





Canyon de Chelly

Mummies, petroglyphs, dancing, and frybread

Scott Brady, his father, and friends travel into the farthest reaches of Canyon del Muerto and Canyon de Chelly in search of history, culture, a world-famous flute player, and a few dance lessons.

By Scott Brady

Photographs by Scott Brady and Bryn Forbes



As our convoy rumbled up to White House Ruins,

deep inside Canyon de Chelly in northeastern Arizona, my initial focus on the 1,000-year-old cliff dwelling was interrupted by a flurry of activity in front of our Jeep. Several Navajo—or Diné as they refer to themselves—started moving toward an old woman, who was clearly frightened and shuffling away from our group as quickly as she could. Stepping out of the Jeep, I could see the group reassuring her. Her countenance changed from frightened to hesitant, and the group came back over to us. I asked our guide, Cynthia Hunter, what the problem was, to which she replied, “That is my great aunt. She thought you were the U.S. Army coming to take her away.”

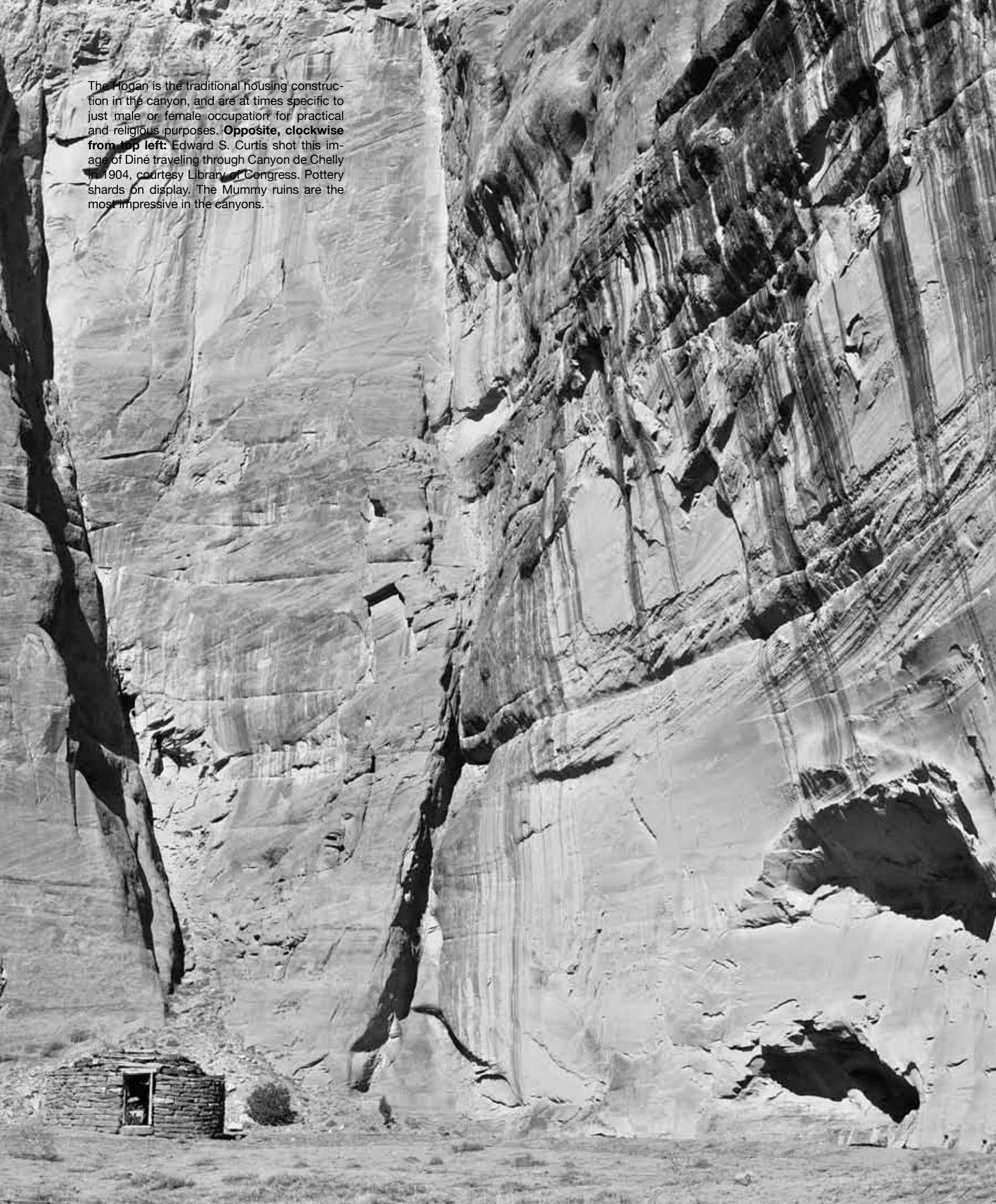
History had many lessons for us as we traveled through this beautiful place, and it was quickly apparent that history was still alive—and sometimes still frightening—to the people of this canyon.

The story of the Diné people and this canyon stretches back at least 600 years. Their pictographs record the arrival of the first *conquistadores*—a priest mounted on a horse with other riders in procession, muskets at the ready. The Spanish wasted little time before they began raiding Diné villages for slaves; the Diné retaliated with raids of their own, which continued after the New Mexico Territory came

under U.S. rule in the 1840s. In 1849 a belligerent American colonel on a sortie through tribal lands ordered his troops to fire on a group of Diné that had assembled to parley, resulting in the death of the tribe’s most prominent leader, Narbona, who was over 80 years old at the time. This escalated hostilities beyond hope of diplomacy until, in 1863, General James Carleton ordered Colonel Kit Carson to initiate a scorched-earth campaign to stamp out Diné resistance, including holdouts in Canyon de Chelly.

Facing starvation, most of the Diné surrendered, and Carson, his distasteful job complete, left for home. But Carleton and the U.S. Army weren’t finished with the Diné. Over the course of a year, in an exodus that became known as the Long Walk, nearly 9,000 men, women, and children were forced to walk 300 miles to a reservation near Fort Sumner in New Mexico. Roughly 500 of them died along the way, mostly from exposure. Ironically, just four years later the U.S. government relented and allowed the Diné to return to their tribal lands between the Four Mountains. Now we were here, in what the Diné call Tséyi’ and what we’ve translated to Canyon de Chelly (pronounced “shay”), to hear their stories.

The Hogan is the traditional housing construction in the canyon, and are at times specific to just male or female occupation for practical and religious purposes. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Edward S. Curtis shot this image of Diné traveling through Canyon de Chelly in 1904, courtesy Library of Congress. Pottery shards on display. The Mummy ruins are the most impressive in the canyons.





There is no private land on the Navajo Nation, so even in the canyon, the family must use the parcel or risk losing it. **Opposite:** Spider Woman rock is an impressive free-standing spire. An EarthRoamer XV-LT moving through the canyon



Exploring the canyon rim

Our adventure began at the Canyon de Chelly National Monument visitor center, where we met our guide and friend Cynthia Hunter and her mother, Sally. I had first met Cynthia in the summer of 2003, when we traveled through the region in our Land Rover, and she proved to be such a knowledgeable and engaging resource that we recommended her frequently to friends and family and eventually arranged a second, more comprehensive visit in the fall of 2009. Several friends came along, all driving some variation of an EarthRoamer, either the small Jeep XV-JP or the larger Ford-based XV-LT. As an especially fun addition, my father had flown into Flagstaff and was my co-pilot in the Jeep. My earliest memories were of my dad taking the family to Utah on various adventures and hunting trips, and I can still remember bouncing around in the old Willys M38a1 that belonged to my grandfather. It was exciting to have an adventure like that again with my father, and since he is a passionate horseman and student of Old West history, this trip was perfect.

During our earlier visit here we discovered that it is critical to first explore the rims of the canyons, to gain perspective on the scale and visual impact of the De Chelly sandstone formation. Formed during the Permian period, the Defiance Plateau was cut into three canyons by the runoff from the Chuska Mountains, which are visible to the northeast. It's possible to circumnavigate the entire canyon system overland,

although most choose to explore the South Rim drive as a two-way route, since it provides exceptional overlooks into De Chelly canyon and the significant features of White House Ruins and Spider Woman Rock. Spider Woman Rock is considered to be the tallest freestanding rock spire in the world, at over 800 feet. According to Navajo myth, it is also the home of Spider Woman, who resides at the top and would drop down on a string of silk to teach the Diné the art of weaving.





Canyon del Muerto

Cynthia and Sally climbed into available seats in the trucks, and we set off from the visitor center into Chinle Wash. We aired the tires down to about 18 psi on the Jeeps and 45 psi on the big trucks to aid with passage through the soft sand. The wash is wide and the canyon walls are short, as this is the start of the sandstone plateau and west of the confluence of the two major canyon systems. There was no water in the canyon, as our trip was early in the fall after a dry summer. In early spring, the flow can be several feet deep on the main route and much deeper in the eddies and narrow sections. There is a famous (and oft-told) story in the canyon about a group of Land Rover owners who attempted the canyon on their Border to Border expedition, losing one of the Series pickups to the flooding in the process.

For us, it was dry and dusty as we turned northeast into Canyon del Muerto (Canyon of the Dead), which was given that name by Colonel James Stevenson, who recorded 46 early Puebloan sites, including the site of a large ruin that contained two mummified remains, both wrapped in yucca cloth. The mummy cave was our destination for the day and would be our camp for the night. Along the canyon, Cynthia

shared with us the history of the early Pueblo and Navajo people, stopping at several significant ruin sites, well preserved and perched on the side of the canyon walls. The discussions also included interpretations of the numerous pictographs and petroglyphs that adorned the sandstone cliffs. In my travels throughout the Southwest, I have always enjoyed the aboriginal artwork and the history they share.

As the canyon narrowed, the trail became more difficult, requiring better ground clearance and traction as the route entered and exited the wash. One final shelf road elevates the trail above the waterway and includes several tight switchbacks and rocky climbs, testing the turning radius of the larger trucks. This additional effort required to reach the end of the road rewarded us with a stunning view of the mummy cave and near-perfectly-preserved ruins. The rest of Cynthia's family came along for the fun and we enjoyed a traditional Navajo frybread dinner while the photographers in the group spent more time taking pictures of her beautiful grandson sleeping peacefully in his authentic cradleboard.



Only this canyon can make an EarthRoamer look small. Navajo pictographs, depicting the Spanish arrival. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** The cradleboard is traditional to the Diné; the headboard serves as protection and is inspired by the rainbow. Each piece has a story and significance. Indian frybread (when in Rome). Travis Terry is a famous Pima flute player. His wife is Diné, and he spends considerable time in the canyon. Anita Benalli looks over her beautiful goods, just after she thought we were the Army coming to take her away. In the end, I expect she was glad she stayed.



Cynthia's nieces presented a series of captivating dances, something we were all grateful and honored to watch. They even grabbed my father and me for a few dances, but I will spare all of you those images. **Opposite:** A view down into Canyon de Chelly from the rim.





Canyon de Chelly

Waking the next morning, we retraced our route back to the confluence with Canyon de Chelly, and started east. The Diné farms in this canyon are larger and more active, all part of the community concessions for land ownership. If a family stops using the land, the community will take it back and give it to another family for use. As we continued forward, the canyon narrowed like Del Muerto, opening slightly at the White House Ruins. These ruins were constructed by the Anasazi, a Navajo word for “ancient enemy” or “ancient ancestor,” an estimated 800 years ago. The ruins get their name from the white colored stones used to make the walls of the upper structure.

At the ruins, we had arranged to meet Travis Terry. Travis, a member of the Gila River Pima tribe who married a Diné woman, is famous as a world-class flute player. He told the stories of his youth and the history of his people interspersed with song and dance. We enjoyed a relaxing lunch (more frybread—when in Rome...), and gained a further appreciation for these great people and their balance with nature and emphasis on family. We also couldn't help but purchase a few of the beautiful baskets and jewelry available for sale, several from Cynthia's great aunt—the one who originally ran from our convoy. She was certainly happy that she stayed around.

Farther into Canyon de Chelly we encountered the most famous of the pictograph panels, one featuring a procession of *conquistadores* with muskets and horses being led by a priest in a red cloak. These Spaniards massacred an estimated 115 Diné in a punitive expedition. Personally,

I find this mural to be awe-inspiring, and for several reasons, primary of which is the accuracy and detail of the scene. Most pictographs and petroglyphs show exaggerated proportions of human figures, often further distorted by zoomorphic adaptation. For this panel, the colors are rich and varied, with great accuracy in the horses, down to the hooves and flowing tails.

Our adventure ended at the base of Spider Woman Rock, where we made our camp for the night (this requires special permission) and watched the sun dip behind the edge of the canyon, elongating the shadow from the sandstone spire and drawing a close to our day. With the setting sun, Cynthia and her family had one more surprise for us, the silence of the waning day broken by the beat of drums and the chorus of flutes. Her nieces had donned the classic dress of the dance, their regalia consisting of flowing shawls and elaborate moccasins. They danced into the night as we sat and enjoyed our last round of frybread. For the last dance of the evening, the ladies grabbed my father and me, along with Charlie Nordstrom, and pulled us into the powwow. With great style and rhythm, these beautiful people drew us further into their culture and I clumsily complied, all of us laughing at the contrast in coordination. They had shared so much with us over the three days we spent in the canyon: their history, their culture, their art and their dance. How could we ever repay such generosity—we can't. Thank you Cynthia, and your wonderful family, for letting us into your world. 🌐

TRIP PLANNING

Canyon de Chelly, Navajo Nation, Arizona

Requirements

Vehicle

The trip through Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto varies greatly throughout the seasons. It's frequently passable in a Honda Element in fall (I have seen it), to impassible in a Unimog in spring. It is essential that the vehicle entering the canyon be 4WD, and have quality all-terrain tires and a means of deflating and inflating the tire pressure to aid with flotation in the soft and deep sand. The vehicle can be larger than average, up to the size of an EarthRoamer XV-LT or Global Expedition Vehicle Unimog.

Equipment

Supplies should include a proper recovery kit with a recovery strap, shovel, shackles, and gloves. It is also critical that you do not bring dogs or alcohol into the canyon (alcohol is not permitted on the reservation).

Seasons

The best time to travel to Canyon de Chelly is in the early fall, when daytime temperatures are moderate and nighttime lows hover above freezing. Earlier fall will provide beautiful color as the trees change and begin dropping their leaves. Winter can be very cold given the elevation, with overnight lows below 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Plan for these wide-ranging temps and pack good rain and cold weather gear. It is also recommended that participants have boots for wading in deep water.

Resources

Canyon de Chelly National Park: Open daily from 8am to 5pm. Chinle, AZ, 928-674-5500, nps.gov/cach
Navajo Guide: Cynthia Hunter, 928-675-0403, cendo_24@yahoo.com



Iceland - May and October.
Kenya - August.
Labrador - August.



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