

COMING FULL CIRCLE A RETURN TO THE WEAVER'S WORKSHOP

by Kathleen Burhnam

The Table Mesa Workshop with Sarah Natani is returning to the focus it has had in the past. It is a workshop for weavers who desire to learn or improve on the Traditional Navajo style of weaving.

I am a volunteer coordinator for this workshop. I believe an introductory letter would be beneficial for the Natani family, for ourselves, and especially for potential workshop registrants so that the purpose of the workshop is clear: this is a weaver's workshop, not a convenient excuse to take a friend and vacation in the southwest. The Natani family has graciously extended to us an opportunity to learn to weave in the Navajo style while living on their land, hearing their stories, and experiencing firsthand the conditions under which they have endured and produced their beautiful weavings, jewelry and pottery.

This workshop may not be for everyone. The weather can be quite harsh, with cold winds, rain and lightning storms. There is a hogan with the traditional dirt floor and coal burning stove that can sleep approximately six people comfortably. We recommend driving to New Mexico in a vehicle you can sleep in, as tents have been known to blow over in the soft, sandy dirt. The bathroom facilities consist of one outhouse, which is shared by all of the weavers. If you feel you must have a shower, you can bring a solar shower bag and hang it in the outdoor shower stall. You are responsible for your own breakfast and lunch, which you may prepare in the hogan or at your vehicle or tent. I prepare dinners for the workshop participants, the Natani family, and guests, and are eaten in the Quonset hut or, weather permitting, in the brush arbor. When the wind dies down and the weather is sunny and warm, flies are abundant. This is camping, not resort living. We live as the Navajo live(d), however briefly and superficially, and in this way we develop an appreciation for their accomplishments, their enduring dignity, their grace and beauty in the face of adversity, and we come away with the glow of the southwest sunsets in our hearts.



View of the small, original hogan and distant outhouse

Originally, all the weavers slept, ate and wove in the Natani's first hogan. This was how the Navajo families lived, and this was how the workshop participants lived. Eventually, as the workshop evolved, people began varying the sleeping arrangements, the meal preparation was pared down to one communal meal a day, and Sarah and Leo graciously allowed the weavers into their own larger hogan at night so they could continue weaving, carding and spinning, and to just relax and talk. To avoid misunderstandings that might exploit the Natani's personal generosity or offend their cultural heritage, what is--and is not--allowed needs to be very clear to every potential registrant BEFORE the deposit checks are sent in. Sharing the incredible beauty and variety of experiences at Table Mesa provides the workshop members with a very real and tangible sense of common purpose and focus.

I look forward every year to returning to Table Mesa and visiting with the Natani family. The sunsets and sunrises are spectacular. The wide, vibrant sky is filled with fluffy white clouds against an unbelievably blue background or millions of tiny stars that go on and on, and the rush and pull- and-tug of civilization quickly fades to the rhythms of a simpler life. The field trips to the trading posts, especially Two Grey Hills Trading Post, are fun and a great diversion and treat after laboring all day with the intricacies of Navajo weaving. There are opportunities for trips into town on your own after the end of the day's workshop activities. This is a wonderfully fulfilling workshop if you can give yourself up to it and not have unrealistic expectations.

I encourage anyone with a desire to learn about Navajo weaving and the Navajo culture, and who can laugh at a few minor discomforts, to sign up for the Table Mesa Workshop with Sarah Natani. It is an experience you will not likely forget.