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Arizona: Beauty and Culture Beyond the Desert

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Among gigantic cacti, vineyards and sites sacred to Native Americans, here is a trip across one of the most appealing states in the USA.

Phoenix: “What makes the desert beautiful, said the Little Prince, is that it hides a well somewhere”, wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. This sentence makes sense only after you accomplish “the mission”, in a spiritual sense, because there is no better metaphor than ‘crossing the desert’ to describe the completion of a human transformation. Could this be the reason why gangsters built Las Vegas right in the middle of the dunes, and, in order to evade the feeling of guilt, they immersed themselves entirely in it?

There are no answers when you cross a “no man’s land”, but, in return, the questions you come across are always the right ones: what do I want, what am I looking for, who am I, who am I trying to be, and so on. It’s with these questions in mind – which by themselves make the trip worth it – that our adventure in Arizona begins, starting from Phoenix, the capital, to unwind through a desert of gigantic cacti, vineyards and rivers in Cottonwood and the Verde Valley, and to conclude in monumental Sedona, the most sacred place on Earth, according to the Natives that once inhabited this area.

We reach Phoenix from New York on board an inexpensive American Airlines flight. Once there, we realize that there isn’t much to see and, after a brief visit to the Phoenix Art Museum, which hosts interesting expositions of contemporary artists, and a quick bite in one of the many restaurants for university students, we start our trip (we recommend renting an SUV: there are a lot of unpaved roads in Arizona) to discover the State of the Grand Canyon, the Monument Valley, the Meteor Crater and the Sonoran Desert. In order to visit the entire state, you need at least two weeks; here we are suggesting an affordable itinerary that can easily be done in one.

After spending the first night at the Crowne Plaza Phoenix Airport, very close to the airport, we are ready to start our trip. The first stop is Ajo, a small town in the heart of the Sonoran Desert, populated by a unique community, educated and respectful of the environment, whose main goal is to preserve the original culture of this region. Two driving forces behind Ajo’s cultural rebirth are Stuart and Emily Siegel, young Americans who, a few years ago, moved from Boston

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to the desert. They accepted the challenge of attracting visitors to what used to be a mining area that is today facing a high rate of population decline. Until last century, Ajo was famous for extracting copper, but after the closing of the mines (by the way, these areas can still be visited and they are very interesting to understand the development of American society over the past 100 years) the life of this place died down.

With the help of public and private funds, allocated to restore historic areas, Ajo residents launched a series of projects, which, within a few years, have given new life to the town, transforming it in a real tourist destination, offering street art festivals and natural itineraries to discover the beauty of the desert. Our suggestion is to stay at the Sonoran Desert Conference Center, where you can sleep in one of the beautiful and newly renovated 21 rooms, and enjoy a delicious breakfast with local products, grown by Nina Sajovec and Sterling Johnson, a native of the Tohono O'odham tribe. They both work for the Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture, dedicated to the development and the recovery of healthy food. In particular they cultivate seeds (mainly beans) used by the Natives, according to a sustainable system, and following past traditions and the original culture of this territory. After enjoying a delicious and highly organic breakfast, take some time to visit the Curley School Campus, a former school complex, which provides live-work space apartments for artists, and take some photos of the picturesque main square, built in Spanish-Colonial style. At the International Sonoran Desert Alliance, an organization which works to preserve and enrich the environment, culture and economy of the region, you can ask about special itineraries to explore the area by foot, horse or bike.

Speaking of nature, Ajo is the ideal starting point for a tour of the spectacular Organ Pipe National Monument, a desert with gigantic cacti, unique to this area at the border with Mexico. The Sonoran Desert is an extreme land, characterized by hot summers and long periods of drought, violent windstorms, freezing winter nights and torrential monsoon rains. Only a plant like the "organ pipe cactus" (whose name derives from its resemblance to a pipe organ) capable of adaptation, can survive in such conditions. Don't miss the chance to admire closely these desert giants that have been growing in North America for over 3500 years, along the paths that extend for several kilometers over the dusty hills.

From Ajo, our second stop is Scottsdale, a well-known town famous for shopping and for its ranches, perfect for a relaxing break after two days in the dusty roads of the desert. Here you can take a tour on a hot air balloon and fully enjoy the wide valley at dawn. But the best thing, in order to really taste the atmosphere of these places, is to spend the afternoon riding a horse along the dunes and the streams of water, which once belonged to the cowboys and to the Natives (we highly recommend the ranch Fort McDowell Adventures). The Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Gainey Ranch is an ideal place to stay. Among palms, cacti, and wild flowers, with the spectaculars McDowell Mountains in the background, and surrounded by gorgeous buildings inspired by the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, this place is a real oasis in the desert. Be sure to savor the cuisine of the Chef Juan, who specializes in Tex-Mex dishes,

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which become even more delicious when enjoyed with a glass of excellent local tequila. Also, the spa offers interesting treatments with qualified staff. Finally, not to be missed, is a visit of the Native American Learning Center, inside the hotel, rich with crafts made by the Natives, useful to understand even more the history and the culture of the Natives.

We leave Scottsdale to reach our third stop: Cottonwood, a town situated in the heart of the Verde Valley, famous for its streams of water (rare in Arizona) perfect for some rafting, and for its vineyards. Once you arrive there, the right person to get in touch with is wonderful Michelle Masters, director of tourism at the Chamber of Commerce. After enjoying a glass of red wine from the Alcantara vineyards, visit nearby Jerome and swing by Caduceus Cellars, the wine shop owned by Maynard James Keenan, also known as the front man for the metal band Tool, and passionate about our country and our wine. Keenan is also the owner of Merkin Osteria, a restaurant that during the Spring hosts the Verde Valley Wine Festival, and that offers every day delicious Italian dishes with a local flavor.

For those who prefer country music over metal, our advice is to attend a Cowboy Show, extremely entertaining and the perfect way to relax before leaving for Sedona, the most sacred place on earth according to the local Natives. Among Sedona's famous red and pink rocks, you may find yourself in one of its vortices, full of energy that promise to heal your soul from evil. In this majestic valley, one of great legends, beauty, and spirituality, you'll end an unforgettable Arizona road trip. Beyond the desert of Arizona there is a colorful and surprising world, you just have to go and find it.