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# How hikers and shutterbugs are seduced by the beauty of Sedona

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A hike in Crescent Moon Ranch off the Red Rock Loop Road in Sedona, Ariz., has great views of Cathedral Rock. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

"Stop! Pull over!"

My poor husband at the wheel of our rental car proved a patient man.

We were driving from Phoenix to Sedona for a few days of sightseeing in northern Arizona. We'd left the interstate highway for a state road when I first saw them: red rocks. The photographer in me couldn't resist shooting frame after frame of the crimson formations, first foolishly through the car window, then from roadside viewpoints. With each turn in the highway a new vista unfolded, pinnacles and mesas sculpted by nature and glowing red against deep blue skies. We pulled over again and again and I kept shooting like a woman possessed, as if this stunning scenery would suddenly vanish before my eyes like some desert Shangri-La.

It didn't, of course. Three days of hikes, scenic drives and a thrilling off-road Jeep ride and still the natural beauty in and around Sedona continued to enchant me.



The Chapel of the Holy Cross built into the red rocks of Sedona, Ariz., is on the National Register of Historic Places. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

### **A spiritual place**

We'd only just arrived when we found ourselves at the base of the Chapel of the Holy Cross. It was the golden hour before sunset when shadows deepen and the rocks grow even more scarlet as the sun inches toward the horizon.

Erected in 1956, the chapel perches on a cliff with a red rock wall rising dramatically behind it. Though Catholic, the chapel's doors are open to all faiths. We walked up the serpentine path to the entrance, enjoying the quiet of a late afternoon. Inside, candles were lit and a few people knelt in prayer.

You don't need to be a follower of organized religion to embrace Sedona as a spiritual place. Many visitors are drawn here by the belief that these red-rock spires emit a mystical energy, vortexes of healing power unleashed through meditation and personal reflection. Some swear by it; others dismiss it as hokum. Whatever. I challenge anyone to walk through this landscape for the first time and claim they don't feel closer to the Creator.

Sedona has inspired not only New Age seekers but also the creative spirit of artists. For 50 years it has attracted sculptors, painters and designers. Shopping areas are chock-full of cute boutiques as well as high-end galleries showcasing the works of international to emerging artists.



Bell Rock rises along the scenic drive between the Village of Oak Creek and Uptown Sedona, Ariz. It can be seen up close on hikes on the Little Horse Trail. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

### **Hiking crimson trails**

The Red Rock District of the Coconino National Forest receives nearly 4 million visitors a year, almost as many as visit the Grand Canyon, said Ranger Heather Provencio. With 160,000 acres, they find plenty of room to roam. Sixty-one percent use the more than 300 hiking and biking trails.

Where to start? I asked the concierge at our hotel, the Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock, who eagerly flipped open her book of hiking trails to find a few easy ones for us flatlanders. Fay Canyon in the Secret Mountain Wilderness Area northwest of uptown Sedona proved a good place to start. It follows a dry creek for a relatively level 1.2 miles, ending in a box canyon. What really got my camera clicking were the red-rock walls rising 70 feet to 120 feet on either side of the trail.

First-timers to red-rock country frequently ask, "Why are they red?" The short answer: The mineral hematite, also known as iron oxide, gives a rusty hue to sedimentary rock formed from ancient wetlands.

On Little Horse Trail, just a few minutes from the Hilton, we had great views of Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte as well as a chance to examine some of the desert plants growing along the trail. The juniper tree has blue berries and scales in place of needles while the pinyon pine has inch-long needles and produces pinyon nuts. We came across two members of the agave family, the banana yucca with waxy, ivory flowers and the century plant that produces a tall stalk with yellow and orange flowers in spring. We hadn't seen a saguaro since we left the Phoenix area, but there were plenty of prickly pear to avoid as we walked.

One of the most photographed spots in the Sedona area, Crescent Moon Ranch, requires a \$10 per vehicle admission charge. Access to a large picnic area, modern restrooms, drinking fountains and a paved path smooth enough for strollers and wheelchairs seemed money well-spent. We left the pavement for a hiking trail leading past the site of an 1800s homestead and into the cottonwood and sycamore trees along Oak Creek. The water's reflection of majestic Cathedral Rock had this shutterbug salivating. One view after another emerged from the path as we hiked to Buddha Beach, a rock shore where visitors have stacked prayer rocks in dozens of cairns. On warm days hikers strip down to bathing suits for swimming and wading in the creek.



Some 300 hiking and biking trails wind through the red rocks around Sedona, Ariz. Fay Canyon, one of the easiest treks, follows a dry creek lined with red-rock walls. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

### **Take a drive, see some history**

Oak Creek is the reason Sedona is here. The spring-fed creek served as a year-round water source for indigenous people who lived here more than 10,000 years ago. Homesteaders arrived in the 1870s and diverted the creek into irrigation ditches for farming. By the turn of the last century enough people had arrived for one settler to lobby for a post office, naming it after his wife, Sedona. Tourism replaced farming as the main revenue source after World War II, and Sedona grew rapidly after it incorporated in 1988. The population now hovers around 10,000 permanent residents.

We saw how Sedona has spread on drives from the Hilton in the quiet Village of Oak Creek, up a scenic route to touristy Uptown Sedona where a roundabout pointed us to West Sedona's commercial district. Soon we left the strip malls and government buildings behind and turned on Red Rock Loop Road for a pleasant scenic drive. More views of Cathedral Rock had us pulling over before the road took us past Red Rock State Park and back to the state highway.



Admiring the scenery from a rock ledge on a break during a Pink Jeep off-road adventure through the red rocks of the Broken Arrow Trail outside Sedona, Ariz. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

The next day we ventured farther, driving 28 miles west to the so-called "Ghost City" of Jerome, population 455. Getting to this old copper mining town was half the fun. The road wound up, up, up, narrowing to a tight two lanes as it wove through the village and out onto a mountain road of blind curves with red-rock walls on one side, steep drop-offs on the other.

Thankfully, a scenic viewpoint gave us a chance to safely turn around and double back to Jerome State Historic Park. Occupying a mansion built in 1916 by mining magnate James S. Douglas, it perches on a hill above his Little Daisy Mine with a view of the village on one side and the valley on the other. Inside we learned about Jerome's founding in 1876 and the vices and victories of a boomtown that peaked at 15,000 inhabitants, a size far surpassing Sedona.

We left the driving to a professional for a Pink Jeep ride, meeting our driver in Uptown Sedona for an off-road adventure on the red rocks of the Broken Arrow Trail, the original route of long-established Pink Jeep Tours. This 4-by-4 experience in a modified Jeep painted Pepto-Bismol pink took us on the Road of No Return, a bumpy, often hair-raising ride on what appeared to be impossibly steep and rugged rocks, descending at one point at a 45-degree angle. Halfway into the tour we stopped on a rock plateau to get out, drink in the scenery and snap a few photos. Good thing, because unlike on our arrival in Sedona, I wasn't about to ask this driver to pull over.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the Sedona Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau.*

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### **Sedona, Arizona**

**Information:** Sedona Chamber of Commerce & Tourism Bureau, (800) 288-7336, [visitsedona.com](http://visitsedona.com)

**Getting there:** Sedona is a two-hour drive from Phoenix, 45 minutes from Flagstaff

**Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock:** 90 Ridge Trail Drive. Three-diamond resort, 221 rooms and suites with fireplace, microwave, mini-frig and wet bar. Spa, outdoor pools. Sedona Golf Resort next door. \$199-\$379, \$28 resort fee. (877) 273-3762 or [hiltonsedonaresort.com](http://hiltonsedonaresort.com)

### **Red Rock District of the Coconino National**

**Forest:** [fs.usda.gov/recarea/coconino/recarea/?recid=54892](https://fs.usda.gov/recarea/coconino/recarea/?recid=54892)

**Red Rock Pass:** Must be visible through the windshield of any unattended vehicle on forest land around Sedona or Oak Creek Canyon, \$5 day pass, \$15 week pass. Purchase at visitor centers, some stores and hotels and self-service machines in some trailhead parking areas. The Golden Age Senior Pass can be displayed in its place.

**Pink Jeep Tours:** Broken Arrow tour, \$110 adult, \$99 child. (844) 226-7465 or [pinkjeeptours.com](http://pinkjeeptours.com)

### **Dining:**

**Elote Café:** Chef-owned restaurant serving fine Southwestern/Mexican cuisine worth the wait for a table. 771 Arizona Route 179, (928) 203-0105, [elotecafe.com](http://elotecafe.com)

**ShadowRock Tap + Table:** A \$2.4-million restaurant transformation completed in 2018 at the Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock. Features locally sourced fare in creative Southwestern cuisine. 90 Ridge Trail Drive, (928) 284-6909, [hiltonsedonaresort.com/dine/shadowrock/](http://hiltonsedonaresort.com/dine/shadowrock/)

**Indian Gardens Café & Market:** Coffee bar serving breakfast and lunch, sandwiches, pastries, craft beer and wine in a setting dating from 1947. Indoor plus outdoor seating next to a rock face in Oak Creek Canyon. 3951 N. Arizona Route 89A, (928) 282-7702

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