

Boys out West

By Tibor Vari

Friday 5/9/03

Its 5:15 AM and it's the start of another T-Tours. After months of planning, countless hours on the Internet researching locations, meetings, putting everything into a ½" think trip guide, the day has finally arrived! A quick shower and one last nervous inspection of the gear before piling everything into the car. Poor Barb is awake to drive me over to Fred Helft's house where we will meet up with Jeff Norton and a limo.

By 7:00 AM we are at Newark and run into Dave Mills while checking in. The team is complete and off we go to security. Dave is momentarily stopped because of his ball head (in hindsight, the size of the Studio ball head is definitely a potential weapon), but they let him through. Dave is on a different type of Jihad then what security is looking for.

So far everything is going like clockwork and we land in Phoenix on time (relatively on time since the airline changed the original departure time by two hours after we had booked the flight). Then the first cog in the well oiled machine. We get the 4wd truck and the roof rack will not support the luggage bag I bought along to store some of the stuff on top. So we pack the gear inside the truck (adapt, improvise, overcome), everyone hops in and we are ready to roll when I realize I can't see out the back! Some head scratching later we agree that we can't easily get to our gear when shooting. A quick call, no big trucks available so we rent a mid-size car (so much for cost savings on the car). We re-allocate the luggage and equipment and finally set off using two vehicles!

First stop is Sedona, which has some great red rock photography opportunities. We make a number of stops to shoot landscapes with some impressive dark clouds in the sky. Some annoyance with what look to be million dollar plus white mansions creating white dots in one of the scenes. No problem for Dave as he blazes away, since the clone tool in Photoshop will make them disappear. With some anxious stress chasing the light. We find the classic Sedona Oak Creek cascades with Courthouse Rocks in the background. Because of the later departure time and delays at the airport. Racing north to catch sunset at the Grand Canyon is no longer feasible so we take a leisure ride up to Tusayan and the Roadway Inn Red Feather hotel.

Saturday 5/10/03

Saturday the team is up and we are at the South Rim at around 4:45 AM and it is very cold at around 25 degrees and windy. It is moments like this that you are happy you have a Gore-Tex shell! We notice a young women in shorts and t-shirt who seems oblivious to the cold. Sadly, she does not want to take a group shot of us all dressed for cold weather and her in summer dress. We shoot at Mather Point as well as Yavapai Point. We spend a little time at the Grand Canyon Village to buy some souvenirs before heading back to the hotel for breakfast and checkout. Next, we head out along route 64 towards Monument Valley while stopping along pullouts at Grandview Point, Moran Point, and Desert View. We are also scouting these locations since we will be back this way at the end of the trip (or so we think). Everything shot using Velvia, polarizer, and enhancing filter.

We arrive at Monument Valley, check into the Hampton Inn in Kayenta before actually going to the valley. Dave is now in his element since he has been here before and shows us the classic bent tree with the buttes framed within the arching trunk. We take turns blowing through a lot of film as the light is great. A little further down the road we find some sand ripples which make for some great patterns leading up to the buttes. At this point the light is fading so we head back to the parking lot to shoot another classic scene while jostling with a very large photography tour for position. A very long Saturday comes to a close and we break for dinner and prepare for the big Sunday shoot.

Sunday 5/11/03

The Navajo do not observe daylight savings time so there is always some confusion about what time it really is. We get up 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. Well, no guide, so we start falling asleep in the car when Tom arrives a little after 5:00 AM. We all perk up because we are going 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 we 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. In fact, Dave and I yell at her to stop as she was about to step on the dunes directly in front of where both our cameras were aiming. This is one of the reasons T-Tours requests no fire arms on trips. I get a shot of Dave taking a picture and it's so neat that we switch places and he gets mine. Everything is shot using Velvia film, polarizer and enhancing filter.



Tibor at the Totem Poles – Monument Valley



Ear of the Wind – Monument Valley

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 we again blaze away with film. Tom also has us walk around and we get some additional compositions that I had not seen from photographs that I have seen of this place. We use Velvia, Enhancing filters, and again the hand held light meter.

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. We return to find the nasty women and her group have departed (there was much rejoicing). The afternoon is spent driving to various locations, ruins, petroglyphs, and arches. Some work well and others are OK. 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 we get 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.

Monday 5/12/03

Since we got the shots we wanted on Sunday. We decide to go exploring some of the near by landmarks. First stop are some nice silhouette shots near Monument Valley followed by Stagecoach Butte. We then go exploring the Valley of the Gods where we get some really neat compositions with desert flowers and towering rock formations in the back. From here we go to Goosenecks State Park After this we drive over to Page AZ and find the Paria Ranger Station on Rt 89 (this is where you get the passes to Coyote buttes), before catching sunset at an overlook of Lake Powell.

Tuesday 5/13/03

Tuesday morning we head over to the Paria Ranger Station to join the lottery to secure 4 passes to Coyote Buttes for the next day. The place is swarming with a lot of foreigners and we sadly do not make the lottery cut.

With it being partly cloudy, we head over to Horse Shoe Bend just outside of Page. This is a massive curve carved by the Colorado River and worth seeing. After a short ½ mile hike we get there. If you slip here, you are definitely gone as it must be like a thousand foot drop. I do some serious thigh burning exercises getting near the edge, look into the camera, and try leaning backwards at the same time (my fear of heights is on full alert here!).

After this, we head over to Water Holes Canyon. Though not as famous as Antelope Canyon, I found some interesting write-ups about the photo opportunities. We hiked quite a ways in where it got very narrow and I am slithering through sideways. Eventually, I turn back because one of the water holes has a massive swarm of flies on it and there was no way I was going to walk over that! Too bad as I feel it had narrowed to a point where the photography was looking real good. We head back to Page for a relaxing evening shooting the sunset from an overlook after which we eat a nice Italian dinner.

Wednesday 5/14/03

Back to the Paria station for another go at the Coyote buttes lottery system. Again we strike out. What's worse is its still pretty cloudy, something I don't recall seeing before on all my trips out west. This eliminates the need to race back to Page and try for Upper Antelope Canyon. So we decide to take a 4wd trip to the Wahweap Wash Towers. Along the way we stop to take shots of a pond that has dried up but provides wonderful compositions in the cracks (think pattern shots for assigned subjects). Because the dirt track is not obvious has many intersections.. We are grateful to have a GPS unit along with some detailed topographic maps we had purchased at the Paria Ranger Station. After some more driving we get to the Wahweap Wash and drive in the dried out river about a mile to the Towers. These are an amazing set of white sand like formations with a rock topping off the top of each tower. Because of the clouds the lighting was flat but it was still an amazing place.



Wahweap Wash Towers



Are they really lost and arguing, or was this staged?

After the Wahweap Wash Towers we head over to Alstrom Point, which is on the north side of Lake Powell. This is a good 40 mile one way 4wd run. At times we were driving over nothing but rock so it was hard to see where to pick the trail up again. We finally get there and shoot Gun Site butte and drive to a nearby second location. This is an interesting place as you are looking down on Lake Powell from an incredible height. We head back before it gets too dark where we might lose the dirt track.

Thursday 5/15/03

Off we go to the Paria Station for our last crack at getting into Coyote Buttes. Things are looking good as there are only 4 groups with 11 people going for 10 positions. There was much rejoicing from the NJ team as we were selected the second team from the hat. We know what we'll be doing now on Friday!

The weather still pretty cloudy and we are debating where to go for the late morning when we decide to go to the Glen Canyon Dam Visitor Center. Dave is the first to go in and there is a lot of security, armed guards and an X-Ray machine. It's like a scene out of the movies where Dave takes like two minutes emptying out of every single vest pocket photography items. Even the security guards are getting a kick out of this. Of course, we all have fully loaded pockets and take quite some time to work through the machine. Fred is stopped last with a tiny pocketknife that he has to return to the car.

After this we take a “what the heck” decision and go to shoot Lower Antelope Canyon. Not quite as famous as its well know Upper Antelope Canyon cousin. This is the one though where 12 hikers were killed in 1996 during a flash flood. With it being partly cloudy, we are hoping the light will occasionally filter down and maybe we’ll get some good shots. As luck would have it, the light was great. Though bracketing was challenging, as the light would radically shift because of the clouds. We shoot this with a warming filter, Velvia film, and spot metering. Afterwards, we are all happy we made the decision to go.



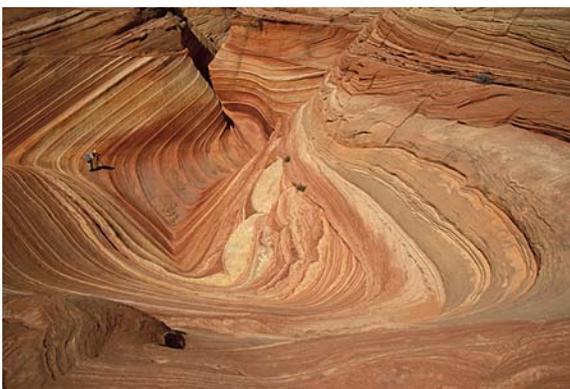
Lower Antelope Canyon



Tibor emerging from Lower Antelope Photo by Fred Helfst

Friday 5/16/03

The hike to Coyotte Buttes and The Wave starts at 5:15 AM after a 45 minute drive from Page. We strip down the weight because each of us has to carry in one gallon of water/Gatorade. This is a 3 mile hike over rough terrain, though fortunately, not much of an elevation gain. We constantly stop along the way to shoot some of the compositions. After a final killer hill with deep sand, we get to The Wave and begin the shooting fest. This is truly an amazing rock formation where you simply can’t aim your lens and take a bad picture. We are again using Velvia, Warming, and Enhancing filters as well as light meters just to be sure. Just before lunch we head back and have some missteps during the hike as there are no markers but the GPS generally guides us well. We saw one insane individual go past us with one water bottle, no GPS, and no companions. This is a really a good way to kill yourself in such an inhospitable place. Back at the hotel we all fall a sleep and the sunset shot is cancelled by overwhelming demand (I believe this was a first for T-Tours).



The Wave from above (note Dave at left)



Fred, Dave, Jeff shooting The Wave

Saturday 5/17/03

It's cloudy again in the morning so there goes our last chance to shoot Upper Antelope Canyon in the morning. Because we waited a bit too long to leave Page, we decide to head back to Phoenix via way of Sedona and pass on some late afternoon shooting at the Grand Canyon. Sedona is again an interesting spot as we find another angle to shoot the Oak Creek cascades with Courthouse Rocks in the background. We finally arrive into Phoenix late at around 10 PM in 95 degree weather. We find out that our hotel can take us in the morning to the airport so we drop both rental cars off and have the hotel shuttle bus pick us up. The trip is done and we relax at a hotel with a couple of beers.

Sunday 5/18/03

Up bright and early to get to the airport and the official end of another successful T-Tours. Results were 38 rolls of Velvia slides exposed, fortunately no broken filters, lenses, or cameras. In fact, the only casualties were sore muscles and one camera bag zipper.

A few weeks later the team gathered at my house to review our slides and we were all quite happy. The club will certainly see these for the upcoming competition year and undoubtedly be sick on Monument Valley, The Wave, Antelope Canyon, and other areas around Page by the time competition is over!