

AS YOU SPIKE IT

THE DESERT CITY OF SCOTTSDALE IS A GREAT BASE FROM WHICH TO EXPLORE AN AUTHENTIC SLICE OF AMERICA, FINDS **LEO BEAR**



The lushest desert in the world, a thriving food scene, some properly American pastimes and several rather pleasant places to stay... Scottsdale has it all to pique clients' interests. →



It's easy to lose oneself in the silence and majesty of the desert, and it's notably free from crowds



Last summer, when American academic Eva Fisher camped in Arizona's Sonoran Desert for the first time, she described her experience thus: "I began to shift, to reorient towards nature. I told the time by the appearance and disappearance of lizards, beetles and the occasional javelin. I knew it was night when the coyotes began howling, and morning when the hummingbirds started buzzing. For the first time in 31 years, I became deeply connected to nature and its infinite capacity for fascination."

Fisher had pitched her tent at the base of the McDowell Mountains, not far from Taliesin West, the former winter home of the legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Today, Taliesin West is a popular tourist attraction forming part of the campus of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. Take a tour and you'll witness the 'starchitects' of tomorrow sketching their way towards future glory. The tour is fascinating – full of dazzling insights and striking architecture, as well as giving a glimpse into the life of an eccentric narcissist.

But what really wows is the



surrounding landscape. Officially labelled the lushest desert in the world, the russet-coloured McDowell Sonoran Preserve is dotted with yucca, agave and palo verde trees punctuated by cacti of all shapes and sizes. There are giant saguaros (the cartoon-like ones found in Mexico), bulging barrel cacti and cute fuzzy chollas, which have spurs on them that can actually 'jump'. *Aspire* can vouch for this.

Out here, it's easy to lose oneself in the silence and majesty of the desert, and best of all, it's notably free from crowds. *Aspire* completed a 6km loop and came into contact with only a handful of fellow walkers, a pair of deer and a jackrabbit.

At sunset the whole vista turns a pinkish shade of purple and the cacti develop halos.

The small city of Scottsdale, just north of Phoenix, provides the perfect base for exploring the area. A far cry from the tourist-clogged towns at the mouths of state parks such as Flagstaff and Red Rock, Scottsdale is much more than a jumping-off point for hikers. Filled with quiet luxury, quirky architecture, sensational spas and artsy eateries, it's one of the sunniest places in the southwest. In the past, it relied heavily on golf tournaments and business conventions for its footfall, but following the recession, the city repackaged itself as a hip destination for

fresh-air-loving fun-seekers. Los Angeles without the crowds, if you like. Or Palm Springs without the price tag.

Fashionistas looking to increase the size of their wardrobe won't find a better, cleaner shopping experience anywhere in the southwest. Scottsdale's malls are big, breezy and largely empty, with free Wi-Fi and endless help at hand. Hours can be lost at Fashion Square, a vast empire of designer labels, or at Kierland Commons, an outdoor shopping parade similar to The Grove in Los Angeles. Shoppers visiting on a Sunday morning can join a free yoga class in the main square before gorging on avocado wraps at True Food Kitchen,

Scottsdale's answer to Good Life Eatery. It's all very hip and healthy.

For accommodation, The Phoenician, a sprawling five-star fun palace at the base of Camelback Mountain, is the place to sip prickly-pear iced tea while the other half tees up. Boulders Hotel and Four Seasons Troon are twin favourites with the international spa-set for their agave-based treatments and chic lodgings. For something more boutique-y, direct your clients to The Saguaro, Hermosa Inn or The Bespoke Inn, or better still, Hotel Valley Ho. Designed by architect Edward Varney, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, it opened in 1956 and remains one of America's



MAIN PICTURE:
The Phoenician,
Scottsdale

ABOVE:
Hotel Valley Ho,
Scottsdale

LEFT:
Arizona Cowboy
College



AGENT'S VIEW



TOM MARCHANT
CO-FOUNDER,
BLACK TOMATO

Scottsdale is great because it's not very well known, so you feel like you're experiencing a really authentic part of the US. What's more, with an enviable position in the heart of the Sonoran Desert, a great health and wellness scene and a history of cowboy culture, it appeals to the culturally curious – the traveller that wants to see what the real USA looks like, who may have done the more trodden routes like California or Florida. Why go now? Like most good things, it won't be long before Scottsdale becomes more popular, and it's great to be ahead of the crowd. At the moment, Scottsdale is having a real foodie moment thanks to its Cordon Bleu culinary arts programme which brings in Michelin-star chefs with boundary-breaking cuisine.





ABOVE: Tom's Thumb roadside diner

best-preserved examples of mid-century architecture. Back in the 1950s, fashion shows were held around the hotel's 'OH pool' – designed in the shape of a martini glass (what else?) – and screen-darling Natalie Wood famously held her wedding reception on the premises. Today, the glam squad still flock to Zuzu, Valley Ho's kooky diner, for its delectable burgers, and to hang out with Ace Bailey, the hotel's concierge, who used to sneak into the Valley Ho's pool as a teenager. She's got a story or two, let us tell you.

For a taste of old-school Scottsdale, send your clients to Arizona Cowboy College, a dusty equestrian centre on the outskirts of town. Lori, who runs the place, is a no-nonsense twinkly-eyed

horsewoman with a heart of gold, who'll get them trotting about and lassoing like pros in no time. Nearby, Tom's Thumb, a roadside diner-cum-gas station, provides the perfect pit-stop for newly initiated cowboys. Smoked hickory wood gives pulled pork and chopped beef brisket a depth of flavour that speaks to the soul, and no one gives a damn if you're covered in sawdust and horsehair.

Downtown Scottsdale presents a more gentrified food scene. FnB, a neighbourhood favourite, does an exquisite line in Hungarian street food and local Arizona wines. There's also The House, a charming grandma's-kitchen-style joint filled with familiar flavours and bonhomie. The Mission, a Latin-inspired →

ASK THE LOCAL

Kristin Heggli, public relations director at Hotel Valley Ho, shares Scottsdale's top spots for culture vultures



DAVID AND GLADYS WRIGHT HOUSE

Recently opened to the public, this property was built by Frank Lloyd Wright for his son and daughter-in-law.

A veritable architectural gem, it occupies 10 acres of citrus groves at the base of Camelback Mountain and was created in the form of a spiral rising from the ground with 360-degree views of the mountains. Said to be a precursor to the Guggenheim Museum in NYC, it was one of Wright's last residential masterpieces. Tours are free.

davidwrighthouse.org

WESTERN SPIRIT: SCOTTSDALE'S MUSEUM OF THE WEST

This brand-new museum showcases the unique stories of the American West with rare historical artefacts, interactive exhibits and rotating art displays.

scottsdalemuseumwest.org

TALIESIN WEST

Frank Lloyd Wright's former winter home and thriving architectural school is renowned for its 'organic' desert architecture. Tours help visitors explore the living areas, students' 'desert shelter' projects and the extensive grounds.

franklloydwright.org

MUSICAL INSTRUMENT MUSEUM

More than 6,000 instruments and objects from around the globe are on display here. As you walk around, your headset changes to play you sounds from different cultures.

mim.org

HEARD MUSEUM

A great place to learn about American Indian culture and history, featuring unique exhibitions from up-and-coming artists, personal stories from Native people, and a permanent collection over 75 years in the making.

heard.org



THE ASPIRE TOP 5



FIVE FACTS ABOUT THE SAGUARO

- 1 THEY ONLY GROW IN THE SONORAN DESERT
- 2 THE SAGUARO BLOSSOM IS THE STATE FLOWER OF ARIZONA
- 3 A 10-YEAR-OLD SAGUARO MAY MEASURE ONLY ABOUT AN INCH TALL BUT THEY CAN GROW TO 50FT.
- 4 ARMS APPEAR TYPICALLY WHEN THE PLANT IS BETWEEN 50 AND 100 YEARS OLD
- 5 IN THE RIGHT CONDITIONS THEY CAN LIVE FOR UP TO 200 YEARS



COMING SOON TO SCOTTSDALE...

- **ANDAZ, PARADISE VALLEY**
Due 2016; scottsdale.andaz.hyatt.com
- **MOUNTAIN SHADOWS BY WESTROC**
Due spring 2017
westroc.com/collection/mountain-shadows
- **RITZ-CARLTON, PARADISE VALLEY**
Due 2018, with the longest pool in the USA
ritzcarlton.com/en/residences/paradise-valley



ABOVE: Camelback Mountain

flavour-shaker with fiesta-fuelling interiors, is the place for something spicier – there's no beating its chilli-infused margaritas and hand-pressed corn tacos, while later on Rusty's saloon has the tequila slammers lined up. Stepping into this tiny drinking den is like entering a portal to the 1970s. Memorabilia dating back to the Beatles smatter the walls, and live country music rocks the place every night. Rusty's has seen everyone from Jennifer Aniston to Clint Eastwood kick up their heels – it's a must on every visitor's list.

Hideous hangover? Not a problem. Metabolism-boosting hikes are what Scottsdale is all about. There are more than 230 miles of scenic tracks interlaced around the city. Camelback Mountain is probably the best-known and toughest trail; a vertiginous two-mile challenge recommended for 'experienced hikers only'. Those who reach the

top are rewarded with phenomenal 360-degree views as well as a smug sense of satisfaction. That is, until they learn that locals will sprint to the top, sprint back down, then do it all over again before work.

Epic scenery, architectural wonders and a friendly downtown buzz – Scottsdale is an easy sell to Brits, especially when you throw in that temperatures are always a couple of degrees higher than those in California. Twenty-five degrees in January? You heard it here first. ●

GETTING THERE

British Airways has direct flights from Heathrow to Phoenix from £592. Rooms at Hotel Valley Ho (hotelvalleyho.com) start from £113 in low season and £234 in high season. For more information, visit EXPERIENCESCOTTSDALE.COM