

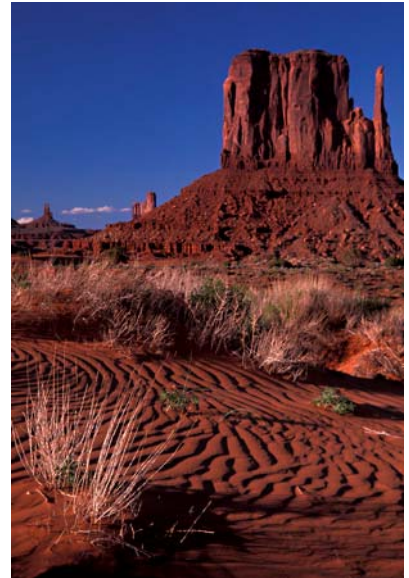
## Monument Valley

© by Tibor Vari

March 2004

In northern Arizona just across the border from Utah is Monument Valley. The area is famous for a number of John Ford films and its wonderful scenery. This landmark has also become a photographers paradise and thus the reason for the journey here. Before actually going to the valley, we check into the Hampton Inn in Kayenta to get the photography gear ready.

After paying the entrance fee you are in front of a large building where you can buy souvenirs as well as hire Navajo guides to take you into the heart of the valley. Since its getting late, the free self guided tour is chosen. When pulling out of the parking area you can bear right and go down the hill but we stay straight and go a very short distance to some bent knurly old trees. This is one of the classic pictures where the bent tree is used to frame each of the 3 buttes with various compositions. After shooting this scene, back track and now drive down the hill and turn left into the pullout and park. Walk around the edge of the parking area and look for sand ripples that can be used as foreground material to lead your eye to the buttes. If the weather is good the warm late afternoon light should be hitting the buttes at 90 degrees from where you are standing in order to get full polarization with the polarizer. Out west, I will generally back off the full polarization since with Velvia film, you don't want the sky to turn out an unnatural dark blue. Since it was late afternoon and the light was starting to fade, we head back to the entrance parking lot to shoot another classic scene with boulders framing the buttes while jostling with a very large photography tour for position. After the light faded, its back to the hotel for some dinner and sleep since the next day will start very early.



Since the two main photography locations (Totem Poles & Ear of the Wind), that I wanted to see are in the restricted Navajo territory. I researched a number of potential guides and settled on Tom Phillips of Keyah Hozhoni Monument Valley Tours. Tom is a well respected photographer himself and frankly, did not come cheap at \$200/person/day (May 2003). However, a number of publications recommended him so I took the chance. Tom also has less expensive tours that cover the morning or afternoon and can be custom tailored to your specific requests. Tom's website is at:

[http://www.monumentvalley.com/Pages/english\\_homepage.html](http://www.monumentvalley.com/Pages/english_homepage.html)

The Navajo do not observe daylight savings time so there is always some confusion about what time it really is. The day starts with an early rise at 3:30 AM to be at the Monument Valley entrance by 4:30 AM, which is the time our guide Tom Phillips had wanted us there (turns out I messed up the hour). Well, no guide, so a quick nap in the car when Tom arrives a little after 5:00 AM. The excitement level rises because I am about to go to the Totem Poles and Ear of the Wind this morning! Tom also tells us he will take us into Mystery Valley and end the



day at the Saucers. We are joined by two other cars with photographers and frankly, none of the 3 groups are thrilled to see the others.

Tom lets us use our 4wd vehicle and off we go to the Totem Poles. This area is one of the key spots on the trip and the weather is great as is the light. This place is truly magical and I shoot a ton of film. Of course one of the individuals is part of a camera club group and is complaining about our presence. She becomes such an annoyance that even Tom has to tell her to stop walking on the sand dunes and messing up the wavy lines. I get a shot of my friend Dave taking a picture and it's so neat that we switch places and he gets mine. The key here is to take the shot (try vertical and horizontal compositions), and then move to a new position. There are plenty of foreground objects from the obvious sand lines to bushes and even the occasional animal tracks. Everything is shot using Velvia film, polarizer and enhancing filter.



Next we are off to the Ear of the Wind and some really neat 4 wheel driving over sand tracks. The truck seems to float over the sand at times while we are all praying the car does not lose its forward momentum. We stop at a home to see if the owner would bring her sheep to the arch for us to shoot. She can't be found, but the guys take some nice shots of the mud huts. Though, it is a shame that anyone in America today should live in these conditions (no plumbing, water etc.).

Again the lighting and mood is great at Ear of the Wind and again I blaze away with film. For the classic shot as seen in this article, you have to walk up a well traveled dirt path. To use the tree as a silhouette, it's a tight fit on the trail, so only one person at a time can take the shot. Tom also has us walk around and we get some additional compositions that I had not previously seen from this place. I use Velvia, polarizer filter, enhancing filter, and spot metered the rock.

By now its lunch time and we are all running low on film, so Tom gives us a two hour break so we head back to the hotel and restock our film supplies. The afternoon is spent driving to various locations, ruins, petroglyphs, and arches in Mystery Valley. Some of the locations work well and others are just so-so. We finally arrive at the end of the day to the Saucers. After a harrowing 4wd up a very steep rock formation (white knuckle time), we crest over and park. The photographs are the ones I have seen before and duly take them. At this point Tom takes us on quite a hike exploring all around this area and there are some really great compositions. But we are all dead tired and frankly exhausted as the day comes to an end. We gladly hand Tom each a \$200.00 check and it was well worth it every cent of it! I shot a record 10 rolls of film for the day and got back some of the most incredible photographs I have ever taken. I highly recommend Monument Valley if you are in the Northern Arizona area and definitely look Tom up for your guide.

