



MARK LIPCZYNSKI

Around the Corners

There are any number of places to stay near the Four Corners, but none quite like Sage Hill Bed and Breakfast, which offers guests an authentic journey through time and Navajo culture.

By KATHY MONTGOMERY

SAGE HILL IS NOT located in the typical Navajo Indian tourist spot. It feels more like a home than a bed and breakfast. And its hosts, Timothy and Karen Benally, seem more like friends. And that's exactly why it's worth the trip.

The house is large by reservation standards, the result of multiple additions since Timothy first built it in 1960. Sunny and lived-in, the house features plaster walls, built-in niches and overflowing bookcases. The solitary guest suite includes a private bath, queen bed, satellite TV and spacious sun porch with an additional single bed. A smaller bedroom across the hall can be added but not rented separately.

Timothy was born to one of the three largest clans in the area. A former uranium miner, he served on the Navajo Tribal Council and earned degrees in writing and cultures. He met his wife, Karen, while looking for someone to record his 100-year-old grandmother's stories.

As a graduate student, Karen spent three seasons recording family members' oral histories, changing her major to anthropology and marrying Timothy in the process.

Yet after more than 20 years of marriage, the Benallys still navigate their cultural differences. Timothy shakes his head at the fence Karen insisted on building to protect the garden. "She needs to define her space," Timothy says, laughing. "Navajos don't do that."

And Karen admits she sometimes misses the social life off the reservation. "Timothy said we did this because I'm lonely," Karen says of the B&B. "I need other white people to talk to."

Whatever the reason, the Benallys like to be a part of their guests' experience. They serve as

cultural guides, sharing their rich and layered knowledge of the Navajos. On request, at added expense, they will hire local artists to teach Navajo weaving, prepare traditional Navajo foods or lead guests on photographic tours of the area. The surrounding area is not only scenic, but rich with archaeological sites, which can be explored only with an employee of the Navajo Nation or a local resident.

If that's not reason enough to visit, the drive to Red Valley winds through some of the prettiest land on the Navajo Reservation. The highlight includes a jaw-dropping trek over Buffalo Pass at the intersection of the Chuska and Lukachukai mountains (open from April through November). The red sandstone and piñon pines at the lower elevations recall Sedona and Oak Creek Canyon. Then the road winds steeply through ponderosa pine and aspen stands, culminating with a stunning view of Shiprock and Mitten Rock before descending into Red Valley, all unmarred by tourists, traffic or tchotchkes.

Sage Hill Bed and Breakfast is located on Navajo Route 33 in Red Valley. For more information, call 928-653-5757 or visit www.free-webs.com/sagehill-bb/.