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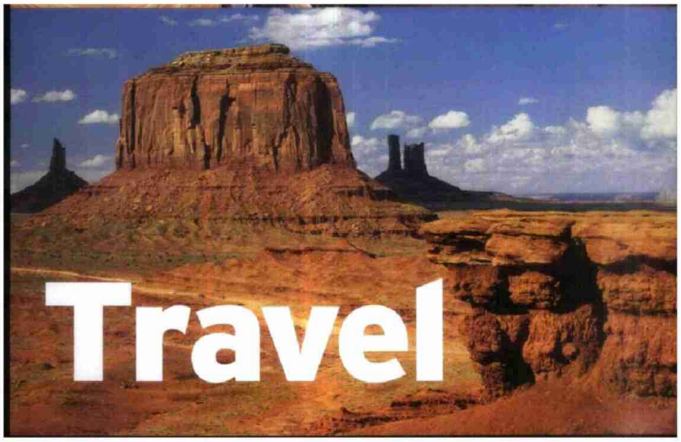

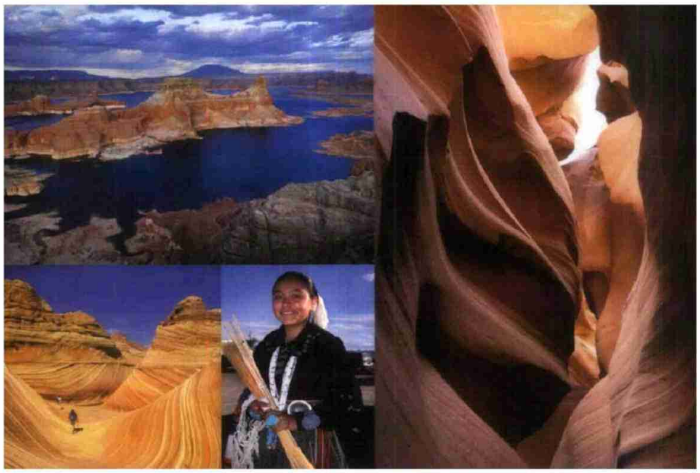

HOME OF THE NAVAJO

Lucie Young experiences indigenous culture in the vast, rocky wilderness of Monument Valley in the south-west US and relishes the comforts of the area's first luxury resort

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To the Navajo, the biggest Native American tribe in the US, the 'Mittens' in Monument Valley, where southern Utah and northern Arizona meet, represent the hands of Mother Earth rising up out of the land. And when day breaks behind these great rocky monoliths, it is indeed a spiritual moment. 'When the white light breaks through the sky, that is when the holy spirits visit our world and it is a time for prayer,' my Navajo guide told me the day I arrived.

Not normally an early riser, I hopped out of bed at 5am two days in a row to catch the 90-minute light show that takes place as the sun rises behind the Mittens, when the valley is flooded with purple, vermilion, orange, indigo, green and ochre hues. It is a majestic and awe-inspiring sight. Sunset is equally breathtaking and The View hotel in the middle of the Navajo-owned Monument Valley Tribal Park, which spans three states and is nearly the size of Scotland, provides the only grandstand view of these events. If you were lazy enough, you could lie in bed and still catch the whole performance. But most guests are out on their balconies in awed silence.

Monument Valley with its ancient 300-metre-high skyscrapers is one of the best places to learn about Native American culture. You can drive through the tribal park, down its boulder-strewn road – rumoured to have been built for the 1939 John Ford movie *Stagecoach* – but you'll miss most of the highlights. The petroglyphs, pictographs and ancient ruins left behind by the Anasazi Indians (the Navajo's old enemy) 1,000-2,000 years ago are off limits if you don't have a native guide.

Because I signed up for an individual tour with 19-year-old Miesha Holiday of Navajo Spirit Tours (www.themonumentvalley.net), I could ask lots of questions and learnt how the Navajo prefer to call themselves the Diné ('Navajo' came from the word 'Nabaju', meaning 'great planted fields', which is what seventeenth-century Spanish settlers called them). I got a peak inside 97-year-old weaver Suzie Yazzie's hogan, a small, circular mud house built to represent a womb, with nine cedar posts that signify the nine months of labour. Miesha sang me Navajo lullabies en route, told me how her pet wolf saved her two-year-old sister from the jaws of a cougar, and explained that the tribe is matriarchal. 'In the old days, if you wanted to divorce your husband, you simply put his shoes and clothes outside your hogan and he knew not to come back,' she told me.

When The View hotel opened two years ago, it was the start of a new trend in environmentally sensitive accommodation at the heart of what the Americans call the 'Grand Circle', an area encompassing parts of five states – Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Nevada – which contains many of the US's great natural treasures, including the Grand Canyon, Lake Powell, Bryce Canyon, Zion National Park, Canyon de Chelly and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. All these incredible sights are less than a day's travel from each other.

Amangiri, at Canyon Point in Utah and just a 15-minute drive from Lake Powell, is the area's first luxury resort. It was 10 years in the making – just purchasing the water rights took six years, and gaining a key 80-acre parcel of land that used to belong to the Glenn Canyon National Park (the hotel stands on 600 acres) was complicated. 'Amanresorts owner Adrian Zecha acquired the land from the US government by giving them another plot in exchange. But it took three years and an act of congress,' said

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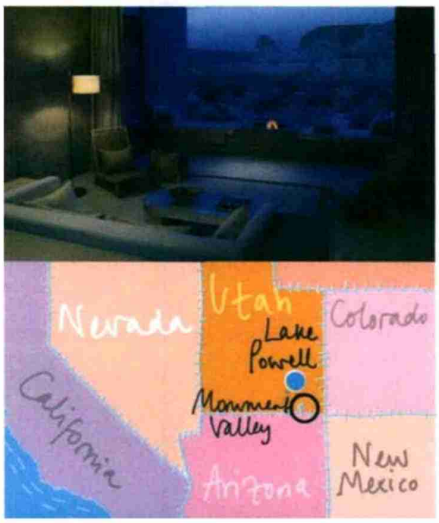
UTAH
LIFE ELEVATED

manager Shaun Matthews, over drinks by the shimmery blue pool that wraps around a rocky outcrop.

Three experimental and environmentally sensitive architects, Rick Joy, Wendell Burnette and Marwan Al-Sayed, designed the hotel as a string of low-slung concrete pavilions that blend so well into their surroundings they are almost invisible from a distance. Every opening and window frames a spectacular view. One of the most magical spaces is the 2,300-square-metre spa with its walnut-lined, candlelit treatment rooms; some have big barn-like doors that can be flung open to let the outside in.

On my first night I slept out under the stars (six of the 34 suites have rooftop sleeping decks). It was certainly the plushest camp bed I've ever tried with fluffy, goose-down pillows, satin-soft linens and lots of candle lanterns around me. I lay and watched the shooting stars for hours. It was like being in a 'Skyspace' installation by artist James Turrell.

The next morning, bleary eyed but enthusiastic, I embarked on a five-hour hike with an Amangiri guide. We started with a rock climb up the mesa behind the hotel to a plateau overlooking Lake Powell, the 186-mile-long man-made reservoir that looks like a pink and purple rockscape on Mars. The journey back took us through slot canyons and over candy-hued, striated rocks that, my guide explained, were petrified, migrating sand dunes. Like few other places in the Grand Circle, Amangiri is surrounded by untrammelled wilderness, which means you need never bump into another tourist □



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Lake Powell has an other-worldly quality. Slot canyons are deeper than they are wide. The region is characterised by monolithic buttes. Petrified sand dunes undulate through the desert. A Navajo girl wears traditional, silver-embellished clothes. THIS PAGE Rooms at Amangiri (above) have amazing views. The View hotel (below) provides a unique vantage for watching the sun rise over the Mittens

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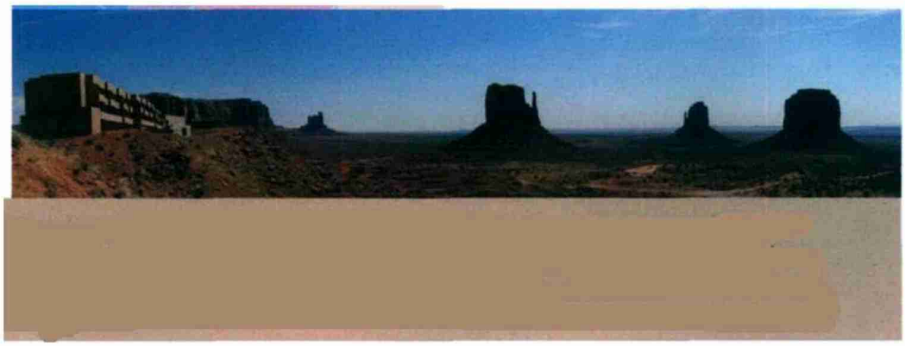

Ways & means Lucie Young travelled as a guest of the Arizona Office of Tourism (www.arizonaguide.com) and stayed at The View hotel (www.monumentvalleyview.com), which costs from $199 per night for a double room; Amangiri (www.amanresorts.com), which costs from $950 per night for a double room; and the Four Seasons Scottsdale at Troon North (www.fourseasons.com/scottsdale), which is convenient for Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport, and costs from $229 per night for a double room. Car hire can be arranged from Enterprise Rent-A-Car (www.enterprise.com).

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