

CANYON DE CHELLY

STORY BY MIKE WILLIAMS • PHOTO BY PHIL GOLDBLATT

If the canyons are the crown of Arizona's beauty, then **Canyon De Chelly** is truly one of its brightest jewels. Like Grand Canyon, words and photographs can barely begin to describe the sheer grandeur of the 83,000-acre national park, but we're going to give it our best. Located about a three-hour drive from Flagstaff, nestled in the northeast corner of the Navajo Nation just outside of Chinle, Canyon De Chelly offers scenic drives, hiking, camping, horseback riding, guided tours, and a taste of the regions rich indigenous culture, history, and art.

As with most parks, the visitor center is a great jumping off point, with exhibits on the distinct styles and evolution of Navajo weaving, the geological forces that helped create the canyon, and digital presentations on the region. Ranger-led tours are available here as well. Directly up the road are the historic **Thunderbird Trading Post** and the **Tso Horse Tour Company**. A guided horse tour runs only \$30 an hour and is as classic a Southwestern experience as you can get. The gift shop is filled to the brim with the crafts of local artisans and the cafeteria next door serves up delicious traditional foods like fry bread, mutton, and Navajo tacos. It's right about here that the difference in the legitimacy of Canyon De Chelly experience sets itself apart from Grand Canyon. There, its crowds, tour buses, and chic gift shops full of mass produced tourist trinkets is almost a wilderness equivalent of Disneyland. Here, it still feels refreshingly remote.

The north rim route winds you through the high desert twists and turns of **Canyon Del Muerto** and offers three viewpoints to one of the nation's longest continuously inhabited settlements. Ancient Puebloan ruins are clearly visible and the high desert landscape makes for great intermediate scenery. Most parking lots have several local vendors selling everything from beautifully painted native sandstone pieces to fantastic jewelry. The south rim driving tour also runs about two hours with seven stops, including a three-mile round trip hike to the **White House Ruin** at the bottom of the canyon. This is the only place at the bottom that tourists can visit without a park ranger or native guide to chaperone.

Take a couple days to explore. One of the best features of the park is, hands down, **Spider Rock Campground**. Named for the nearby 800-foot tall rock formation standing majestically just south of the camp, the Navajos believe it is inhabited by Spider Woman, who taught the people to overcome the monsters of land and sea. The camp itself is primitive camping at its best. Water has to be trucked in, the outhouses are indeed more on the port-a-potty side of things, and electricity is only found in the office.

If available, try to stay in one of the hand built hogans on the property. Camp manager **Howard Smith** has been running the camp since 1993 and personally maintains all the structures, the largest of which was built by his great uncle over 100 years ago. There's options for a small, medium, and large, all complete with an indoor wood-burning fireplace. There's also fire pits outside and a friendly dog named Ashkii who loves to accompany visitors on the nearby three-mile hike along the rim overlooking Anazazi ruins in **Cherry Canyon**. Rates vary from \$11 for a tent space up to \$46 for the large hogan and the camp offers its own four-wheel drive tours and guided overnight hikes.

As with all of the outdoor spots here in beautiful Northern Arizona, be prepared for weather. Monsoons bring frequent rainstorms which help with the summer heat significantly, and winters can get on the chilly side. The interior of the canyon also experiences flash floods, which everyone descending into any canyon should be on the alert for anyways. Be sure to drink at least a gallon of water per day, eat regularly, and bring a hat and sunscreen, as any hike you're going on will be in direct desert sun for the duration.

While pets are prohibited on White House Trail, Cherry Canyon Trail outside of the Spider Rock Campground, as well as the campground itself, is dog friendly. It should go without saying, but Canyon De Chelly is the year-round home for around 40 families, so photographing or drawing people as they go on with their day-to-day lives should be discussed with them first. A tip is usually required. And, as with all national parks, pack it in and pack it out! 🐾