

Tsé Bii' Ndzisg'aii VALLEY OF THE ROCKS

Pam Ellis

You know the scenes in many of these pictures. You may not be able specifically to name them, but they are familiar to you. Dozens of films and commercials have been shot in this location beginning with John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939, featuring John Wayne in his breakthrough role. Ford used the location so often that in the words of critic Keith Phipps, "its five square miles have defined what decades of moviegoers think of when they imagine the American West."

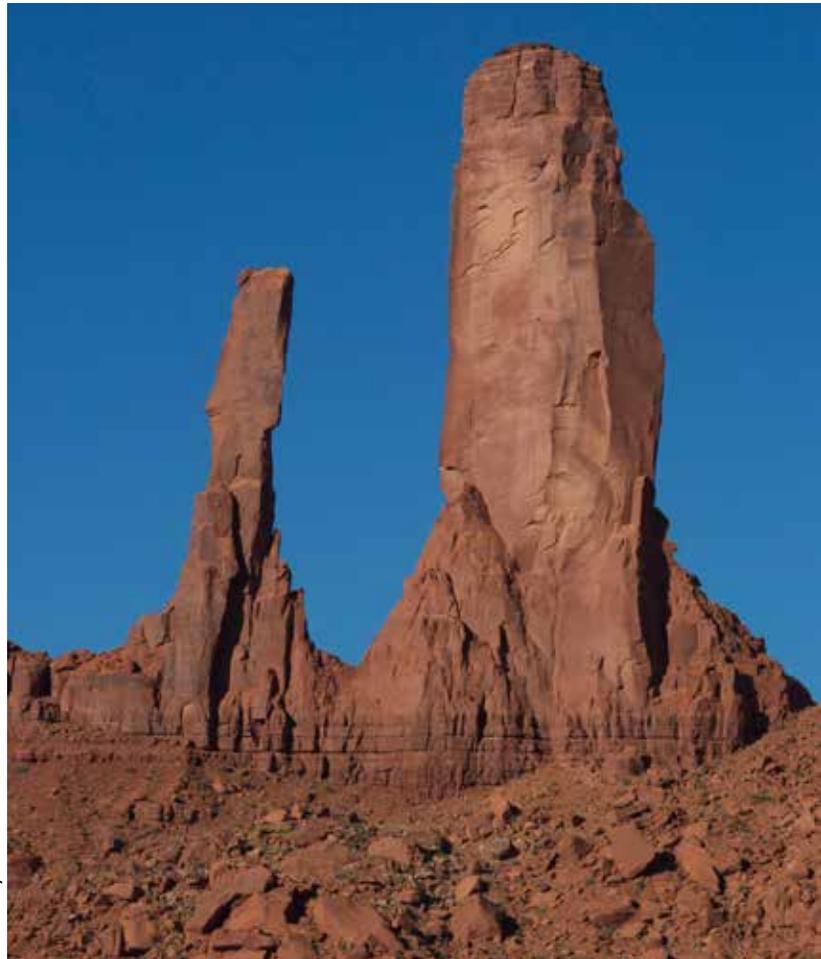
BRIEFCASE EXCURSIONS

But I wasn't here to pay homage to the movies, ranging from *Stagecoach* to *Easy Rider*, *Forrest Gump*, and *The Lone Ranger*, that have shot scenes here. I fully intended to take pictures from the top of iconic Hunts Mesa, one of the two best places to experience panoramic views of the popular sandstone formations. I'd been thwarted in 2011 by flooding that left the trails impassable. Little did I know that the "passable" condition now wasn't much better.

Straddling the territory along the Arizona and Utah border and covering more than 90,000 acres, Monument Valley Park functions as a national park for the Navajo Nation. Named *Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii*, meaning "valley of the rocks," the park boasts a variety of mesas, buttes, and spire rock structures with descriptive names with a certain meaning to the Navajo people or created by the early settlers of the area. Some of the more suggestive names include the East and West Mitten Buttes looking like hands and Elephant and Camel Buttes looking like, well, those animals.

Long before human habitation, erosion deposited layers of sediments to form a plateau. The natural forces of wind and water eroded the land, cutting into and peeling away at the surface of the plateau and slowly creating the natural wonders of Monument Valley today. As a part of the Navajo Nation, the park is dedicated to keeping alive the culture, traditions, and beliefs of the *Diné*, meaning "the people" or "children of the holy people."

Most of the estimated 350,000 people that visit the area each year stay in the Lower Monument Valley. A seventeen-mile loop road traverses the sandstone formations. If you are willing to risk the undercarriage of your car to the dirt road and potholes, you can view the lower valley on a self-guided drive. A preferable alternative is a guided tour conducted in an open jeep by a Navajo tour operator. A bonus is that these experienced guides can access many intriguing places those in their own cars do not see, as visitors are not allowed to travel off road in the park.



Photos by Pam Ellis

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In 2011, since I couldn't get to Hunts Mesa, I took a sunrise tour that started long before the sun rose over the surrounding peaks. My guide, Duffy Holiday, a local Navajo, knew the best places to capture the sunrise in the backcountry. This year, Duffy was again available, the weather cooperated, and I returned for the eighteen-hour overnight tour to capture both the sunset and sunrise from about 6,365 feet above sea level, high above the valley floor, which ranges from 5,000 to 6,000 feet.

Duffy started the trip with the advice to "expect the unexpected." He warned that this was not a trip for everyone. In fact, he told of one woman that cried all the way. Another customer crouched on the floor of the 1997 Suburban in terror for the three-hour trip to the top. But Duffy added that the reward would be huge: the opportunity to overlook Monument Valley at sunset, camp overnight, and witness the sunrise in the morning.

Only about sixty people a year go on the Hunts Mesa adventure. Even though this is listed as a photographic tour, it would fill the bill for anyone seeking a unique, out-of-the-ordinary experience. The trip to the top was, well, exhilarating. The road—er, trail—to the summit was barely visible most times and I couldn't help but wonder if we would ever get back down once we got to the top.

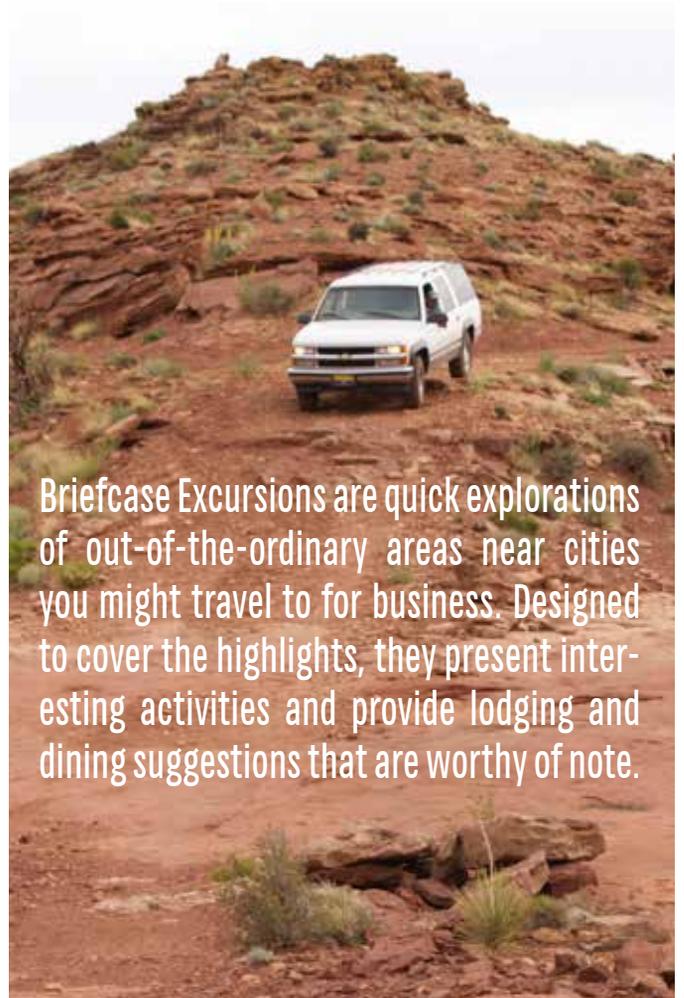
Powering through sand dunes, balancing on two tires up a rocky cliff, snaking up a sheer rock wall, and creeping inch by inch over boulders along the edge of a cliff were all part of the journey. The trip was bone-jarring, jaw-dropping, and eye-popping all at the same time. Was I scared? Only slightly, because Duffy seemed to know exactly what he was doing. At one point he said, "Now is the time to hold on tight and maybe close your eyes!"

When we reached the top, Monument Valley lay out in front of us like a beautiful postcard. Grabbing my camera, I shot nonstop while Duffy started a campfire and put up the tents. Later, as a steak dinner sizzled on the fire, I was struck by the fact that so few people have had this experience. It didn't matter that both the sunset and sunrise were diminished by clouds and overcast skies because

the adventure outweighed the slight disappointment that Mother Nature hadn't cooperated.

As I said goodbye to Duffy, he told me that I would be back and he promised an awesome sunset and sunrise!

Former business partners Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards developed Briefcase Excursions after too many airport to hotel to conference center to hotel to airport trips. They decided to break the cycle and add a day or two of exploring for their mental and physical wellbeing. Ellis visited Monument Valley earlier this year.



Briefcase Excursions are quick explorations of out-of-the-ordinary areas near cities you might travel to for business. Designed to cover the highlights, they present interesting activities and provide lodging and dining suggestions that are worthy of note.