



# A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Our writer can't say how many times he's passed through Monument Valley on U.S. Route 163 – he lost count long ago. So, when we asked him to return yet again, he was determined to find another way. What he found was a single-engine Cessna. "We flew low and slow ... and we seemed to hang in the air above these monuments, giant stone faces turning below us like ornaments on a mobile." **AN ESSAY BY CRAIG CHILDS**

From the air, the scale of Monument Valley's famous rock formations and expanses of red sand becomes apparent.  
*Adriel Heisey*

A veil of rain fell across the desert, barely touching ground, leaving only a scatter of tiny craters in red sand. The term is “virga.” It means rain that hardly connects with the earth, a sweep of water through the sky, desert too dry to let much of anything land. The droplets return to vapor and back to cloud. From far away, it looks like a mile-wide waterfall that dissolves before meeting its destination, a bucket poured out of the sky, gunmetal-gray streaks almost to the earth.

We knew it would be here, a green point on the map advancing in first light, best time to be flying. The pilot checked weather predawn, and rain over Monument Valley was 20 percent throughout the day, patchy with big open spaces between clouds. We had a small plane, a World War II-era tail-dragger Cessna, a single-engine easily swayed by downdrafts and ups. Just getting into the air sometimes felt like a miracle. The benefit was that we flew low and slow. Several thousand feet above us, a German couple at the Goulding’s strip would blaze through at 250 miles per hour in a twin-engine, 300-horsepower plane, Los Angeles to Monument Valley in two hours. We were closer to 80 miles per hour, with 100 horsepower, and we seemed to hang in the air above these monuments, giant stone faces turning below us like ornaments on a mobile.

The virga was a dancer weaving over Monument Valley, slipping behind lonely stone buttes, peeking out the other side. When we flew into it, drops speckled the windscreen and streaked off like little comets.

Six-thirty in the morning, we’d left an asphalt runway near Halls Crossing, upper Lake Powell. The plane lofted easily on the coolness from night, instruments showing a gradual rise. We’d camped near the tie-down ramp at the runway, coming in to take cold water and air conditioning from the man tending the runway. The green on the iPad map was minor, something you could fly straight through, and we headed for it.

As we entered, we could feel the drop, the sky pushing down like a hand as we passed through light, atmospheric rain. We wore headphones, and wind through open window vents scratched our microphones. We didn’t say much to each other. Mostly, we watched over the windscreen as we tipped gently through virga and Monument Valley passed around us. We were a slow and aimless fly in a hall of gods. Slabs of orange and chocolate rock stood several hundred feet tall. Some of the buttes were completely alone. Some gathered, as if conversing, or followed each other like Navajo yeibichai dancers onto a plaza.

The pilot and I are old friends; we’ve spent wilderness time together. We’d come out and landed on dirt strips before, pulled packs from the tiny space behind the seat and trekked into the desert. His airplane, which he named *Rayna*, carried us from one old, rough prospecting strip to the next, landing on ruts and anthills. We’d look over her propeller to see where we were going, maps coming out, routes picked and then changed as winds and clouds shifted.

We’d felt the presence of Monument Valley 8 miles out. The air, which had been serene since our takeoff in Utah, began to bob and buckle. “It’s like a rapid where the water doesn’t know where to go,” the pilot said into my headset.

This disturbance came from air as laminar as paint moving into the blockades of Monument Valley. The standing monoliths were an obstacle, and the winds aloft bucked around them like a river hitting a boulder, putting us in the downwind chop 8 miles away. He took *Rayna* up and over, finding gentle air into the valley.

The Germans we met at the runway near Goulding’s Trading Post, which is tucked up in a rock formation at the edge of Monument Valley, seemed flabbergasted at the

amount of space, the ease of flight. They spoke of flying in Germany as almost criminal, skies busy with people and their machines. Out here, they found mostly wind and stone.

The pilot and I were out for a few days leapfrogging desert landscapes from Utah into Arizona and back, familiar country to us. We slept on the ground, fixed coffee in the morning on a camp stove and hopped to the next region. Monument Valley was our mecca, target of the lines he put on his map. From up here, we saw no borders. Sometimes we could see a highway or the probe of a dirt road. A Navajo homestead, cleared ground with hogans and houses. Mostly, we passed empty country, the blessing of the desert. Not just desert, not a blank slate, it is a voluptuous land of eroded stone and the geometric breakdown of rock fractures. It is a puzzle your eye can’t stop trying to solve.

Monument Valley is a valley only in the most clinical sense, and even that is suspect. There’s no river at the bottom. There is not bottom; it’s generally flat. If any water exists, it comes from the last rain, or from aquifers tapped deep underground. Ground cover is reduced to snakeweed; small bushels of rabbitbrush; and sometimes hard, bristling clumps of blackbrush. Mostly, it’s bare sand or rock. The monuments themselves feel as if they’re standing on their toes, like the Totem Pole, 450 feet tall depending on where you start, and 30 feet wide at the top; or flat-footed and stout, like Merrick Butte, nearly a thousand feet tall, with a footprint of about 15 acres.

The virga let us out into the southeastern quarter of Monument Valley. Few roads passed below us, mostly puzzle pieces of sandstone, buttes, inner parklands, chambers of hearts, shadowy seams.

“There’s a really cool alcove over here,” the pilot said, and I lifted against the seat restraints to see out his window. Which really cool alcove? The rock looked as if it had been eaten by enormous urchins, leaving alcoves and shadowy, shell-shaped impressions.

He kept pointing down, but it was just out of my view. “It’s a really unusual shape,” he said. “Water comes over the



Monument Valley’s West Mitten Butte punctuates a view of a “virga” rainstorm to the north. *Mark Frank*

top and it’s twisted back.”

By “water comes over the top,” he did not mean water present, but a place where water runs when it rains hard enough. Rainfall moves sediment, a reason this place looks like it does. Layered by sheets of thick sedimentary rock, the ground is a single, rigid surface that goes on unbroken for miles, in some cases out of Arizona and on into Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. Monument Valley has been gently rising over millions of years, part of what is called the Monument Upwarp, a platform of elevated earth that lifts from here about 40 miles into Utah. Again, not so much a valley, this is an eroded platform being elevated and exhumed. It’s called a valley because there is no better name, other than what Navajos call it: *Tsé Bii’ Ndzisgaii*, meaning “streaks that go around in the rocks.”

The “streaks” seem to be horizontal layers of differential erosion: Shinarump, Moenkopi, de Chelly and Organ Rock formations. As observers, we’ve arrived at the last wink of this particular landscape, buttes shipwrecked alone in the desert, thin memories of mesas and canyons that used to be here.

I can’t say how many times I’ve driven U.S. Route 163 through Monument Valley, a lifetime commute connecting Arizona to states to the north. I was a kid in the passenger seat of my mom’s Volkswagen Beetle streaming across these folded red lands, my face

in the window motoring past bolts of rock. I took jobs and lives on either end of this highway, must have worn a small groove in the air going back and forth. Driving from the north, U.S. 163 lays straight like an arrow, and for a moment, you are in a Ursula Le Guin novel, approaching a community of towers on a desert plain. I’ve pulled over to watch the full moon come up dry and clear like a bell between towers, and have taken naps in the canyon shade below the road cut, stopping halfway between someplace and someplace else to shut my eyes for a bit.

I turned in at the Monument Valley visitors center only once. For buying hand-crafted silver jewelry inlaid with turquoise, the place was great. Conversations among Navajo vendors are wide-ranging, other languages, German, French, mixing around the edges. For seeing the breadth of Monument Valley, the scale and dimension of its geography, not so much. The maps were helpful, the picture windows gorgeous, the flags of Arizona, the United States and the Navajo Nation intriguing, but I really wanted to know what was out there. Tours leave daily in vans and open-aired truck beds, but roads are few, and wandering away on foot is frowned upon.

It is Navajoland. You travel with permission. I’d gone into some of the surrounding mesas and far mountain ranges, but never into Monument Valley backcountry. The circus at the visitors center warns me off. People end up seeing a lot of this country out a window. The view is spectacular, well worth it, a showstopper geology museum any direction you look. From the highway, you see only the wallpaper, though. Behind the walls, canyons and uplifts keep going. The country is full of half-crumbled, solitary towers, whale backs and elephant heads, boulders balanced upon slender pedestals.

Flying over Monument Valley, I could hardly say anything intelligent over the headset, any more than “Look at that” or “Oh, my God” or “It just keeps going.” Rock domes were interrupted by miles of shaped red sand.

“Parallax” is a word I wrote down on the top of a journal page on my knee crammed into *Rayna*’s cockpit. It’s the way objects standing apart appear to shift in relation to each other. Highway parallax is pretty simple, John Wayne backdrops passed across each other mile by mile, the near buttes hurrying along while the farthest drift over the horizon like sea turtles. From a plane flying a figure eight across the sky, touching through virga and going on, the monuments shifted in three-dimensional space. I could see how tall they were and how widely spaced, rooks and queens caught midgame.

Out past the roads and small clusters of Navajo communities, stone and parallax took over. There was nothing else human for scale. No tour vans, no hogans, no slight tracks of a road. Monument Valley enveloped itself, as wild and contoured as the convolutions of the brain. Our course brought us back near the virga curtain, where I could see the parallax of stone and water falling from the sky, raindrops that would scarcely touch the desert below. [OH](#)