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TONY HILLERMAN COUNTRY

CHICAGO



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Exploring Tony Hillerman Country

BY CHRISTINE MAXA

Hidden deep in an adjacent gorge of the Grand Canyon, the robin's-egg blue water of the Little Colorado River swirls past towering red cliffs toward the teal-tinged Colorado River. A curious mound of earth yawning a small opening signals the Sipapu, where Hopi Indians say humans emerged onto the planet. Sacred and secluded, most people don't know about this esoteric place.

Aficionados of Tony Hillerman's mystery novels do, if they read his latest bestseller, *Skeleton Man*.

Colorado River,
Grand Canyon

Armchair travelers have visited Arizona's most mystical and scenic spots via Hillerman's novels starring reason-heavy Joe Leaphorn, a retired sergeant with the Navajo Tribal Police; and tribal police lieutenant Jim Chee, who venerates the traditional Navajo ways and aspires shamanism. Through these two characters, Hillerman showcases the spiritual and physical beauty of the Navajo world, as well as the Hopi and Zuni cultures.

"It was love at first sight for me," Hillerman recalls of his first encounter with the Navajo Nation, "and I have been getting acquainted with its mountains, canyons and interesting cultures ever since. Its big country with long views and a wealth of empty places, populated with Navajos famous for their endurance and their sense of humor, and a variety of pueblo tribes noted for their artistry and their complex mythology."

The Navajos called this high desert country stretched between Four Sacred Mountains in three states (Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico) The Glittering World. For people who want to see this land and its inhabitants for themselves, below are 10 Arizona destinations featured in Hillerman's novels (currently numbering 17 with one on the way). A visit to them may not meet with the danger and mystery Leaphorn and Chee encounter, but it certainly may turn out as memorable.



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Grand Canyon National Park

Hillerman's *Skeleton Man* takes readers to the depths of the Grand Canyon and wraps them in Hopi spiritual legends. Visitors to the canyon don't have to roam the canyon's floor like the book's characters do. It only takes a trip to the South Rim and a glance at the magnificence of the earth's grandest gorge for travelers to experience one of the planet's seven natural wonders.

Visitors may not find a diamond Hopi character, Billy Tuve, or spot a pink Grand Canyon rattlesnake described in the book; but they might find a treasure in one of the Rim shops or catch a glimpse of California condors as they gather on the South Rim, their roost of choice.

The Rainbow Plateau

Deep gorges twisted by the elements, legend-filled mountains, and mystical formations bring travelers into a supernatural world full of legends and pristine beauty on the Rainbow Plateau. Famous landmarks, Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge, still hold sacred status with the Navajo. In this sanguine canyonland, Indian ruins deck steep canyon walls and nestle in alcoves. The ruins draw archaeology-lovers from all over the world.

In his third novel, *Listening Woman*, Hillerman drops the reader in this captivating land by describing its landscape in detail while the novel's blind main character elucidates about the ghosts and witches that haunt it. Hillerman knits the supernatural with logic to solve two murders.

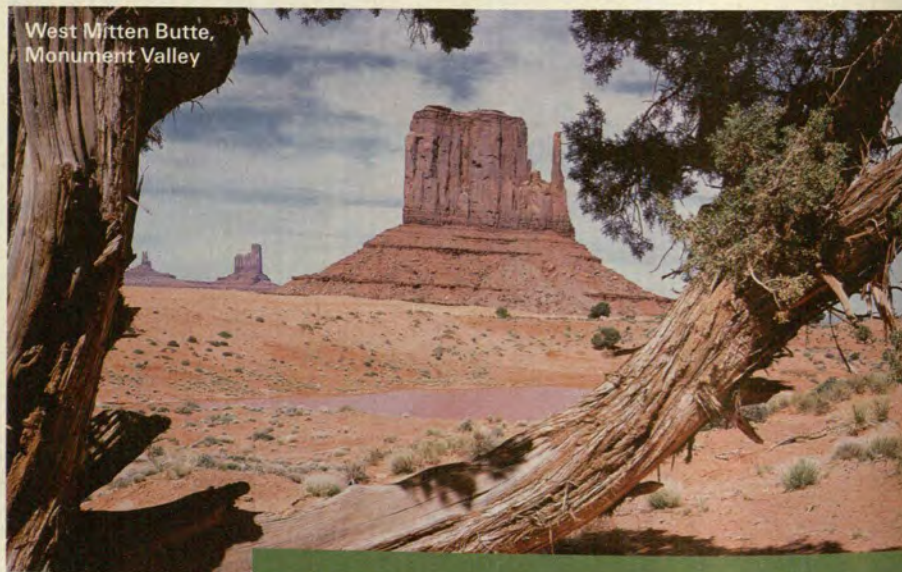
Monument Valley

Listening Woman also takes readers to Monument Valley, another sacred spot on Navajo earth. Not a valley, as its name implies, the landscape more aptly fits the Navajo's nomenclature of Tse' Bii' Ndzisgaaí, or changing of the rock. From the time an ancient ocean covered the area millions of years ago, erosional forces of wind, water, and sand have shaped the land. The soft shales, siltstones, and slabs of sandstone formed into pinnacles, spires, and buttes unique to Monument Valley. Iron oxide colored the rocks with hues of red, and manganese oxide painted black streaks called desert varnish on precipitous walls. The distinctive formations create a kinetic atmosphere where monoliths point to a turquoise sky, mesas drip with desert varnish, and emerald cottonwoods gather around rare springs bubbling up in the folds of canyons.

Mystery Valley, located next door to Monument Valley and as intriguing as its name implies, has Indian ruins, distinctive arches, and pictographs. True to *Listening Woman's* supernatural side, some people say Mystery Valley has ghosts.

Canyon de Chelly

Situated almost in the center of the Navajo Nation, Canyon de Chelly has been called "the other Grand Canyon." Desert varnish drips down perpendicular canyon walls that brace traditional Navajo homesteads, galleries of cottonwoods, and argentine flickers of water. The redrock walls of the 26-mile long branched canyon rise up to 1,000 feet.



West Mitten Butte,
Monument Valley

DETRICH PHOTOGRAPHY

The ending scene of Hillerman's 12th novel, *The Fallen Man*, occurs in Canyon del Muerto, one of the canyon's arms. The book's title refers to a man who fell on Ship Rock, just outside of the town of Shiprock. Navajo mythology says Monster Slayer climbed the Rock with Wings (a.k.a. Ship Rock) to kill the Winged Monster and couldn't, like *The Fallen Man*, get down. Spider Woman, of Canyon de Chelly fame, heard his screams and rescued him. The Fallen Man, alas, never made it off the rock alive, and became the fodder for Hillerman's 1996 novel.

Tradition flourishes confidently amid the flow of tourists at Canyon de Chelly. There are no telephone or electrical lines in the canyon; sheep tending and farming remain the resident Indians' principal means of support; and Spider Woman still resides on the canyon's trademark spindly monolith, Spider Rock.

Teec Nos Pos

Up in the Four Corners, practically only a footstep away from the state line, Teec Nos Pos gets moments of infamy in several of Hillerman's novels. The only nuance of civilization for miles, the tiny town lies just north of the isolated Carrizo Mountains, where scenes from *The Fallen Man* take place. From Teec Nos Pos, a tangle of backroads leads to beautiful Red Rock (whose current vice president is Albert Nez), where Jim Chee planned to meet Coyote Waits character, Delbert Nez. On the other side of Red Rock Valley, in Cove, someone hid *Wailing Wind* character

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Hillerman Country Travel Tips

The Navajo Nation observes daylight savings time.

Alcohol is not permitted on the Nation.

Among Navajos, eye contact is considered impolite.

Hiking is not allowed without permission or permit.

Unpaved roads may not be traveled without permission or a permit.

Cameras are not allowed on the Hopi mesas.

Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon National Park has six lodges (Xanterra Resorts & Lodges, 888-297-2757). As long as travelers don't have their heart set on staying at El Tovar (celebrating its 100th year and recently renovated) or a cabin at the Bright Angel Lodge (the quintessential park experience), they can land a room on the Rim. While summertime has the highest visitation to the park, travelers can expect a pleasant experience if they follow these few tips:

- Be **flexible** with dates and avoid multiple-night stays.
- Try to **plan** 30 days ahead.
- Every lodge has sudden **cancellations** and/or a few unreserved rooms. The chances of getting a room early in the morning on the day of the intended stay are good.
- Park at the lodge and **take the shuttle**, an efficient alternative to hunting for parking spots.
- Eat breakfast at the El Tovar **after 9 a.m.**; eat lunch at the Arizona Room **before noon** and dinner **before 6 p.m.**
- Everything becomes available during the **winter** season, November 1 through March 1, excluding Christmas week.

Tuba City

For one of the best Navajo tacos in the state, go where the locals do at the **Tuba City Truck Stop Café** along U.S. 180.

Canyon de Chelly

Historic Thunderbird Lodge, located in the monument, has a cultural ambience. Its restaurant, located in an old trading post, serves reasonably priced, good food. The Lodge offers half- or whole-day tours of the canyon that give an in-depth look at *The Fallen Man's* scenery. 800-679-2473

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- Boat trips to Rainbow Bridge depart from **Wahweap Marina** at the Lake Powell Lodge. 928-645-2433
- From mid-April through September, the **Page Chamber of Commerce** offers *An Evening With The Navajo*. Learn about Navajo customs and traditions at this several-hour live presentation. 928-645-2741

Monument Valley

- A **self-guided**, 17-mile car-friendly unpaved road strings together 11 scenic stops in the park.
- Guided tours for **Mystery Valley** can be reserved at the parking area in Monument Valley.

Rainbow Plateau

For a look at the plateau's forbidding, yet alluring, landscape, **Navajo Highway 16**, located 52 miles from Page off Arizona 98, travels 25 paved miles into the isolated countryside toward Navajo Mountain.

San Francisco Peaks

For information on trails into the San Francisco Peaks and Red Mountain contact the **Peaks Ranger District** at 928-526-0866.

Hillerman Country Tour

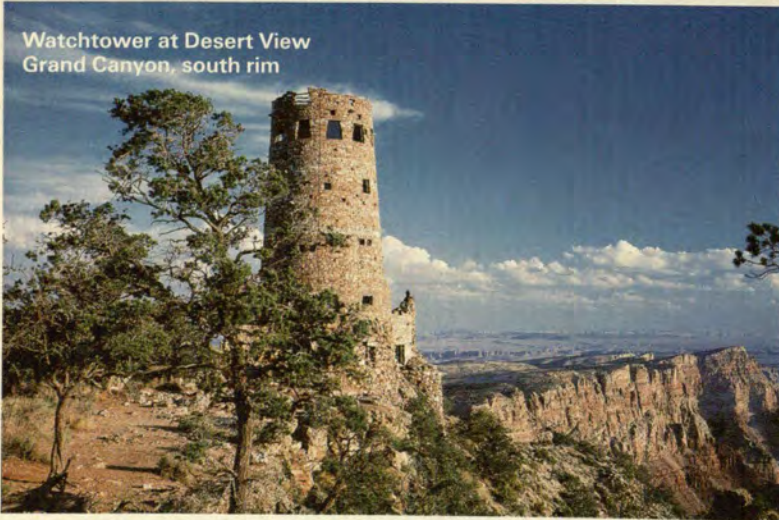
DETOURS offers a five-day Hillerman Country Tour and one-day tour to the Grand Canyon that includes a meeting with James Peshlakai. 480-633-9013 or 866-438-6877 www.detoursaz.com

Four Corners

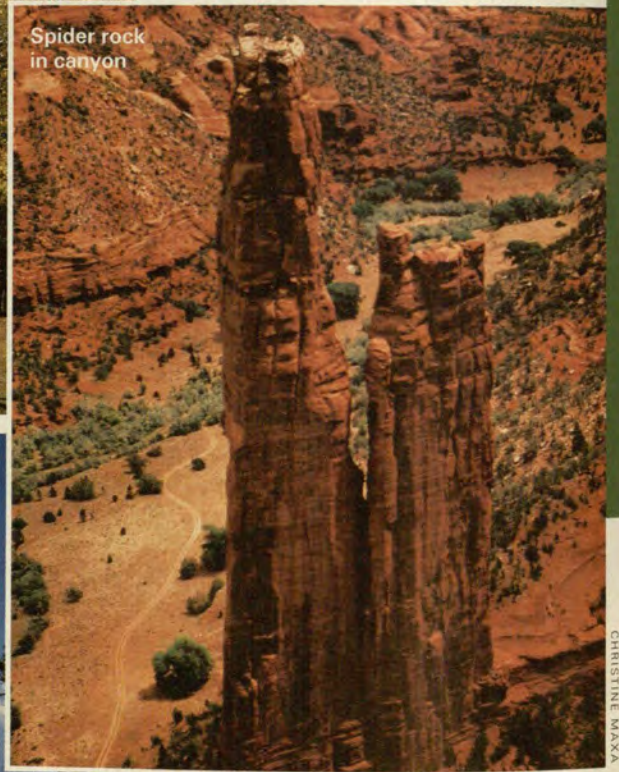
CROW CANYON ARCHAEOLOGICAL CENTER offers all-inclusive several-day-long archaeological tours in the Four Corners area and Rainbow Plateau. 970-565-8975 or 800-422-8975 www.crowcanyon.org



San Francisco Peaks,
Flagstaff, AZ



Watchtower at Desert View
Grand Canyon, south rim



Spider rock
in canyon

Thomas Doherty and his car in the “broken red rock country” at the base of the Lukachukai Mountains. Was it the old shaman, James Peshlakai?

Hillerman borrowed the name, James Peshlakai, from a Navajo shaman. Though Hillerman made Peshlakai a bad guy in *Wailing Wind* and *The First Eagle* (set around Tuba City in the Echo Cliffs and Moenkopi Plateau), he believes in the real Peshlakai, saying the Navajos need “a hundred people like him.” The real Peshlakai, whose name means “white metal”, is a silver-smith and a keeper of the Navajo traditions. He has an educational hogan near Cameron to teach traditional ways to Navajo children and offers private tours hosted by Detours.

Hopí Mesas

One morning on Second Mesa, Tony Hillerman mused the sunrise from the inside of his truck. He noticed an older Indian come out with an infant. The elder raised the child to the sun and chanted a prayer. Feeling the sacredness of the moment, Hillerman said he slunk down into the truck seat, further keeping out of sight.

Four of Hillerman’s novels bring his readers to the Hopi Mesas. Each of the three Hopi Mesas has their own personality:

First Mesa glories in its world-renown potters; Second Mesa reaches out to visitors with a hotel and cultural center; and Third Mesa honors its Hopi roots with Old Oraibi, known as the longest-inhabited city in North America. Nevertheless, tradition looms large on them all, and visitors may likely encounter dances and moments like Hillerman’s sunrise experience.

San Francisco Peaks

Hillerman’s current work-in-progress takes place around the San Francisco Peaks. Though the award-winning author will not reveal any more than alluding to the Peaks’ sacred nature in the eyes of the Navajo and Hopi, he does say he is “stuck on page 137.” While the Hillerman genius wrestles with writer’s block, visitors can volcano hop in the San Francisco Lava Field with a hike into the sacred San Francisco Peaks where the Hopi say kachinas dwell, a drive past lava flows in Sunset Crater National Monument, a visit to the ruins at Wupatki, and an exploration of blown-out Red Mountain.

After a visit to *The Glittering World*, Hillerman fans can follow Leaphorn and Chee’s footsteps with the insight of personal experience. ■

Christine Maxa is an award winning freelance writer who contributes to Arizona Highways as well as numerous publications nationwide.