

# Beyond the Grand Canyon: 7 natural wonders OF ARIZONA

By Tiffany Owens

**T**OUTED AS AMERICA'S TOP NATIONAL PARK AND ONE OF THE SEVEN NATURAL WONDERS OF THE WORLD,

the Grand Canyon is a place of unsurpassed beauty, with dramatic vistas, towering pinnacles, mile-high cliffs and colorful rock formations. President Theodore Roosevelt said it was “the

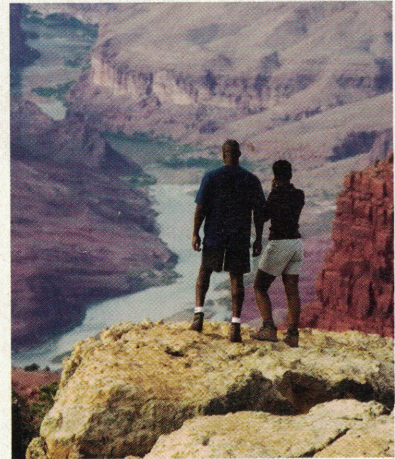
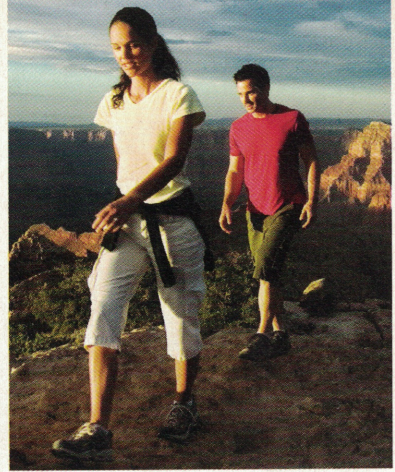
one great sight every American...should see,” and millions of people from around the globe journey there each year to witness the spectacular views.

But while the state's namesake and star attraction is certainly deserving of all of her publicity and attention, Arizona is also home to a wealth of other awe-inspiring destinations. Listed here

are seven of the state's most remarkable natural wonders, albeit slightly lesser-known, but equally worthy of discovery. In fact, one of these seven amazing places is most likely within driving distance of your own home — the perfect day trip or weekend getaway with only a fraction of the Grand Canyon's tourist crowds.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOEL GRIMES





## VERMILION CLIFFS NATIONAL MONUMENT

This relative newcomer to Arizona's esteemed list of monuments is home to the Paria Plateau, Vermilion Cliffs, Paria River Canyon, Coyote Buttes and "The Wave." The 294,000-acre monument contains seven major geologic formations and is an unspoiled treasure

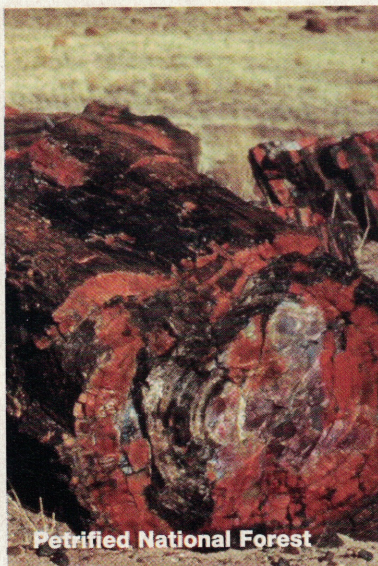
of soaring cliffs, plunging canyons, and decorative sandstone swirls.

The monument's secluded location, just south of the Utah border and isolated from the rest of the state by the Grand Canyon, makes it some of the most remote and rugged public land in the lower 48 states. The far-flung locale has also helped to preserve its outstand-

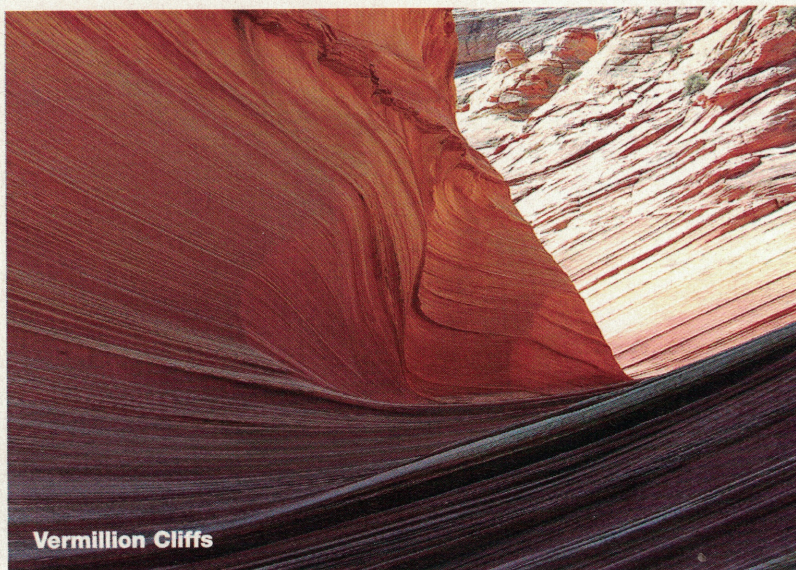
ing biodiversity: Twenty species of raptors, including endangered condors, call the area home, as do desert bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, and an array of other native fish and wildlife.

In the northern region lies Coyote Buttes and "The Wave," an area of spectacular natural scenery with an assortment of delicate sculptures carved in





**Petrified National Forest**



**Vermilion Cliffs**

layers of kaleidoscopic, candy-colored sandstone that change in appearance according to the weather and time of day. Oddly enough, the location was first publicized in 1995 by a German nature film and subsequent magazine articles.

However, due to its newfound popularity and because the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) considers the sandstone formations to be extremely fragile, Coyote Buttes has recently been subjected to fees and a limit of 20 permits per day. Be warned, the calendar fills up quickly. "April is our most popular month due to the mild weather," says Katie Brauer of the BLM, "we just completed our lottery drawing for that month and 500 people applied."

Hiking to "The Wave" is fairly easy, without much change in elevation, and takes one to two hours. Visit [www.az.blm.gov/paria](http://www.az.blm.gov/paria) for directions, campsite information, and complete instructions on how to apply, either online or in-person, for day-use only permits.

## **PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK & PAINTED DESERT**

Petrified wood in its various incarnations can be found in almost every

state in America, but the "forest" in northeastern Arizona is one of the world's largest and most colorful collections. Most of the wood is in the form of scattered logs, (vs. standing trees, which most first-time visitors expect to see), and are made almost entirely of solid, multi-colored quartz that weighs about 200 lbs. per cubic foot. Conversely, the Painted Desert is a dreamy patchwork of rich-hued pastels spanning windswept vistas.

More than 650 ancient American Indian sites have been found in the park, from one-room shelters to a 100-room pueblo. Consequently, the park also has one of the most diverse collections of prehistoric pottery fragments and remarkable displays of 225-million-year-old dinosaur fossils from the Late Triassic Period.

The Petrified Forest National Park has both a north (via I-40) and a south entrance (via Highway 180). The Rainbow Forest Museum just inside the south entrance to the park is the best place to get oriented and begin a tour. From there, visitors can work their way north along the park's 27-mile scenic road, which has more than 20 overlooks and numerous hiking trails, to

view striking displays of petrified wood first, saving the Painted Desert's multi-colored badlands for last. Visit [www.nps.gov/pefo](http://www.nps.gov/pefo) for information.

## **CANYON DE CHELLY NATIONAL MONUMENT**

Beyond the Painted Desert, much of the state's northeast region is barren and not particularly scenic, with one notable exception: Canyon de Chelly National Monument. It is considered the oldest continuously occupied site in North America, with 2500 archeological sites of the Archaic, Anasazi, Pueblo, Hopi and Navajo tribes, ranging from 1500 B.C. to 1350 A.D., to the present-day life of the Navajo, who still farm the valley and consider the canyon to be sacred ground.

Points of interest include Mummy Cave, White House Ruins, and the Antelope House. Another spectacular geologic feature is Spider Rock, an 800-foot sandstone spire that has served as the scene of many TV commercials.

Canyon de Chelly is unique among the National Parks in that it consists entirely of Navajo Tribal Trust Land. Although the White House Ruin Trail along the South Rim Drive is free and

PHOTOS COURTESY OF (LEFT) CHRIS COE, AND (RIGHT) THOMAS H. WHITTEN.





Monument Valley

open to the public, access to the canyon floor is restricted, and visitors are allowed to travel in the canyons only when accompanied by a park ranger or authorized Navajo guide.

The monument's visitor center maintains a complete list of guides and tour options, from horseback rides through the canyon, to private jeep excursions or what locals refer to as the "shake-and-bake" tour via an open-air, six-wheeled truck with padded seats. Visit [www.nps.gov/cach](http://www.nps.gov/cach) or [www.tbird-lodge.com/tours.htm](http://www.tbird-lodge.com/tours.htm) for information.

## CHIRICAHUA NATIONAL MONUMENT

The experience of what pioneers referred to as the "Wonderland of Rocks" can only be described as "other-worldly." Indeed, the Chiricahuas are a world apart, not only from the other deserts and mountain ranges that surround them, but for their extraordinary rock sculptures, created by the forces of nature—namely a massive volcanic explosion and erosion—over millions of years.

The sheer number of these "sky islands," is breathtaking, with massive rock spires, towering columns and gi-

ant boulders perched on delicate pedestals. More than 18 miles of trails wind through the park past rock grottos, a natural bridge and ledge of volcanic hailstone, lush oak-juniper and pine forests, and the unusual rock formations, many named for their surprising likenesses, such as "Duck on a Rock" or "Punch and Judy."

Or, visitors can opt for the winding, scenic eight-mile ride up Bonita Canyon Drive to the mountains' crest and Masai Point. The Point's overlook provides commanding views of the park and landmark peaks of Cochise Head and Sugarloaf Mountain, with roadside pullouts along the way to see

many of the spectacular rock spires. Visit [www.nps.gov/chir](http://www.nps.gov/chir) for more information on the park and adjacent Bonita Canyon Campground.

## MONUMENT VALLEY

Monument Valley is one of the West's most-photographed natural wonders, also best-known as the beloved cinematic stage for western films. Director John Ford started it all in 1939 with *Stagecoach* starring John Wayne, filmed against the Valley's majestic backdrop of red-rock buttes and thousand-foot-tall spires. The Navajo run the 30,000-acre tribal park that encompasses virtually all the major sites, roughly 40 buttes, mesas



Chiricahua National Monument



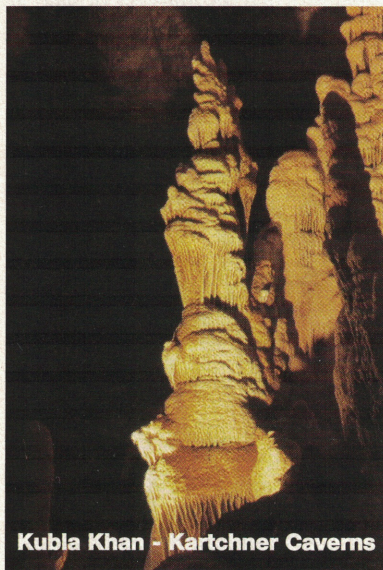


Sunset Crater National Monument

and pinnacles, with whimsical names like Gray Whiskers, The Mittens and Three Sisters.

There are two options for experiencing the main part of the valley. One is to hire a Navajo guide and tour the big-rock sites on foot, horseback or open-air Jeeps. The other is to visit on your own, driving the 17-mile dirt road that winds around the valley floor.

The only lodging available is at the historic Goulding's Lodge, which sits at the base of a 700-foot-high mesa, with sweeping views of the Valley:



Kubla Khan - Kartchner Caverns

[www.gouldings.com](http://www.gouldings.com). Camping is also available year round, just off the visitor center at the park's entrance. For more information, visit [www.navajonation-parks.org/htm/monumentvalley.htm](http://www.navajonation-parks.org/htm/monumentvalley.htm).

### SUNSET CRATER VOLCANO NATIONAL MONUMENT

Sunset Crater Volcano is the youngest of more than 600 volcanic craters that dot the landscape north-east of Flagstaff. Named for the sunset-like red and yellow colors of the cinder cones near its summit, the volcano looms 1,000 feet tall and began to form in 1064 A.D. The volcano's intermittent eruptions over the next century eventually covered an area of 800 square miles with ash, lava, and cinders to create the surreal landscape that is seen today.

The one-mile Lava Flow Trail passes through the desolate moon-scape of lava flows, cinders, and ash hugging the base of the volcano. Or, try the one-mile Lenox Crater Trail for a rare opportunity to climb a cinder cone, coupled with amazing views of the San Francisco Peaks, Sunset Crater and its expansive lava flow.

Near the visitor center at the west

entrance is the small Bonito Campground, open from late May to mid-October. Visit [www.nps.gov/sucr](http://www.nps.gov/sucr) for directions and information.

### KARTCHNER CAVERNS

Opened to the public in 1999, Kartchner Caverns are among the largest and most beautiful in the country—with stalactites, stalagmites, and other natural cave structures that are still growing. Within the caverns are the mammoth “Big” and “Throne” rooms (each with separate tours) that reveal such amazing sites as the 58-foot-tall Kubla Khan Column and the world's longest soda straw stalactite.

Within the park are a day-use area, campground and several miles of above-ground hiking trails. But best of all? Whereas it used to take up to eight months to get a reservation, these days, visitors can often walk in and join a tour. Visit online at [www.pr.state.az.us/Parks/parkhtml/kartchner.html](http://www.pr.state.az.us/Parks/parkhtml/kartchner.html) for ticket information and more. **H**

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