On The Road With
ARIZONA HIGHWAYS
Discovering Monument Valley
By Robin Sewell
Layout by Wendy Parker
Photos Courtesy of Michael Becker & Felipe Ruiz

If you are a longtime Arizonan, you have undoubtedly uttered these words, "but it's a dry heat." Chances are you've had to explain to your out-of-town friends that the desert is more than just a place to retire, play golf and wear a cowboy hat.

During my years as a newscaster, I lived the "gypsy" lifestyle, hop-scotching the country from one job to another. I got acquainted, but never really got to know the state where I lived. All that changed when I moved to Arizona for the main anchor job at channel 15. My learning curve increased even more dramatically when I became the executive producer and host of Arizona Highways. In three months of filming, we have traveled to places I never thought I'd ever visit. (C'mon, I grew up in New York and never went to the Statue of Liberty until I moved away and came back as a tourist).

Our first Arizona Highways road trip took us to Monument Valley on the Arizona/Utah border. All we knew about Monument Valley was that it was the stuff movies were made of and that its famous vistas graced magazine covers and postcards. I felt like Chevy Chase in the movie "Vacation" as my producer and I jumped in the car and headed up 1-17 to Navajo country. Both of us could have a map, compass and a GPS system in our car and still manage to get lost. On that February day, it was typical Arizona weather down here in the Valley, but we quickly changed from shorts to sweaters when we stopped in Flagstaff for lunch and found the town covered in snow. After some tasty, hot homemade soup in a little downtown café, we stopped in a few shops inquiring about the best way to get to Kayenta, the town that's home to Monument Valley. After many puzzled looks, we decided we would use our best Lewis and Clark skills to get there before sundown. In all honesty, the drive out of Flagstaff is less than picturesque and you keep wondering, "Who lives all the way out here?"

Three hours later, the flat, barren landscape starts to rise and when the color brown turns into a deep rich red, you realize why the Native Americans call this place sacred. As a journalist, I hate being cliché, but this quiet place in the farthest corner of Northern Arizona is magnificent and awe-inspiring. It is a photographer's paradise. We had a Navajo guide take us to the most picturesque spots of the valley (although they all seem pretty equal in that regard) and explain to us the history and culture of Monument Valley and how Hollywood fell in love with this place. It's been a scene-stealer in John Ford/John Wayne westerns as well as films like "Thelma and Louise," "Forest Gump" and "Back to the Future."

The place to stay in Monument Valley is Goulding's Lodge. It's nothing fancy, but the views are unmatched. There is a trading post, which is now a museum that pays homage to John Ford and all the folks who put Monument Valley on the map and there is a gift shop, which sells Native American jewelry and some other fun trinkets that represent life in Navajo country. This is not the place to come if you are looking for adventure or a lot to do, but it is a place to come if you want to experience and fall in love with some of the most majestic landscapes in the country or even the world. This is one of those places in Arizona where there are no golf courses, but yes, I did wear a cowboy hat.

Robin Sewell
Arizona Highways Host