

# The deep north

## THIRTEEN STORIES BELOW GRADE ON THE NAVAJO NATION

Story and photos by Tyson Hugie

Any resident of the Grand Canyon State owes it to himself or herself to pay a visit to Grand Canyon National Park on a regular basis (the South Rim is an easy 3½-hour drive from the Phoenix area). It's a huge mistake, though, to overlook the many, many day-trip opportunities that northern Arizona offers besides the Grand Canyon. Here's one example: Antelope Canyon. Cruising just another hour beyond the Highway 64 junction on State Highway 89 in Cameron, the small town of Page, Arizona thrives near the Utah border. Page is an important hub for recreation at Lake Powell, a man-made reservoir that receives over 3 million visitors annually. But I wonder how many of those 3 million people know that one of the most oft-photographed slot canyons in the southwest is located just 15 minutes from the lake?

While the rest of Phoenix was bustling with Super Bowl preparation activities, a few friends and I had other plans in mind for our weekend in late January. We hit the highway and headed up Interstate 17 in search of high adventure at high elevations.

The drive to Flagstaff, our halfway point, was wet, and the San Francisco Peaks were obscured by low cloud cover, but just a couple of hours into our trip we were already enjoying fresher air and



It's a simple and rewarding drive to canyon country on the Utah border. Head north on I-17 to Flagstaff, east a few miles on I-40, then exit to US 89 north (above). Or stop in Flagstaff for gas, lunch and its high altitude atmosphere. Highway 89 is clear sailing for many miles. Shown above is the northbound stretch just before US 64 heads west and a temporary stretch of 89 fills a construction gap to Page. Below is the Little Colorado River at the Cameron Trading Post, another must-stop on 89.



KEEP RIGHT >>



greener landscapes. The sun broke through north of town as we made the descent to around 4,000 feet in elevation, igniting the vivid red sandstone formations along Highway 89 near Gap. There, we'd be taking a "temporary" stretch of Highway 89 (while undergoing repairs) the rest of the way into Page.

Antelope Canyon was named for a herd of antelope that once roamed the area, and legend has it that a sheep herder discovered the canyon in the 1930s. Since Antelope Canyon is located on part of the 27,000-square-mile Navajo Nation, there are special considerations in place for visitors to keep in mind. Antelope Canyon has two sections, upper and lower, and each one requires a tour guide for access. Since we'd met up with another party of friends, our group size was now a total of eight. Luckily, my friend Jason had been able to secure us a group reservation with an outfit called Antelope Canyon Tours, which charges \$35 a head for the 90-minute tour, including shuttle services to and from the mouth of the canyon. Visitors should keep in mind that any tour's availability is subject to weather conditions—if there is flash flood potential, it's possible the entire canyon could be shut off to visitors.

Luckily for us, the skies weren't threatening enough to put our canyoneering in jeopardy, so right on schedule at 1:30 pm, we hopped into the bed of a lifted Ford pickup with a blue canopy overhead and geared up for the 20-minute ride to the mouth of the canyon. For half of that ride, we were bumping along in a sandy wash, and I realized why that Ford pickup needed such meaty tires to keep from getting stuck. The breezy truck ride made us all wish we'd dressed in a few more layers.

Our tour guide told us she'd been navigating Antelope Canyon for 13 years, and she seemed to know every perfect photo-op along the way. Though the length of Upper Antelope is short at only a quarter-mile, its twists and turns offered a vastly different perspective with every step we took. At some points, the canyon walls were so narrow that we had to walk single file. And due to the canyon's depth—maxing out at around 130 feet below ground level—there were times when the darkness made it difficult

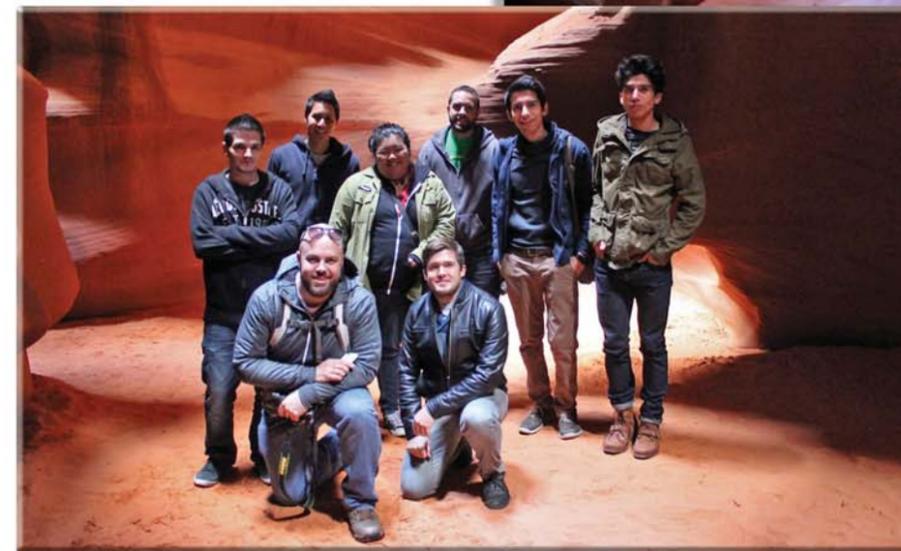
to even find our footing. The guide was helpful to point out certain landmarks with her flashlight as we passed them: debris overhead that had been deposited by flooding, a rock shaped like Abraham Lincoln's profile, and a heart-shaped formation overhead.

Soon, we could see the light at the end of the tunnel—or the canyon, rather. We exited the south end of the canyon and did a U-turn to head back to the pickup for our return shuttle. As much as I usually prefer continuous loops to "out and back" hikes, in this case I didn't mind since the scenery was quite different heading through Antelope on the return leg.

Our last stop for the day—and one that shouldn't be missed—was a landmark just 10 minutes south of Page along Highway 89 called "Horseshoe Bend." Here, the mighty Colorado River makes a 180-degree meandering turn inside a 1,000-foot-deep sandstone canyon. The viewpoint is accessible by a three-quarter-mile hike that's hardly strenuous. The most challenging part of the hike, in fact, was just keeping sand from filling up our shoes as we walked. Ahead of us, the view was incredible, and we couldn't have timed things any better, with perfect sunset lighting. Ledges along the canyon rim were slippery in areas, so we had to exercise caution when climbing around. While my friend Peter sat on the edge and dangled his tennis shoes off into the ravine, I was content to stay a few feet back.

By the time we finished at Horseshoe, we'd worked up an appetite. For some of the best (read: only) Italian fare in Page, check out Stromboli's on Navajo Drive. The hostess there was quickly able to accommodate our large group, and the "Sampler Plate" appetizer had some of the tastiest fried zucchini I've ever eaten. The Comfort Inn's hot tub beckoned for a quick dip before bed, and it offered great relief for tired legs after being on-the-go since early in the morning. That evening, we all enjoyed sharing pictures with one another, that we'd captured during our day's adventures.

For a rewarding getaway to Arizona's high country, Antelope Canyon is a must-see. It's an easy overnight trip from the Phoenix area and delivers some of the most stunning views in all of the southwest. Now get on the road! ■



Antelope Canyon is a hidden treasure with professional access courtesy of the Navajo Nation. Our team quickly learns why those trucks are built to such high capability (opposite page) and why the trip is so rewarding (upper right). Other worthwhile stops near Page include Horseshoe Bend on the Colorado River, 10 minutes to the south (lower left) and—several of the crew had never been—the Utah state line 10 minutes to the north. And there's the smartphone screen at the end of a great day.

