

Antelope Canyon Navajo Tribal Park

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Antelope Canyon

Desert dessert

It was like walking through an enormous whipped-cream dessert. The red, pink and orange sandstone rocks swirled and flowed around us in fantastic, scalloped and surreal patterns, lit by occasional shafts of sunlight which filtered down, placing dramatic spotlights on the flat, sandy floor.

We were exploring the Upper Antelope Canyon, near Page, Arizona, one of the most famous and most photographed slot canyons in the world. A sense of almost religious, jaw-dropping awe overtook our party as we wandered through the 600-foot-long, winding trail, with the walls towering 120 feet above us.

The skies had begun to cloud over as we reached the top of the canyon and started to retrace our steps. We were close to the entrance when a few photographers noticed spots of rain splashing their lenses. ‘Come on,’ said our knowledgeable Navajo guide, a sense of urgency suddenly entering her voice: ‘we need to get out of here – and quick!’.

Before we knew it, waterfalls of chocolate brown water were cascading down the walls of the canyon, and floodwater was gushing down the floor and spreading out of the canyon mouth. We turned and ran for the entrance, realizing that we were witnessing at first hand one of the famous, deadly flash floods which are such a major hazard of these deceptively beautiful slot canyons.

Our guide had warned us that rain does not have to fall on or near these canyons for floods to surge through them. Downpours dozens of miles away upstream can funnel through them without notice. Earlier that year, several tourists had been stranded on a ledge when two flash floods similar to the one we had witnessed occurred in Upper Antelope Canyon. Some were rescued and others just had to wait for the flood waters to recede.

And only 13 years before, 11 tourists had been killed in the more dangerous Lower Antelope Canyon by another flash flood. Little rain had fallen on that day, but an earlier thunderstorm had dumped a large amount of water in the canyon basin, seven miles upstream. And in 2006, a flash flood had lasted for 36 hours and caused the

Tribal Park authorities to close Lower Antelope Canyon for a period of five months.

As we bumped our way in our SUV across the arroyo back to Page, we realized with gratitude why Antelope Canyon must always be visited on a guided Navajo tour. And we appreciated the accuracy of the Navajo name for Upper Antelope Canyon – *Tse’ bighanilini* – ‘the place where water runs through rocks’.

It was water, of course, that created these masterpieces of Nature. They were formed by floods eroding the soft Navajo Sandstone, especially during the so-called summer ‘desert monsoon’ season. Picking up speed and abrasive sand grains as they surge through the narrow slots, they carve them ever deeper, smoothing away the hard edges like a natural sandpaper and creating the characteristic flowing shapes in the rock that we admire today.

The English name of Antelope Canyon (it is also sometimes known as Corkscrew Canyon) comes from the time when prong-horned antelopes pranced through it, but the only animals we saw on our visit were other camera-clicking humans.

The Navajo name for Lower Antelope Canyon, a couple of miles away, is *Hasdeztwazi*, which is equally descriptive and means ‘spiral rock arches.’ Prior to the installation of metal stairways, visiting the Lower Canyon required climbing wooden ladders, and it remains a much more difficult proposition than the Upper Canyon. It is longer, much shallower and narrower, and requires some climbing and sturdy footwear. Lower Antelope Canyon still attracts a number of determined photographers, although casual sightseers are much less common than in the Upper Canyon.

Our guide explained that to the Navajo people, entering Antelope Canyon was like entering a cathedral. ‘We pause before entering to be in the right frame of mind and as a sign of respect’ she said. ‘This also allows us to leave feeling uplifted by Nature, and to be in harmony with something greater than ourselves. It is a spiritual experience.’ We said amen to that.

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