

The hidden treasures of Navajo land

Written by Story and Photos by Marley Shebala Sun Correspondent
Friday, 22 May 2015 15:24



CHURCH ROCK – The month of May is when the U.S. including the Navajo Nation, celebrates travel and tourism.

The tribal Division of Economic Development Tourism Department held a Navajo Nation Tourism Appreciation Week from May 4-8.

The tourism appreciation week was kicked off with a “Hiking the Trail” event at the Red Rock State Park, which is about 19 miles east of Gallup, on May 8.

The trail was actually two hikes that both started at the Red Rock State Park in the morning.

The first one, which was estimated to be about three hours, ascended to a red sandstone monolith called Church Rock.

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The second hike, which was about two-hours, went up to the top of Pyramid Peak.

Geri BinettneeKirk, a senior tourism specialist with the tribal Division of Economic Development Tourism Department, said that the tourism appreciation week was also to promote all the scenic areas of the Navajo Reservation, which is about 27,000 square miles.

Tourism and Small Businesses

But since the reservation is so large, the tourism department decided to do this little kick off celebration, which included a tribal presidential proclamation that also thanked the visitors for spending their dollars on Navajo land, especially at the small businesses owned by Navajo people, BinettneeKirk explained.

Alvin Thompson, a volunteer for the tribal tourism department and City of Gallup, co-owns Thompson Station and Market with his older brother, Ivan Thompson. The station and market is a small Navajo business that is located at Church Rock.

Thompson said his family is always involved with whatever the Navajo Nation hosts at the Red Rock State Park.

The Thompson family also promotes small businesses and tourism, which includes cultural awareness and preservation, he added.

BinettneeKirk said that Navajo tourism businesses include scenic tours, jewelry making and a host of other goods and services.

“We’re trying to promote everyone,” she said.

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And she said since the appreciation week kickoff event is the first one, it will definitely get bigger.

The weather, which was cool and sunny with huge billowy white clouds in a deep blue sky, was perfect for the two hikes but there were only about 10 hikers.

Thompson started talking about the “hidden treasures” of the Church Rock area but then he stopped to thank the team of tourism “friends,” which included the tribal tourism department, the Red Rock State Park, Gallup Mayor Jackie McKinney and the tribal Special Diabetes Program for sponsoring the hikes and providing fruit, water, sandwiches and tee shirts.

Hidden Tourism Treasures

“Church Rock is a hidden treasure,” he said as he looked around at the huge red sandstone that created a colorful and majestic backdrop for the state park, which sat across the road from Church Rock.

Thompson, a lifetime resident of Church Rock, said that Navajo elders told him that during the Long Walk, which he called a “travesty,” that Navajo people were taken through the Church Rock area to a “holding camp” at Fort Wingate, which is about two miles east of Church Rock.

He pointed to the north and said that there’s a cave back there that’s called Kit Carson’s cave but the road was blocked off to the public.

According to The Bosque Redondo Memorial, about 10,500 Navajos of all ages were forced march by the U.S. Calvary more than 400 miles through dangerous river crossing and other hazardous situations from their homeland to southern New Mexico between the summer of 1863 and the winter of 1866. About 9,000 died before reaching Bosque Redondo.

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Gen. Carlton recruited Col. Kit Carson to help him starve the Navajo people in submission by “killing Navajos, burning crops and orchards, killing livestock, destroying villages, and contaminating water sources. This ‘scorched earth’ campaign of Carson’s ‘designed to starve the Navajo into submission’ would be aptly called by the Navajos ‘The Fearing Times.’”

Hiking Trails

Thompson said that to the west of the tall red sandstone monument called Church Rock is a peak that is called Pyramid Peak.

“This entire area was my playground,” he recalled with a huge smile.

He added that as part of his volunteer work with the tribal tourism department and Gallup, he showed BinettneeKirk the Church Rock Trail by hiking it with her.

“She was overwhelmed with the beauty (of the trail),” Thompson said. “I hoped more people would have come out. We have information about local plant life, sheep trails.”

Maybe people were scared away by the initial information on the brochure about the Hiking the Trail kickoff because it talked about watching out for the wildlife, he said.

Thompson noted, “There’s been no mauling (by wildlife).”

He said that the only cautionary message that he had for hikers was “be in shape. For first time hiker this trail is overwhelming.”

Thompson recommended that hikers wear loose clothing, carry water and bring binoculars and cameras because the trails are breathtaking. It’s worth your time.”

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The trails have small markers that are stacks of rocks, which the Gallup Youth Conservation Corp made several years ago, he said. But livestock have created so many trails that it's easy to get lost if you're not familiar with the area, which is why the hikes should not be started late in the evening.

Thompson said that the livestock trails are also breathtaking.

BinettneeKirk added that hiking is part of the tribal special diabetes program's mission of promoting the Navajo way of life, which always included wellness, eating healthy, walking, running and keeping your body agile.

Discover Navajo

The trails to Church Rock and Pyramid Peak are "hidden treasures" waiting to be discovered and the theme of the tribal tourism department is "Discover Navajo," she explained. "The Navajo Nation has so many attractions and so many are hidden."

She pointed to a large colorful mobile mural with four photos of spectacular red rock monoliths that stood next to the registration table for the hikes. The words "Discover Navajo," which was printed in large yellow lettering, neatly placed between the photos.

BinettneeKirk said that the photos were of Spider Rock, which is in Chinle's Canyon de Chelly Antelope Point, which is near Lake Powell, the Shiprock, which is near Shiprock, N.M., and Monument Valley, which is near Kayenta.

She said that the tribal tourism department has a website, discovernavajo.com, where information is available about Navajo land's points of interests, trails, scenic sites, including the National Scenic Byway N-12, which goes north into the Navajo Reservation off Interstate 40 at the Lupton, Ariz., turn off.

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From Lupton, N-12 takes you through several small Navajo communities, such as Oak Springs and St. Michaels, she said.

BinettneeKirk said that if you turn east at the intersection of N-12 Arizona highway 254 and drive about three miles, you'll be in Window Rock, the capitol of the Navajo Nation.

The discovernavajo.com website provides a walking tour of Window Rock.

BinettneeKirk said that if you turn west at the intersection, you will drive through Ganado and eventually reach Burnside, where you'll head north on 191 to Chinle and Canyon de Chelly.

She said that the tribal tourism department works with visitors' centers in Winslow, Holbrook, and Flagstaff and provides them visitors guides with road maps that include the N-12 and 191 scenic routes through the reservation.

Combating Stereotypes

BinettneeKirk said she understands that some visitors may have negative stereotypes of Navajos and Native Americans but that's what they are, stereotypes.

"I wish they would come and see the heart of the Navajo Nation," she said. "That's where the hidden treasures are. That's where all our traditional stories are. We have storytelling. We also talk about the significance of our culture and how we appreciate our land, our air, our water, our environment, and how beautiful it is.

"There's just so much to talk about," BinettneeKirk said. "I wish people would really see how we live, how we are as Navajos, Dine' people."

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She recalled, “For me, I took pride as a child growing up as a Navajo on Navajo land. Navajo was my first language and it’s so beautiful. If you take the time to be around the Navajo people, you will find that they are very friendly.”

BinettneeKirk said that Navajo vendors at the outdoor market places across the reservation, including Window Rock and the Four Corners, are kind and sociable.

She that the tribal visitor centers collect comments from the reservation’s visitors, who come from across Europe, and many of them have stated that the Navajo people’s homeland is the “most beautiful land in the world.”

The Navajo Nation Tourism Appreciation Week included tours of the Navajo Nation Museum and Library, tribal zoo, and tribal Veterans’ Memorial Park, which are all located in Window Rock, Canyon de Chelly, an art show at the Navajo Nation Twin Arrows Casino and Resort, which is near Flagstaff, dinosaur tracks in Leupp, Elephant Feet in Monument Valley, and a special tourism event with the Hopi Tribe.

There are three tribal tourism specialists, including BinettneeKirk. Rose Morgan oversees the northern portion of the reservation. And Mike Etcitty takes care of the western portion.