

ELAINE KIM, HUSBAND JOHN AND THEIR SONS KYAN AND LUKE ENJOYING THE SIGHTS AT ANTELOPE CANYON

Desert LUXURY

Last summer, ELAINE KIM travelled with her family to the canyonlands in Utah, home to the out-of-this-world Amangiri



SWIMMING AT AMANGIRI MEANS PADDLING BY THE EDGE OF A DRAMATIC STONE OUTCROP

AMANGIRI IS IN the middle of nowhere, quite literally. Wedged in the vicinity between Arizona and Utah, there's nothing around but empty desert, flat-topped canyon mountains and several small pockets of township. Yet many, myself included, would consider this far-flung resort a destination of a lifetime.

It is a four-hour scenic drive from Las Vegas but we chose to fly from Denver on a tiny turboprop plane into Page Municipal Airport, essentially an empty airstrip next to a tiny building with a few check-in counters and a sleepy shop with displays of Grand Canyon postcards and cheerful Native American souvenirs. There were no other planes. But oh, the view! Beyond the grey asphalt is a horizon of reddish-brown and sand-coloured rock under a cerulean sky scattered with wispy white clouds and no end to the landscape in sight.

In Aman's signature style of bringing sophisticated and incongruous five-star service to

exotic locales, a smartly suited chauffeur collected our bags and escorted us to an SUV. Enroute, we were greeted by more otherworldly desert geology — carved into their varying shapes by millions of years of erosion, rugged rock formations etched with horizontal lines stretched out before us.

We passed a sign announcing that we had crossed from Arizona into Utah, and turned into a winding road flanked by flat desert mesa. Undulating, wind-carved rock cliffs interspersed with towering rock formations stood like sentinels lining the way. Then Amangiri came into view — a cluster of sleek, geometric sandstone structures blending seamlessly into the landscape.

As we pulled up to the lobby, the sky darkened and a light desert rain abruptly started to fall. We hurried through the entrance hall into Amangiri's pavilion, an open-plan, light-filled great room where guests lounged on sofas by fireplaces, sat at tables to eat at all times of the day, or reclined in the library in the centre of the space. On one side, floor-to-ceiling glass windows offered a sweeping vantage of the desert and surrounding rock formations. Across the room, glass doors opened to a terrace overlooking one of the most stunning pools I'd seen, carved into the ground around a sandstone escarpment.

As welcoming as the pavilion was, we were

eager to see the suite. Escorted by umbrella-bearing attendants, we crossed the courtyard. A secluded terrace led to the minimalist building that housed our suite — a large refined space with white stone floors and smooth concrete walls, softened by furnishings in muted hues, with light accents like a Navajo-inspired rug and thoughtful touches such as a sun hat hanging on the wall or jars of fine chocolate on the coffee table. Past the glass doors, we came to a private outdoor lounge, with a fireplace that could be lit as one sat on the cushioned ledge to admire the endless mesa.

Sitting on this ledge was what we did after a soothing soak in the deep stone bathtub. We were looking out into the desert, when a jackrabbit wandered into view, lingered outside our room, then disappeared into the open land. It struck me right then that we were in the middle of a vast wilderness. And the next day I would get a chance to explore this foreign, natural, wild desert.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: AMANGIRI'S SUITES OPEN TO A PRIVATE OUTDOOR LOUNGE WHERE YOU CAN SIT BY A FIREPLACE AND ADMIRE THE ENDLESS MESA; LAKE POWELL IS A POPULAR RECREATION SPOT; THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE TAKING IN THE DESERT SIGHTS IN A CONVERTIBLE

There's plenty to explore, with endless hikes throughout Amangiri's 600-acre property. But venture into the surrounding National Park, and the adventures at your disposal are beyond imagination.

Some of the excursions available include climbing one of the majestic rock formations for a dramatic perspective of the valley, flying over Lake Powell, Navajo Mountain and the Vermillion Cliffs in a hot-air balloon launched from Amangiri, excavating dinosaur fossils at the Tippet Spring Bone Bed Quarry with a palaeontology guide, and horseback riding through the windswept desert.

With two kids under the age of six in tow, and myself seven months pregnant, climbing cliffs and trekking through a desert didn't seem too appealing, so we swapped hiking boots for a BMW convertible, a fleet of which Amangiri kept at guests' disposal.

The balmy weather was perfect for driving with the top down, our hair in the wind as we drove to Wahweap Marina to take in the gorgeous panorama of Lake Powell and stroll along the waterfront. Then we found ourselves at the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, within which was the famous Horseshoe Bend, a horseshoe-shaped cliff that curved over the rushing Colorado river. We tarried a little at the beginning of this 1.5-km hike that brought us to the top, at the same time wondering how prudent it might be to do so while pregnant. But I had seen pictures of this spectacular landmark and figured I was just too close by to skip it.

Later, as I sat at the top of the escarpment for that money shot of the towering cliff and the river below, with a mix of adrenaline rush



from the dizzying height, nervous exhilaration from knowing we were two steps from tumbling hundreds of feet to certain death and the thrill of adventure, I was glad I'd made the decision to go for it.

The other highlight of this trip was our tour of the Slot Canyons — rock formations arising from sandstone layers that had accumulated over millions of years to culminate in a spectrum of orange and gold, and carved and moulded by the

elements into curvaceous structures that let in slivers of light through slits in the caverns. Our guide Raymond, is a Navajo native whose family has lived for generations on the lands we were exploring, so who better to take us to see the three canyons (Antelope, Owl and Rattlesnake) that lay within the Navajo nation (the largest Native American nation in the US)? He had planned for us to arrive at Antelope just before the tour groups descended and while the light was ideal for photography. My children, husband and I clambered through the crevices into the iconic cavern we had seen in travel guides, where a sheath of light poured into the middle of towering, curved walls of red, amber and gold rock. We stood in awe, staring at the dust swirling in the beam and creating a flue of glittering specks dancing in the light.

Our time with Raymond gave us a wealth of insight into the culture and history of the Navajo community, and their lives in the modern world. Turned out that Raymond is also a

professional photographer whose images of these very canyons have graced magazines covers. He was as excited as I was upon discovering our shared passion for photography. During the drive, we discussed cameras and lenses and how best to capture the light. It was he who took the stunning photographs of us in the canyons.

Coming back dusty and breathless from a day of adventure, Amangiri is a welcoming haven. After the canyon tour, I retreated to the Spa, a 25,000-sq-ft sanctuary that offered a water pavilion with sauna, steam

rooms and soaking pools with desert views, and a yoga pavilion where you could meditate to the healing sounds of crystal singing bowls, or do yoga under the full moon. There was a flotation pool as well, where you could lie, weightless in the warm, dense Dead Sea water within the still darkness of the cavernous nook. My favourite part of the experience: In a stone-lined step pool surrounded by undulating rock formations of the empty desert, I sat, plunged in warm water, in tranquil privacy, at the centre of all this raw, beautiful nature.

Meanwhile my children and husband tumbled and splashed in the main swimming pool, paddling across to the dramatic stone outcrops the pool embraces. As dusk fell, the staff arrived to light

the outdoor fire in the cushioned lounge pit by the pool, and the pool glowed pale green, surrounded by candles flickering in glass hurricane lamps. We gathered for dinner at the poolside terrace, now transformed into an enchanting restaurant in one of the most unique environs in the world.

As we sat dining by the pool during sunset, we knew we were in a special place like no other, and how lucky we were to have experienced a magical moment like this. ■

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