

# NAVAJO CULTURE

## LOCATION

The Navajo (or Diné, as they call themselves) live in the Southwestern United States, especially in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. This area is very dry and desert-like. Some 260,000 people now live on the Navajo Nation Reservation, which is located on the four corners of these four states.

## HISTORY

The ancestors of the Navajo migrated across the Bering Strait during the last ice age when the water between Russia and America was frozen. About 1000 years ago they started to move south from Alaska and Western Canada. The move south was a slow process that probably happened because there was not enough food for their growing population. Most of the people who traveled south were hunters, gatherers and fishers. By 1300 they reached the area in which they now live. The Navajo had conflicts with the people who were already living here and took many of their belongings. However, they settled quickly and became farmers, while others hunted for food.

The Navajo lived in peace for the next 200 years. In the late 1500's, however, the Spanish started to settle in New Mexico and this caused a conflict. The Spanish tried to rule the Navajo and convert them to Christianity. The Navajo stuck to their own beliefs and the efforts of the Spanish failed. After several wars the Spanish succeeded in dominating the Navajo and the area became part of Spain (and later part of Mexico). In 1848 the United States fought a war against Mexico and this area became part of the United States. A short time later the gold rush brought many white people through Navajo land and again this led to major problems. The start of the US civil war in 1860 made things even worse for the Navajo. The United States government decided to force all of the Navajos to leave their homes in 1863 and walk some 500 kilometers (called the "Long Walk" by the Navajo). The US army also destroyed all of their fields, orchards and villages on the way, and killed their animals (which the Navajo needed for food). The Navajo remained prisoners for four years. During this time thousands died of starvation, disease and cold.

The ninth treaty between the Navajo and the US government in 1868 allowed the 7,000 Navajo who survived the Long Walk to return home and start a new life. The Navajo had little to return to. The treaty also created the Navajo Nation Reservation, which is where most Navajo now live. Since this time the relationship between the Navajo and the United States government has been a tense one. The Navajo only became US citizens in 1924, and were given the right to vote in 1948. Many Navajo still feel very strongly that they were robbed of their land and their culture, and that their ways are not respected by others. Nowadays, more and more Navajo are starting to rediscover their culture and feel proud of their past.

## RELIGION

For the more traditional Navajo religion is very important in their day-to-day lives. Navajo try to be at peace and harmony with the world (Mother Earth) around them at all times. This is called "walking in beauty". Navajo are taught to respect the holy ones (their gods) and everything they have created. There is great respect for nature: the land, and the plants and animals that one finds there.

Sand paintings are very common among the Navajo and have a religious purpose. Many tourists buy them for their beauty, but they are used by the Navajo themselves in healing ceremonies. In these ceremonies the Healer uses the sand painting to tell the story of the holy ones. The number "4" is traditionally a sacred number among the Navajo. For instance, there are four sacred mountains, four parts of a person, four events in a woman's life, etc.

Nowadays, many Navajo have become Christian. The most active religions on the reservation are now the Mormon Church, the Catholic Church, the Adventists and the Native American Church.

## SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

After arriving in the Southwest seven hundred years ago, most Navajo soon turned to farming and herding to survive. Traditionally, the Navajo farmed beans, squash and corn. Corn was and still is the most important of these foods and comes in many colors. The Navajo also hunted deer, prairie dogs and other animals. Today many Navajo raise sheep for meat and wool. The most common dishes are fry bread and mutton stew. Navajo are also known for their rug weaving. Different areas of the Navajo Reservation create their own distinct types of rug patterns. The rugs are made from sheep wool. It is a fairly new trade because it was the Spanish who brought sheep to the area.

Although the Navajo Reservation is in the United States, they have a form of self-government. They elect their leaders at both the local and tribal levels.

## **CULTURE**

Navajo family life is arranged by a kinship system called clans. Today there are around 150 clans among the Navajo. Clan membership passes through the mother. Traditionally, people are not allowed to marry people who belong to the same clan.

Historically the Navajo language (Dineh) is an oral one. It was not until 1900 that a Navajo alphabet was created, which is unique and very different from the Latin alphabet. The language is still used widely in the community and in the Navajo schools.

Until recently Navajo's tended to live in houses called Hogans. These tend to look much like the traditional houses of the Anasazi, who lived in the area before the Navajo settled there. These houses have a log frame that is covered by smaller logs, willow and clay. Nowadays, Hogans are made of many different materials. But logs are still a main building material. If somebody dies in a hogan, the others living there will leave and go to live elsewhere. The hogan will be left to decay and no part of it will be re-used.

Gay people are highly respected among the Navajo. They are seen as having the special gift of being able to see the male and female side of any matter. They are therefore seen as excellent teachers.

