

Scottsdale's old west lure

By Patti Nickell Tribune News Service

Arizona city replete with history and modern luxuries

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. - Sipping a glass of chardonnay on the terrace of Mountain Shadows Resort, I gazed at the unmistakable hump of granite that gave Camelback Mountain its name.

At dusk a lilac haze etched the mountain in stark relief against the sky. Looking at it brought to mind a novel that my grandfather, the ultimate student of Old West lore, introduced me to when I was a child. Today, my paperback copy of Zane Grey's "Riders of the Purple Sage" is dog-eared and well-worn from many reads.

Those who know me are aware I am a passionate lover of the American West, which makes Scottsdale, "the Gateway to the West," a natural destination.

If you want to see for yourself, a good place to start is Old Town, where the city began in the late 1800s. Its Old West flair is apparent day and night.

By day, shop for both Native American art and jewelry (be sure not to miss the Native American-owned Art Market) and authentic western apparel.

By night, don those western duds and head for the Rusty Spur Saloon where there's live country/western music nightly.

You may have to belly up to the bar for your cold one, as the Rusty Spur's tables are occupied pretty much whenever it's open. Don't let that stop you; it didn't stop western icons John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, who were known to frequent the Rusty Spur when in town.

Cattle drovers, ranch hands, town marshals, gunslingers and other denizens of the Wild West probably didn't do much museum-going, leaving that to those dudes from the East.

However, you should make museums a part of your Scottsdale experience, especially if the museum is as intriguing as Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West.

A Smithsonian affiliate, the museum has exhibits that showcase the culture and rich history of 19 American states, plus Western Canada and Mexico.

The majesty and scope of the West can be seen in traditional paintings such as the one of a Hopi woman atop her horse gazing at the horizon and a less traditional painting of a tuxedo-clad pianist sitting atop a mesa, playing his piano and staring at the same expansive view.

For a different take on the majesty of the West, book a tour at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, a counterpart to the architect's Wisconsin Taliesin.

Using it as his winter home and studio from 1937 until his death in 1959, Wright found as much beauty in the ochre-colored desert and the foothills of the McDowell Mountains as he did in the bucolic environs of southern Wisconsin.

He once famously described the view from atop his mesa as "a look over the rim of the world."

Visitors experience the same awe at this National Historic Landmark and UNESCO World Heritage Site as they wander from room to room, all connected by a series of terraces, pools and gardens.

Those who live in parts of the country given to lush green vegetation often think the desert doesn't bloom. They couldn't be more wrong. It blooms differently, but boy, does it bloom.

Among desolate dunes and sand-sculpted spires flourish Brittlebush, Desert Marigold, Fairy Duster, Apache Plume, Arizona Poppy, Desert Lavender, Desert Primrose and Whitestem Paperflower, which bring splotches of color to a dust-hued landscape.

The best place to see the flora is the Desert Botanical Garden in nearby Phoenix. Here, visitors will find the world's major collection of arid climate plants - not just from the deserts of the Southwest, but from those around the world.

Some 50,000 plants are scattered among the red rocks of the Papago Buttes, best viewed by taking any of the five themed trails.

Cactuses native to the Sonoran Desert are also represented here, from the cholla cactus to the prickly pear cactus, which some may know only through its namesake margarita.

My favorite, however, is the saguaro cactus, which develops bent and twisted arms as it ages (some have as many as 25). I was careful to give them a wide berth as they are covered with protective spines that shelter white flowers in the spring and red fruit in the summer.

Eat, drink, stay in style

As befits its place as a popular getaway, Scottsdale boasts a number of first-class eating and drinking establishments, and some incomparable lodging options.

In the former category, book a table for lunch at The Mission Kierland (try their homemade tortillas, arepas and salsas and the meats prepared on a plancha, a grill using pecan and mesquite wood to achieve a unique flavor), or enjoy a wine tasting at Merkin Vineyards Old Town where you can try local wines from estate vineyards in the Verde Valley (yes, Arizona does produce wine).

When it comes to stylish accommodations, the Scottsdale/Paradise Valley/Phoenix area takes a back seat to no one. On my visit, I stayed at two equally luxe properties.

Mountain Shadows Resort in Paradise Valley has been a desert icon since its opening in 1959. It quickly became a favorite of Hollywood celebrities, sports stars and politicians who flocked here. To see those who contributed to its lore, check out the photo gallery lining the wall of the main building.

Cocktail enthusiasts will love the circular bar, described by no less an authority than Architectural Digest as "the most beautiful bar in Arizona."

Likewise, foodies will appreciate the inspired cuisine at Hearth '61, the resort's fine dining restaurant. I ordered the Winter Squash Soup with maple cream, chervil and pomegranate, followed by the Niman Ranch prime beef tenderloin, bleu cheese fondue and truffled mash, and ended with carrot cake bread pudding.

I would have been extremely reluctant to leave Mountain Shadows had I not been spending my last two nights at the Four Seasons Scottsdale, tucked invitingly into the foothills of Pinnacle Peak, and offering stunning vistas of the high Sonoran Desert.

My adobe-style casita came with a private balcony, gas-burning kiva fireplace and eye-popping view.

On-property restaurants - whether casual (Proof, billed as an American cantina) and Talavera (an upscale Spanish steakhouse) are typical of the Four Seasons level of excellence.

The imaginative desserts at Proof will have you smacking your lips, and the steaks, jamon Iberica and paella at Talavera will make it tough to choose.

If it's relaxation you're in search of, you'll find it at the 12,000-foot full-service spa.

Walking around the property on my last night, I was again struck by that purple wash of sky, a graphic that I will forever associate with "the Gateway to the West."

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