

We take a jeep tour up into the Grand Staircase-Escalante, a remote area of backcountry covered in bumpy dirt tracks lined with sagebrush. We admire the toadstools — curious columns of sandstone held in place by boulders — and look down into canyon valleys from cliffs where waterfalls start and golden eagles nest. We drive along the Vermillion Cliffs,

where red cliffs surround us as we descend thousands of feet down into the canyon and dip our feet in the Colorado River at Lees Ferry, the northernmost end of the 446km-long Grand Canyon.

Six million people a year visit the Grand Canyon to peer over the edge and marvel at the wonder that has been carved over 270 million years, but to chase light beams, lake ripples, sunsets and stars in Arizona's other canyons is to escape to a timeless and sometimes surreal space in this rocky world.

WHERE TO STAY

Yvonne stayed at Mountain Shadows in Scottsdale, Phoenix ([mountainshadows.com](https://www.mountainshadows.com); rooms from \$124/€105); The Red Agave Adventure Resort ([redagaveresort.net](https://www.redagaveresort.net); studios from \$191/€162); Lake Powell Resort ([lakepowell.com](https://www.lakepowell.com); from \$172/€146) and Amangiri ([aman.com/resorts/Amangiri](https://www.aman.com/resorts/Amangiri); rooms from \$1,900/€1,612) including meals and hikes. See also [visitarizona.com](https://www.visitarizona.com).



GET THERE & AROUND

Delta Airlines ([delta.com](https://www.delta.com)) flies from Dublin to Phoenix via Atlanta. Antelope Canyon tours from \$45.50/€38 ([antelopecanyon.com](https://www.antelopecanyon.com)); Lake Powell boat tours from \$80/€68 ([lakepowell.com](https://www.lakepowell.com)) and jeep tours in Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, (\$131/€112), [jeeplakepowell.com](https://www.jeeplakepowell.com)).

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