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Mountains of Peace

Amangiri offers the ultimate in silence,
stillness and untouched beauty.

by Tara Loader Wilkinson



Left: Amangiri, USA - Mesa Breezeway.
Right: Excursions through the iconic Antelope Canyon Slot Canyon.

In the old Navajo or Diné tradition, they would not say goodbye but “Aada’aholya, t’áá yínáálgó”, which translates approximately as “take care of yourself, for your children and your community”.

It is only after leaving the silence and serenity of the world-renowned Amangiri, in the foothills of a 165-million-year-old sandstone escarpment, do you begin to understand the meaning of the phrase and the reason why the ‘Aman junkies’ regularly return here for their desert fix.



“The scale and silence can be overwhelming at first, especially for guests hailing from intense cities like New York or Los Angeles,” agrees General Manager Kerry Hing. “But the desert is conducive to cutting the outside noise, so people can reflect on their internal voice.”

There is a roughness to the desert that strips everything back to the essentials: a healing process. But it’s a commitment. Whichever way you cut it, getting to Amangiri, on 900 acres in Canyon Point, Southern Utah, overlooking the majestic Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, takes a lengthy journey, (from New York it was a five-hour flight, a layover at Phoenix, Arizona, then another hop to the petite Page airport, before a half-hour drive across Arizona into Utah).

It’s a scenic journey, characterised by vast rugged rocks, red sand dunes, red stone, as far as the eye can see. Barely a whisper of wind, scarcely a tree or plant and not a cloud in the shockingly blue contrast of the cornflower skies. There is a sense of spiritual energy in this resort, which is only a stone’s throw from the ancient Navajo Nation (some 40 per cent of the 200-250 staff here are Navajo).

The ancient Colorado Plateau encircling us may look static, but it is still moving imperceptibly up, nudged ever skywards by plate tectonics which began six million years ago, according to geologist, photographer and author Gary Ladd who comes to talk to guests one evening. “As plateaus go, it’s a young one,” he explains, before describing how the dry dusty horizons were once seabed. We all agree, it puts our problems in perspective.

On our hike into the valley the following morning, we are astonished to discover an encrustation of barnacles clinging to a car-sized lump of hard ‘caprock’ that has been eroded from the soft sandstone. We can’t quite believe we are looking at evidence of sea creatures from millions of years ago, out here on the dry desert plains.

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— General Manager
Kerry Hing.

Indeed, the surreal landscape is more akin to Mars than any terrestrial place; drive a few hours north and you’ll come to the Mars Desert Research Station, considered the closest earthly analogue habitat to the Red Planet. Meanwhile, close-by Lake Powell formed a filming site for Star Wars spin-off, *The Mandalorian*, and the incredible slot canyons that meander their way through the plateau, formed inspiration for its set design.

It took quite some vision to decide to make this the home of one of the sought-after and desirable hotels in the world. Back in the late 1990s, Christoph Henkel, a London-based German billionaire, co-founder of Canyon Equity, and Bernt Kuhlmann, Austrian travel industry developer, set about looking for the perfect spot.

During a helicopter search they fell in love with a protruding rock that would later come to form the W-shaped escarpment that frames one of the world’s most Instagrammed swimming pools, with celebrity guests including Kim and Kourtney Kardashian, Miley Cyrus, Brad Pitt, Justin and Hailey Bieber, Lady Gaga and Gwyneth Paltrow.

It was a rock, clearly, with more than meets the eye, as it took years to buy the land, which involved a land swap with the US Bureau of Land Management that had to be approved by the US Congress. To create the famous hotel, they commissioned Marwan Al-Sayed, Wendell Burnette and Rick Joy, who completed the



Top: Rock climbing around Amangiri on the Via Ferrata.
Below: Amangiri's Camp Sarika Pavilion Plunge Pool.



resort in 2009 with 34 suites that today come with a nightly rate of US\$4,000-US\$10,000, with everything included. In 2020, it expanded again, adding Camp Sarika, 10 tented pavilions a 15-minute walk east, that can accommodate 30 guests. Within the growing Aman Group of some 35 properties, Amangiri is frequently singled out as one of the most 'bucket-list' of them all.

"You might think it is the middle of nowhere, but actually it is in the middle of everything," says Hing, referring to the ancient and colourful history of the nearby sacred lands we learn about nightly when members of the Navajo come to impart some wisdom or skills to guests; one night is a workshop on dreamcatcher making, another night has us learning about how to weave traditional rugs and the symbolism therein.

The palatial 25,000 square foot Amangiri spa is a destination in its own right with a tranquil floating therapy pavilion, cold plunge, sauna and steam room and a burning log fire.



Top: Amangiri, The Chinle Site. Bottom: Camp Sarika restaurant outside patio.

Described as a hotel with a hard exterior and a soft centre, the quiet grey minimalist walls are punctuated with vivid flashes of bright yellow Aspen trees. To our surprise we find the inner courtyards planted with orchards of juicy mahogany-coloured plums and crunchy red apples, some of which we discover sliced up and plated, welcoming us into our room on arrival.

When we return to the room after dinner there is a small offering on the bed — a dreamcatcher, a small perfume or bundle of sage — with a warm note. The smallest suite measures a generous 1,000 square foot, the largest a palatial 3,700, the décor kept calm and quiet with a stunning view out onto the plain.

The palatial 25,000 square foot Amangiri spa is a destination in its own right with a tranquil floating therapy pavilion, cold plunge, sauna and steam room and a burning log fire. Before our massages we are “smudged” with burning sage, the practice of the Navajo where the smoke is used to cleanse and purify a space or person, believed to dispel negative energy and restore balance and harmony; it’s considered a sacred ritual.



For town mice like us, the greatest luxury of all is the silent mountain hikes. Each morning, we set our alarm to start our walk in the shadows of the enormous cold mountain, enjoying the countdown until the luminous sunrise hits our face. We never see a soul, nor do we hear a whisper of wind — nothing moves among the strong scrubby plants along the path, such as Indian rice, narrow leaf yucca, Mormon tea, cliffrose, and plenty of cute prickly pear cacti. We occasionally see a raven or three, which we later discover are considered messengers by the Navajo, thought to help clarify visions.

The rocks provide constant wonder. Sculpted by millions years of water and wind, the soft sandstone has taken on a look of fluidity: some stones appearing like waves; others like rippling pools; some the colour and texture of toasted meringue; others grey and pocked like a brain; some a vivid polished pale jade; a chocolatey layered tiramisu; soft, veined pink, fragments of pastel Funfetti; or the dark red marbling of a gigantic sliced jamon.

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German-born artist Ulrike Arnold captures this whole spectrum in her Broken Arrow Cave paintings, where she mixes stone dust with a rough-hewn pestle and mortar, with meteorite dust, and turns the landscape into a canvas, all carried out in a cave on the Amangiri resort. Many of these paintings are on the walls of the hotel, as well as in galleries and museums around the world.

After a day of discoveries, an extensive library awaits in the cosy, firelit sitting room, comprising fact, fiction and photography. Each afternoon an offering of Navajo tea and pastries is available — guests intermingle, discussing the day’s hikes and observations.

Amangiri translates as “peaceful mountain” in Sanskrit, which suits it perfectly. For those who can afford it, it is the ultimate luxury of self-care to spend time in unadulterated silence and untouched beauty, returning to loved ones with a clear head and a renewed sense of perspective and priorities. ◇



From Left: Camp Sarika two-bedroom Pavilion.
Lake Powell excursion. Horseshoe Bend.