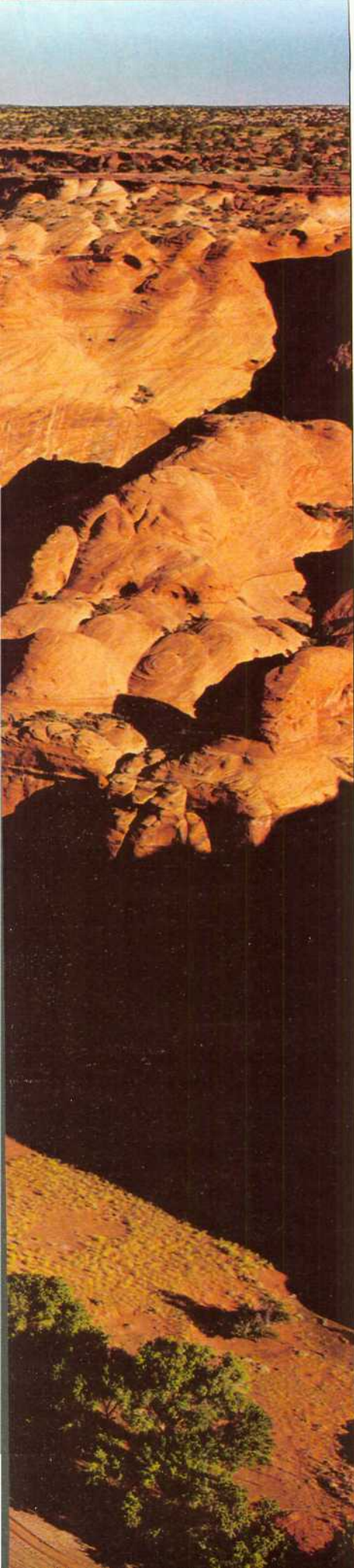




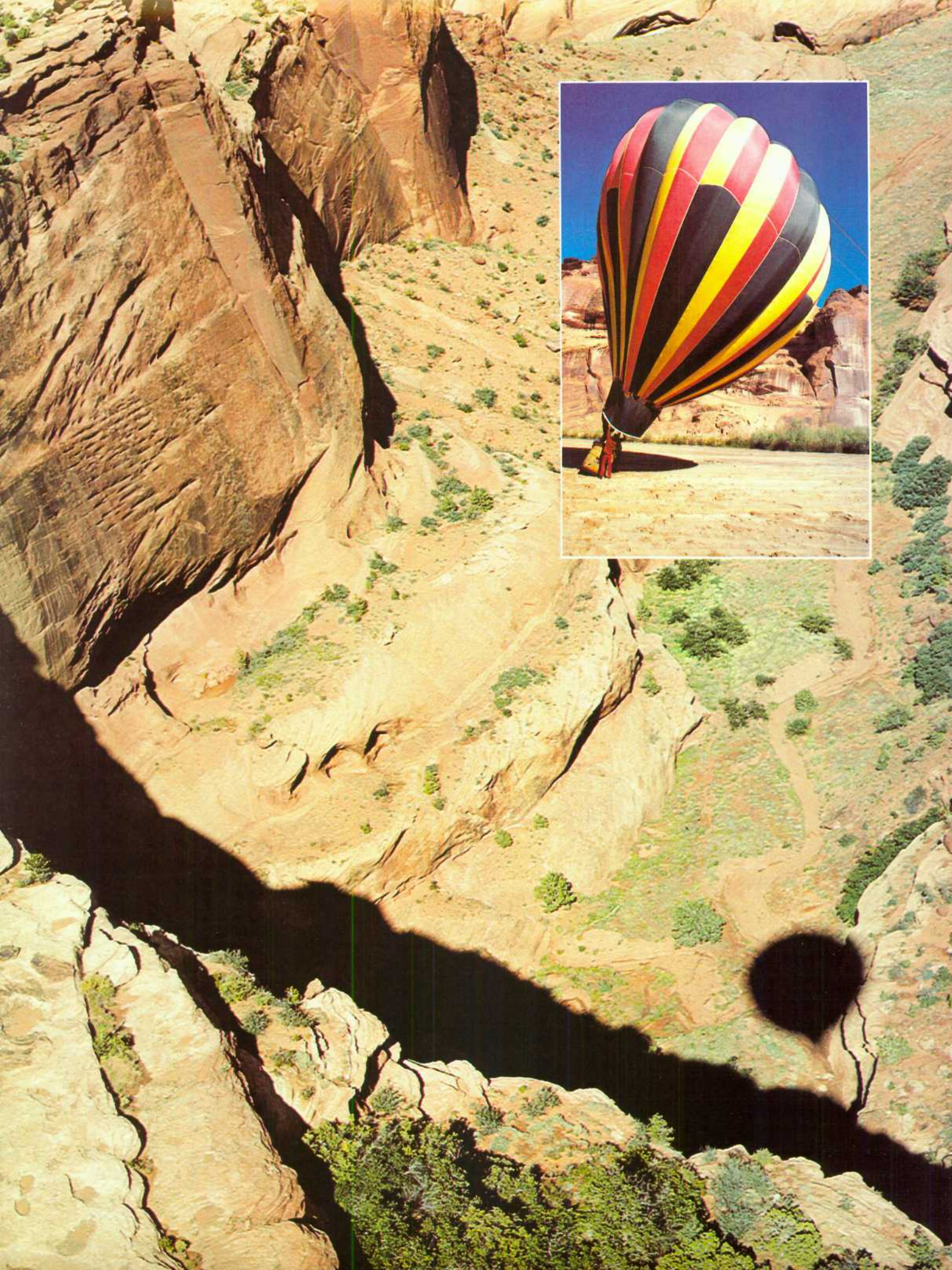
A silent flight through Canyon de Chelly,
a sandstone masterpiece of time.

Ballooning



Canyon de Chelly

Text by Virginia Greene
Photography by Alan Benoit



On Tuesday night, the cold front moved in, chasing summer's thrush from distant peaks, and coyotes graphed a song of mournful harmony beyond the canyon rim.

On Wednesday morning, light snow freckled the land as clouds thundered low and fast across the high plateau. Ice-decorated piñon and juniper and rows of cottonwoods, recently turned golden by capricious temperatures, stood leaf-heavy in the early-morning quiet.

Fall had come to Canyon de Chelly (d'Shay). With it was the silence of anticipation, of change. It was that silence that occurs when man watches and listens, then internalizes what he sees and hears. Gravel crunches underfoot and is loud to the senses. A jay settles on a branch of piñon, snow sifts to the ground and the blur is brilliant, even against a backdrop of pale skies.

We had arrived two days ago, fresh from the city, spirits high, ready for something new. The change had occurred as subtly and quietly as snow had fallen during the night. We could blame it on any number of things: the long drive, the different altitude, the experience of being among strangers on the Navajo Indian reservation. We recognized a hard reality, an elusive mystique which seems to permeate some places remote on the southwestern landscape.

Canyon de Chelly is such a place. It moves in a cycle of seasons. Its ponderous silences and immutable tranquility contain both the peace and the violence found in such cycles.

We had been here before, to this great slash deep in the earth of the Defiance Mesa in eastern Arizona, had toured the canyon, and read its history. A few months earlier, Roland LaFont, dispenser of western hospitality at Justin's historical Thunderbird Lodge and Trading Post in Chinle, had casually suggested a hot-air balloon ride through the canyon sometime. It was October and we had returned to accept the offer—not as casually as it had been extended.

The balloon, an AX-7 Raven, became a dash of color against the gray morning as it was unpacked and stretched out near the canyon rim at Spider Rock Overlook, almost 22 miles from the mouth. Red, yellow and black folds of

Six stories of 20th-Century multicolored ingenuity was rapidly unfolding on a lip of earth overlooking one of North America's oldest sites of continuing civilization.

nylon lay across the dun-colored sandstone, awaiting the wind. The men talked quietly as they worked, quickly attaching lines, the propane burners, the brown wicker basket.

Rosetta LaFont spoke of her life in this place, of her grandparents' small farm on the canyon floor, and of events which punctuated 2,000 years of Indian history in Canyon de Chelly.

We walked to the rim, skirting cholla and prickly pear encircled by narrow rims of snow. Dried rabbitbrush left a dull residue on our boots.

It was 6 a.m. and the winds were calm—perfect for flying, Roland said. Behind us, the great balloon was taking embryonic shape. As we watched, 22,000-BTU dual propane burners, loaded with 40 gallons of fuel good for a little over three hours aloft, filled the *Shepherd* (our balloon) closer to its 77,500-cubic-foot capacity. Six stories of 20th-Century multicolored ingenuity was rapidly unfolding on a lip of earth overlooking one of North America's oldest sites of continuing civilization.

The comparison between the ancient and the modern was striking. It seemed fitting to experience the great canyon from *Shepherd's* swaying basket, for the silence of the canyon is perpetuated by the silence of balloon-flying. The sense of privacy inherent in this place demands not to be violated.

Fifteen minutes was enough time to

fill the balloon. Prevailing winds from the east caught us and we were moved into an inner world of dramatic history and archeological speculation, of modern peoples guided through their daily lives by shamans and ancient ritual, of art treasures and adobe walls of sandstone, masterpieces thousands of years old.

Canyon de Chelly may be thought of as a towering sandstone art gallery crammed with some of man's most precious masterpieces. Call it a Louvre of the high plateau. Call it a living museum of farmers and silver craftsmen living in the shadow of the Anasazi—the ancient ones—guarding the old ways and the old secrets. They carry on a culture in the small but overwhelmingly beautiful canyon where the legendary Spider Woman crouches high astride her red spire 800 feet above the canyon floor, and primroses grow in the fine sand of the riverbed.

The canyon itself is a work of art, with vermilion monoliths of wind-sculpted rock and sheer walls brushed with surrealistic streaks of desert patina. Painted in a burst of colors bellowing copper and gold, all the reds and the tender blaze of pinks ranging to orange; the titian landscape subtly changes with the shadows each day.

Carved by winds, eroded by ancient seas, polished by windblown sands, the canyon walls house gigantic caves which supported human life and an on-going culture before AD 200. The ruins, well preserved in the dry, desert-like climate, are there. Huge rock and adobe pueblos, dwarfed by the massive concave cliffs above and below them, bring both reality and mystique to the silence of the inner canyon. Pictographs and petroglyphs decorate the red walls with larger-than-life-sized figures, giving mute testimony to the complex lives of those ancient ones.

Below, on the canyon floor, modern Navajos tend their sheep, weave their rugs, pound their silver into shapes imitating the figures on the walls above them. During winter months, the canyon is deserted by its human inhabitants who move to the upper levels of the plateau where wood is plentiful, leaving the summer hogans and garden plots until the following

Cast on the canyon, far below, the balloon's shadow. Inset: The Shepherd being inflated on the canyon floor.



year. Once again the spirits of the past may claim their place.

Rosetta had talked about those ancient ancestors who had a genius for building straight walls without instruments, for hewing wood with nothing but a stone tool; for plastering walls of kivas with as many as six coats, finishing with turquoise; for weaving fine cloth of feather, fiber and fur with bone needles; for making pottery of simple beauty, shaping it with deft, brown hands. She spoke of beads and ornaments of shell and turquoise mosaic made with only the crudest of stone knives and drills.

Shepherd moved slowly past Spider Rock and Speaking Rock. About 1,000 feet below are several small Navajo structures; other ruins of prehistoric times are located across the canyon in alcoves and on ledges. On the horizon is the prominent peak of Black Rock, a volcanic plug serving as a surprising landmark on the flat plateau.

We swung west, past Sliding Rock Ruin, pointing silently to old hogans, an occasional horse, an occasional flap of huge wings catching the currents above. The silence was complete. Alan Benoit's camera made a smooth "click," and our few murmured words were hollow in the cold morning.

The sound of bells drew our attention to the canyon floor where deep shadows lay across the sands, stretched before the day's light which struggled through clouds thinning beyond the Chuska Mountains in the east.

"Sheep. Over there. See?"

They had moved out of shadow, a small white band of sheep and goats, clinging to an indiscernable path cut into the sheer wall of rock, and made their way slowly toward the rim. The herder's rattle—pebbles shaken in an old aluminum can—was a dry counterpoint against the flat tinkle of sheep bells.

Six miles down the canyon from our launch at Spider Rock, White House Ruin seemed to melt dramatically into a deep recess in the long, sloping wall of coral-hued sandstone; mute testimony of more than 1,000 souls who made their homes there 800 years ago. Alan photographed what had once been a self-

contained community, and we quietly reconstructed the daily lifestyle of those men and women of a few centuries ago. We spoke of the buildings hunched in the caves and under the overhangs and how those ancient folks tilled the small fields, grew their corn, beans, pumpkins and cotton along the narrow fringes of land hugging the cliff-bases next to the flood channel.

The canyon itself is a work of art, with vermilion monoliths of wind-sculpted rock and sheer walls brushed with surrealistic streaks of desert patina.

Roland reached a gloved hand and pulled a chain. A great "WHOOSH" roared above us as propane forced more hot air into the multicolored shrouds. Our balloon rose quickly past layer upon layer of rose-hued sandstone buffed and softened by frost and moisture, winds and blowing sand.

We topped the rim and drifted west, again in silence, moving toward Junction Overlook and Tsegi—a deep-carved summer paradise where the clans of Navajos who have used it for generations still come to plant corn, squash, melons and beans in the tiny rincons under the spell of a warm summer sun.

Junction Ruin, nine miles from our departure point at Spider Rock, marks the junction of Canyon del Muerto and Canyon de Chelly. Canyon del Muerto, an important tributary of Canyon de Chelly, houses famous Antelope House Ruins, Mummy Cave, Massacre Cave, and the dramatic Standing Cow Ruin.

We passed above Navajo Fortress and drifted almost a mile toward Tsegi, following the riverbed. Rosetta's grandparents have a hogan at Tsegi where water is brought in precarious ditches to huddled peach orchards and where women sit in the shade to weave blankets after the planting and weeding is done. Scrawny ponies ignore anything beyond their own cropping of coarse grasses, and small children listen for the

low growl of tour trucks making the once-daily trip up the canyon toward Spider Rock. The drivers, Navajos in broad-brimmed stetsons, can always be counted on to toss a few Tootsie Pop suckers as the trucks struggle through the deep sand of the riverbed.

The canyon had become more and more shallow as we moved west, the morning sun was full upon us, and we drifted toward the trading post a mile and a half away. Still, the silence prompted by the quiet of the balloon, by the canyon walls that alternately closed in to a few hundred feet, then widened to several hundred yards, remained taut. The whisper of moccasins in the sand is augmented by spirits of the ancient ones who haunt the north walls of sandstone.

We made a turn over the trading post at the mouth of Canyon de Chelly and began a drift north toward Many Farms, that small community some 10 miles north of Chinle. We would be picked up there.

The Defiance Plateau receded beneath us, the "WHOOSH" of the butane burners sent us higher and Canyon de Chelly was left to twist and flow in its centuries-old patterns. The whisper of moccasins, the smell of sun-warmed peaches, the brilliance of woven wool were once again in the shadow of undisturbed ages. 2

Virginia Greene, native Arizonan, adopted Californian, has spent much of her lifetime exploring the deserts, mountains, canyonlands and waterways of the Southwest. Three years ago, she marked the last of the English theme papers, turned in the final grade report and moved with her husband from Palm Springs to Pacific Grove, California, where she works as a novelist and free-lance writer.



Alan Benoit received his B.F.A. in Photography from Arizona State University. For the last seven years, he has made his home in Tempe, Arizona. His work has been published in Arizona Highways, Desert magazine and Rocky Mountain magazine, as well as other magazines and books.



Evidence of the past, Indian dwelling set in beneath the cliffs. Inset: Roland LaFont with the Sheepherder.