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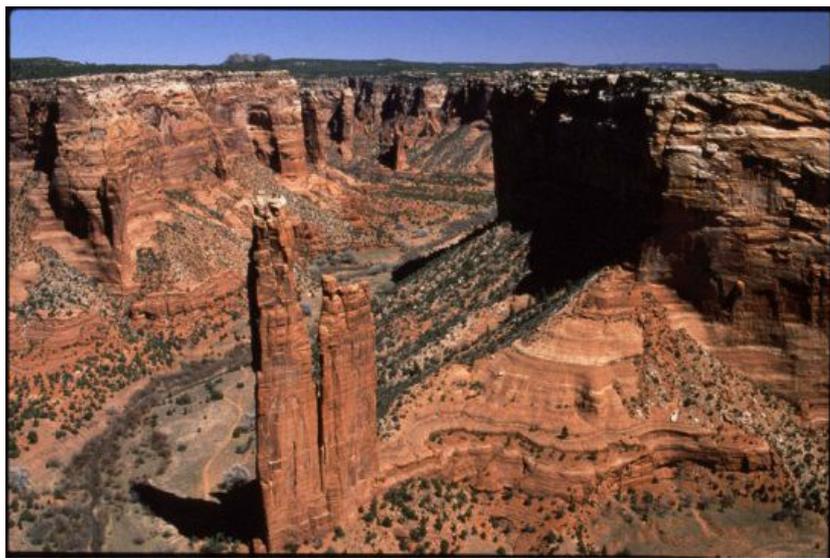
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Life / Travel

## Arizona: For nature buffs and history lovers, there's nothing quite like this state

Unearthly landscapes and still-isolated frontiers abound in this riveting destination.

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Located in northeastern Arizona on the Navajo Nation, Canyon De Chelly (pronounced de shay, meaning "in the rock") is known for its rugged beauty, history and Navajo culture.

By: **Becca Hensley** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Wed Mar 18 2015

Atop a sandstone rim the colour of curry, I look a thousand feet down to spy a patch of green pastureland. Around me chili-red slickrock glimmers in the sun. A low blowing wind jostles the earth, and turns this from-another-planet terrain suddenly hazy at my feet. As the dust dissipates, my Navajo guide continues to recount the legend of Spider Woman. Besides his voice, there's only the tinkling of goat bells and the giggly whinny of a horse. In remote Canyon de Chelly National Monument in northeastern Arizona, the silence is so ponderous it almost has sound. And in that thick quietude, my guide tells me about his ancestors, and how Spider Woman created their universe by weaving it as a web. She taught them about harmony with nature, and how important the balance between mind, body, spirit and land is to daily existence. This, he says, reflects the beliefs of the Navajo people even today.

Having been recommended by the staff at the Canyon de Chelly (pronounced canyon da shay) Visitor Center, a typical Navajo-style hexagonal Hogan holding driving maps, information about the park, and artifacts relating the history of the area, my guide takes me to explore the park by foot. The less intrepid can drive the canyon's north or south rims, expeditions of 15 miles each, self-guided tours which take about three hours to complete. A hike to White House Ruins, a public trail, lasts around two hours and leads to eye-popping overlooks. But, walking into the park with a ranger-certified guide provides a deeper cultural experience. Stretching across 84,000 acres, a mile high in altitude, this canyon parkland sits entirely within the Navajo Nation. It has been continuously inhabited for more than 5,000 years; first by the ancestral puebloans, also known as the Anasazi, and later by the Navajos — who call themselves the Dine.

Canyon de Chelly's narrow, soaring canyons frame cornfields and grazing areas from above, where Dine families still live and farm. Throughout, vestiges of early cultures abound — with more than 2, 500 archeological sites embraced by the dramatic rockscape, and some built right into the walls of the canyon. Petroglyphs and

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pictographs remind us of the timelessness of human beings and reflect the ancestral residents here. And the heart of the place, sacred Spider Rock, ascends 800 feet from the canyon floor, seemingly to shoot into the heavens. Its gravitas explains why the Navajos regard it the centre of their universe. I am moved beyond measure here.

Indeed, there's nothing quite like Arizona for nature buffs and history lovers. With its diverse, unearthly landscapes and still isolated frontiers, the state offers ruminative vistas and mind boggling photographic opportunities galore — most just as riveting as Canyon de Chelly.

Add Chelly and the parks below to your itinerary for your next trip to Arizona.

**White Pocket, Poria Canyon, Vermillion Cliffs National Monument:**

Fanciful White Pocket is nature's artwork. In a remote section of Northern Arizona, this otherworldly expanse of twisting, contorted rock masses evokes colossal, multicoloured baked goods fallen from the sky. Some geologists believe the unusual formations may result from once liquified earthquake residue. Hikers can walk the fantasy landscape along a well-marked, four-mile trail. Millions of years old, the rock chunks sit amid eroded escarpments, tiny streams, cliffs and sandy areas. Bird sightings — eagles, hawks, raptors, falcons — are common.

**Petrified Forest and the Painted Desert:** Wander through the Petrified Forest National Park, where 200-million-year-old fossils comprise the world's largest assemblage of petrified wood. Near Winslow Arizona, at the state's north-eastern perimeters, the park boasts a bevy of hiking trails, all with views of the surrounding Painted Desert. As you ramble, you'll be awed by the profusion of colour — pink, orange, lavender and scarlet — in the desert's badland terrain, an uncanny canvas for the paleontological wonder-trees, fossilized animal bones and extant remnants of ancient civilizations. Visit the Puerco Pueblo, which sits on a protected portion of Route 66. A nearly-800-year-old, 100-room dwelling, it is awash with pottery, artifacts and information about life long ago.

**Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument:** This UNESCO Biosphere, in Southern Arizona, has a plethora of cacti — especially the Organ cactus, with its many appendages. Located along the Mexican border, beneath immense blue skies, free from crowds, this Sonoran Desert wilderness boasts 26 species of cacti. It's the only place in the U.S. to see the white-tufted sinita cactus, known as old man's beard. Though arid, the landscape holds a plethora of wildlife, including big horn sheep, javelinas, mountain lions and coyotes. Hike the monument's back country trails and drive its quiet roads any time of the year, but consider coming in early winter and springtime when Mexican gold poppies and purple lupine dot the expanse. For avid, primitive campers, setting up a tent in Organ Pipe is a must.

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