

Lake Powell Balloon Regatta

A small town event set against the grandeur of the Wild, Wild West

by Dee Thorell

photos by Dale Gleave and Dee Thorell

The Lake Powell Balloon Regatta is held annually on the first weekend in November. Page, Arizona is located in Northern Arizona about five hours north of Phoenix, five hours east of Las Vegas and six hours south of Salt Lake City. Page is adjacent to the Navajo Nation Indian Reservation and scenic Lake Powell, with its breathtaking sandstone cliffs. Page also boasts the Glen Canyon Dam, and is the gateway to many of our nation's national parks and monuments. God's Country!

About 50 pilots and balloons from across the southwest attend the event each year. Balloonmeister Brian Hill and his home town's business owners, along with the Lake Powell Tourism Bureau, and a host of dedicated

volunteers, all work tirelessly to ensure a good time will be enjoyed by all.

The flying in Page is spectacular. The mix of the red rock landscape, the blue water of Lake Powell and the green of the city parks and the nearby golf course brings a mix of color and environments that can only be described as spectacular.

Of particular interest is Antelope Canyon located a few miles east of the city. Antelope Canyon is an incredibly beautiful geological formation known as a slot canyon. Created over millions of years by wind and water, the forces of time have formed a cathedral of sandstone, where fluid waves, curls and arches join together to create a series of towering, narrow passages in a palette of warm colors.

Reaching Antelope





Mission Accomplished! Kent Barnes pilots his balloon Out of the Blue through Antelope Canyon, the most visited slot canyon in the American Southwest. Photo by Val Gleave.

Canyon by balloon is often a goal for the pilots attending the Lake Powell Balloon Regatta. In 2007, Don and Robyn Stockley had flown to the canyon, and were lucky enough to have a local photographer capture their balloon, Moonshine, while they experienced the adventure of a lifetime flying down in the depths of the canyon.

Always one for fun and laughs, Stockley conspired to stage his arrest after flying the canyon, which is located on the Navajo Indian Reservation land. Don was delivered back to the refueling area, apparently handcuffed by the local sheriff, in the back of their search and rescue police vehicle.

Historically, on Saturday evening of the Regatta, the town closes the main street and the event selects about 30 balloons to participate in a glow, while spectators stroll among the balloons and visit businesses and vendors along the street. While the spectators enjoy the festive atmosphere and party in the streets, a helicopter flies overhead and videos the choreographed blasts from burners, directed by Brian Hill to the pilots, via pre-assigned radios. As a grand finale, Brian and his pilots orchestrate a “wave” of balloons lighting all the way up and back down the street.

This year as we recounted past experiences, we

hoped that the winds would be with us, and that this would be the year we would get our slot canyon experience. More than anything, we wanted a picture of “Out of the Blue” in the canyon. We hope it would be an easy choice of whether to compete and go for the target or go for the canyon experience.

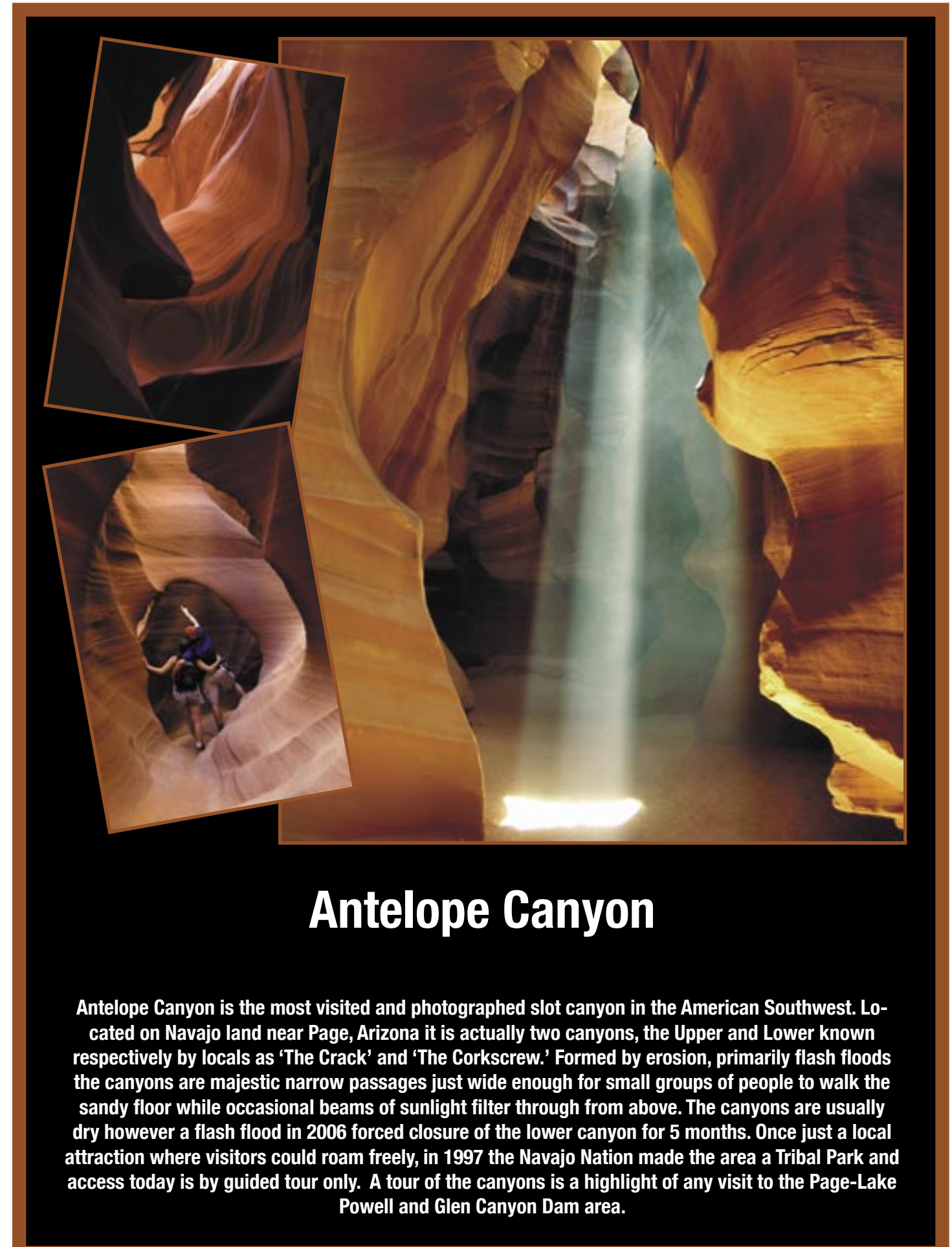
While the event pre-assigns launch sites at the town’s former golf course, the pilots have the option of choosing other launch sites around Page. On the first morning, Don and Kent decided to launch from the Page City Park. This site put them closer to the slot canyon than the golf course site. We were fortunate to have two Native American Navaho teens as volunteer crew on the flight that day. They excitedly accepted Kent’s invitation for a balloon ride. Since Antelope Canyon is on the Navaho reservation, it was good to have them on board. After providing the usual passenger instruction, Kent and Don were able to find the right set of conditions and were able to fly their balloons directly to the Antelope Canyon. Don’s passengers were Dale and Val Gleave, who were among the original organizers of the event in the 80’s. Val took awesome photos of “Out of the Blue” in the canyon from Stockley’s balloon, while Kent’s passenger Nicole, took picture of Moonshine from Kent’s balloon.

In the meantime, Robyn Stockley and I, out ahead in the chase vehicles, sat and watched as our balloons disappeared into the canyon. We were more than a little disappointed we weren’t in the baskets, but it didn’t take too much away from the

amazing moment.

The next morning, after much discussion about complicated technical computations, and adequate exchange of “hot air”, a group of Utah pilots, including Mark Prothro and Ray Kline, along with Kent and Don, decided to launch from the city park. Following their calculated flight plan, along with a few prayers and divine intervention, they all made it to the canyons, and they all took a dip.

What a spectacular experience the Balloon Regatta in Page, Arizona provided for all who participated and attended. The Regatta is a small town first class event. Good fortune and great piloting provided we made it into the slot canyon two times. When Brian invites us back again, we will definitely give it another try in November 2009!



Antelope Canyon

Antelope Canyon is the most visited and photographed slot canyon in the American Southwest. Located on Navajo land near Page, Arizona it is actually two canyons, the Upper and Lower known respectively by locals as ‘The Crack’ and ‘The Corkscrew.’ Formed by erosion, primarily flash floods the canyons are majestic narrow passages just wide enough for small groups of people to walk the sandy floor while occasional beams of sunlight filter through from above. The canyons are usually dry however a flash flood in 2006 forced closure of the lower canyon for 5 months. Once just a local attraction where visitors could roam freely, in 1997 the Navajo Nation made the area a Tribal Park and access today is by guided tour only. A tour of the canyons is a highlight of any visit to the Page-Lake Powell and Glen Canyon Dam area.