

## Tours track Hillerman mystery sites

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WALPI, First Mesa - Reldon Schirch waited until his small band of followers had surrounded the plaza in this small village high atop a mesa on the Hopi Reservation. Then he began his narration.

"This is where Jimmy Chee lost track of a murder suspect," he said, and he pointed to the roof of one of the houses bordering the plaza. "He was standing up there when he looked away for just a moment, and the suspect was gone."

Everyone else in the tour group nodded. They already knew about the escape, but now they were standing on the exact spot where it occurred. None of them had ever met Jim Chee, but they all knew him intimately.

They knew his feelings after losing the man he was supposed to arrest, and they knew how hard he'd work to catch up with him again. They knew all this even though Chee

has never been here, and even though Chee is not a real person. He exists only on the pages of fiction by Tony Hillerman.

Photos by Sam Lowe/  
Special for the Republic

At Toadlena Trading Post, Clara Sherman, 91, demonstrates weaving and leads a small tour.



Chee is a recurring character in the murder mysteries written by Hillerman. He's a lawman who, along with the likes of Joe Leaphorn, Bernadette Manuelito, Cowboy Dashee and Captain Largo, brings truth and justice to the reservations of northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico.

The fictional characters are also key elements in the Hillerman Country Tours, a new travel series conceived and hosted by Detours of Arizona, a Scottsdale firm. Hillerman, who has written more than 20 novels, sanctions the enterprise.

### Strategic locales

The tours cover more than 1,100 miles and extend over four days, taking participants from Phoenix to the Grand Canyon; the Hopi, Navajo and Zuni reservations; Canyon de Chelly; Chaco Canyon; trading

posts and various villages and towns.



At Chaco Canyon, the stone buildings, erected between 850 and 1150, are among the best preserved ruins in the United States. Some of the buildings were as high as five stories.

Most of them are strategic locations in Hillerman's books. The names of his heroes and villains aren't real, but the locales are.

Walpi, for example, is important in Hillerman's 1993 novel, *Sacred Clowns*. Canyon de Chelly and Chaco Canyon provide background for *Thief of Time*, written in 1988. And Tuba City appears regularly because it's where Joe Leaphorn, a Navajo tribal policeman, is headquartered.

From Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, tour participants are transported in an eight-passenger van and accompanied by guides such as Schirch, all of them well-versed in Hillerman's work. They've read every one of his books and can discuss them at great length. They also have a good understanding of Native American culture, geology, geography and historic lore.

The first stop is Sedona, not a major locale in Hillerman's books but important to some Native Americans who believe theirContinued to Page 2

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ancestors emerged from nearby Boynton Canyon. The van passes the San Francisco Peaks, which are near Flagstaff and are one of the four sacred mountains in some cultures, then heads for an overnight stay at the Grand Canyon, scene of a couple of Hillerman's murders.

The next morning, the group stops at the trading post at Cameron, then a canyon carved by the Little Colorado River, where Hillerman begins his *Skeleton Man* (2004). The day's itinerary also includes a brief tour of Tuba City, a stop at the spectacular Coal Mine Canyon and lunch with Eric and Jane Polingyouma at Kykotsmovi. The hosts prepare a typical Hopi meal and explain how they make things grow without irrigation in their portion of the Great Basin Desert.

### **Chee's birthplace**

The day ends with a drive along the south rim of Canyon de Chelly. Participants get a closer look at the ruins and sandstone obelisks the next morning on a Jeep tour of the canyon floor, then head northeast toward Tsaile, Lukachukai and the Chuska Mountains, where Jim Chee was born.



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The drive through the Chuska Mountains, where Hillerman's Jim Chee was born, features aspens, birches and red-rock formations.

The drive through the mountains is slow but spectacular, the road lined with birch and aspen trees and towering red-rock formations that resemble those in Sedona, but minus all the houses and people.

Just below the 8,950-foot summit, there's an opening in the trees, and way out there, about 25 miles in the distance, you can see Shiprock as it pokes up through the high desert of New Mexico. The victim in *The Fallen Man* (1996) either fell or was pushed from the top of Shiprock. An hour later, the van passes within a mile of the huge rock formation and gives photographers an excellent vantage point.

Lunch on the third day is at the Toadlena Trading Post, where Clara Sherman, a 91-year-old Navajo weaver, demonstrates her craft and leads a tour of a small rug museum in the back of the building.

Chaco Canyon is next. The ranger tells the group that Chaco means either "unexplored place" or "canyon," and that the buildings there once rose to five stories.

In traditional Navajo stories, the canyon is the home of the Great Gambler, who enslaved the Puebloan people and forced them to create the great city before he was driven away. The stone buildings were erected between 850 and 1150, and today, they are some of the best-preserved ruins in the country. Some structures still go as high as three stories.

The tour spends the night in Gallup, N.M. At the evening meal, one of the few remaining Navajo Code Talkers recalls their role in winning World War II battles in the South Pacific, and a medicine man explains facets of his religion.

On the fourth morning, the travelers are taken to Zuni Pueblo, south of Gallup and featured in *Dance Hall of the Dead* (1973). There, they visit a mission built in 1629 and undergoing restoration, then have a Zuni lunch at the Inn at Halona. The van then heads back to Phoenix.

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### **Hillerman Country Tours**

Detours of Arizona offers four or five Hillerman tours every year. If successful, the company also may use Albuquerque as a starting point.

**Cost:** \$1,075 per guest, which includes lodging, entry fees, bottled water and taxes, but not meals.

**Details:** 1-866-438-6877 or (480) 633-9013 or [www.detoursaz.com](http://www.detoursaz.com).

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