

NATURAL WONDERS

Stand amid an ocean of striped sandstone in Arizona

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PARIA CANYON, ARIZ. — Special to The Globe and Mail

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I was smitten the moment I saw a photograph of the striated rocks of the Wave. Imagine sandstone rocks as smooth as marble in layers of butterscotch, cream, beige and burnt orange. This is what hikers find at Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs, 18 kilometres west of Page, Ariz., on the border of Utah. The area was nicknamed by photographers because of its swirling carved canyons which rise up like domes and recede like waves. Its real name is Coyote Buttes and the area is one of the most photographed in the West. It's also considered one of America's crown jewel hiking spots.

The Wave is little known, because if you look on most maps of Arizona you won't find it. Once you learn about the 11-kilometre, out-and-back canyon (or see the photographs) you'll want to experience it yourself.

The trailhead is in North Coyote Buttes midway between Page and Kanab, Utah. But first you'll need a permit, and they are as hard to come by as hot concert tickets.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management protects the fragile area by keeping a tight control on permits. It issues just 20 a day by lottery. If you're one of the lucky permit winners, you'll pretty much have the place to yourself. (April through October are in high demand but it's easier to land one in the winter months.)

I snagged a permit to leave one Friday in winter and planned to head out with the navigation map and detailed directions, but I was warned that without an experienced guide, it would be almost impossible to find. I'm glad I took the advice.

I hiked with my guide, Robert, through five kilometres of desert mountain terrain and a few steep hills of sand. There were no trees, no marked trail to follow, and only the occasional cairn to indicate the direction. After about 90 minutes, we arrived at the hidden rock slit known as the Secret Passage. It seemed to appear out of nowhere, and I'd never have found it on my own. We entered a sandstone

wash of rounded hills polished by wind and water as smooth as marble. Some formations looked like pillars or cones, others like giant cauliflower and broccoli heads.

The landscape was surreal – sandstone hills swirled with stripes the colour of cinnamon, nutmeg and milk chocolate, it felt like I was standing in a bowl of cake batter. The rainbow of colours ran ribbon-like around the rock formations like giant waves petrified in motion. No wonder it was called “The Wave.”

While my guide went off to take photos, I sat down on a rock, mesmerized by the million-year-old formations. The only sound was the whispering wind. I ran my hands along the rock face, so smooth to the touch. For a moment, I wanted to slide down like a kid. Instead, I sat there listening to the sound of my breath, completely centred.

IF YOU GO

What it is: The Wave is an area of surreal multicolored rock chutes cut into a sandstone mountain. The area is perfect for a day hike.

Where it is: Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs, 18 kilometres west of Page, Ariz.

How to get there: Fly to Phoenix or Denver and then change planes to fly directly to Page.

How to see it: The Wave is open all year but your chances of obtaining a permit to visit are much better November through March. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management runs two lotteries. You can apply online four months in advance for one of 10 permits issued a day. For trips with less advance planning, try for one of the next 10 permits by applying in person the day before your hike at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Visitor Center in nearby Kanab, Utah. *For permits:* blm.gov

Where to stay: Amangiri, a luxurious Aman resort in Canyon Point, Utah, is less than a half-hour from the trailhead. The resort will schedule a guided, full-day hiking excursion. The guide will attend the in-person lottery on your behalf but there is no guarantee (there are often more than 100 applicants vying for 10 permits). If you don't get in, the guide will take you to other stunning locations in the Vermilion Cliffs area, including Thousand Pockets, Hodge's Hideaway or the Middle Route of Buckskin Gulch. Rooms from \$1,100 (U.S.) a night. amanresorts.com