

MONUMENT TO NATURE

MONUMENT VALLEY, ALONG THE ARIZONA-UTAH BORDER, CAPTURES THE HEART AND REINFORCES THE IDEA THAT NATURE IS THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED ARTIST

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Forrest Gump ran and ran and finally came to a stop at this point. Fans of the movie remember the immortal line, “I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll go home now” uttered by actor Tom Hanks playing the titular role of Forrest Gump. Some of them also remember the stunning backdrop to the scene, the first sight of Monument Valley, with this vast expanse of the red and rocky Colorado Plateau like arms stretched out in warm welcome. As I watch, tourists get off their cars in the middle of the road to capture this iconic scene for posterity on their cameras, standing where Gump himself did.

Way before *Forrest Gump* though, in 1939, director John Ford discovered Monument Valley’s charm and presented it to the world in his classic Western *Stagecoach*, starring John Wayne (who famously said, upon first laying eyes on the land, “so this is where God put the West”). The director shot no less than eight films in this landscape, so it comes as no surprise that there is a John Ford’s Point inside. It is the precipice deep inside the heart of Monument Valley, where Johnny Depp, playing the lone ranger, stood with his horse in the eponymous movie (2013). Six years later, I stand at the same spot, and next to me, there is a Navajo man on a horse, in classic cowboy costume; for a small fee, eager tourists get themselves photographed on his horse, wearing his hat.

Film historian Scott Eyman once said

about Monument Valley, “There are certain places in the world that seem like special effects, they don’t seem real. They’re too perfect.” Of course, if John Ford saw that perfectness, the things a visitor sees today are very different. For instance, the souvenir stalls set up by Navajo women at various points, promising not just an authentic piece of their culture, but also the convenience of paying with a credit card!

Obviously, my trip to Monument Valley was not on horseback, but in a rented car. I was on a road trip with a friend across a few national parks in Utah, ending at this Navajo Nation Reservation spot deep down in the state. Most people drive up from Arizona or Nevada, hiking at the Grand Canyon and a possible pit-stop at Antelope Canyon, too. On my route though, Monument Valley is the proverbial off-the-beaten-track stop, located right on the border between Utah and Arizona, in the Four Corners region of America’s wild Southwest.

In this stark desert landscape, it is difficult to believe that civilisation existed since 1200 BC, with the ancient Puebloans and then the Navajo people making it home. More than 250,000 of the latter still live on this land, the 16 million acres of what seems like barren space known collectively as Navajo Nation. In a minor nod to their status as an indigenous people, Monument Valley has been named a Tribal Park and left in their care, instead of a National Park under the purview of the federal government.

Even though I have driven and hiked through other red rock parks in the region, Monument Valley still takes my breath away with its fierce barrenness, broken only by the dramatic geological formations known as buttes (pronounced byoot, these are short hillocks with steep sides and flat tops) and mesas (may-sa, similar to buttes but broader). I had various options for exploring this “Valley of the rocks”, as it is translated from its original Navajo name of Tsé Bii Ndzisgaii. I could drive through it in my own car in a single day, stay over at the resort inside the park, or take a half day tour with a

