

# Once upon a time in the

**Andy Mossack** saddles up in South Arizona for a modern-day cowboy adventure



Travel with Cathy Winston

**E**ARLY EVENING at the Tombstone Monument Dude Ranch, and a pianist was playing a jaunty tune over in the saloon. Fresh from that afternoon's memorable horseback ride out on the range, I moseyed through the swing doors looking slick and casual, walked up to the barman and uttered those immortal words, "Slide me a glass of redevye."

The pianist stopped playing and the conversation died. OK, that part wasn't true, but I did get a drink slide. Another cowboy moment relived.

Cards on the table, I have always harboured a deep yearning for the Wild West. Those Hollywood Westerns, infamous gunslingers, grizzly prospectors and endless prairies laid the foundations in my formative years and have stayed with me ever since. Deep down, a cowboy I will always be. And southern Arizona has such a star-studded line-up of Wild West

authenticity, it could be straight out of Hollywood central casting.

Arizona is a remarkable state. The magnificent Grand Canyon in the north needs no introduction, nor does mystical Sedona, with its deep-red canyons and sandstone spires. But for me, the south of the state is where I can properly channel my inner cowboy on a road trip through the old West, following in the wake of wagon trains and outlaws.

The adventure started in Tucson, Arizona's second city and just a two-hour drive from Phoenix — but what a drive. The moment you leave Arizona's capital, you're in the Sonoran Desert, the home of the saguaro cactus, which is revered around these parts and features in every Western movie landscape.

This extraordinary plant — unique to the

Sonoran Desert — not only reaches impressive heights, but those iconic arms, pointing skywards, only begin to grow after 70 years. They are such a protected species they cannot even be moved without special permission.

Today's Tucson is quite different from its pioneer roots; a bustling metropolis with a lively university vibe, yet many downtown neighbourhoods still reflect the city's blend of Spanish, Mexican, and Native American cultures. Expect an eclectic range of retailers and some very cool restaurants, such as the organic hipster hangout 5 Points Market, or Seis Kitchen for delicious guacamole.

Don't miss Hotel Congress either, built in 1918 and notorious for being the place where gangster John Dillinger was arrested in 1934. The original interiors simply ooze character, but its courtyard breakfasts at the Cup Café



are nothing short of legendary.

Tucson is the gateway to the Saguaro National Park, home to more than two million of my favourite cactus. Spread across two sections, east and west, the Valley Overlook Trail in the western section offers dream views and some memorable sunsets.

And a few minutes' drive outside Tucson lies what has been called the

Sistine Chapel of North America. The extraordinary Mission San Xavier del Bac is a Franciscan mission right in the heart of the Tohono O'odham Nation Reservation, dating back to the 1700s when southern Arizona was part of New Spain. The intricate interior, designed by architect Ignacio Gaona and built by O'odham tribal labourers, is remarkable — something you might





High noon: living the dream at Tombstone Monument Guest Ranch



Cowboy country: the Wild West, frozen in time, at Tombstone



expect to find in an ornate cathedral in Madrid rather than the middle of a dusty desert. There are free tours most days.

Another unmissable activity on offer here is stargazing at Spencer's Observatory. Southern Arizona's famously dark sky is perfect for this and this state-of-the-art observatory atop Cat Mountain offers personal guided tours of the galaxy.

A little further out, in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, is the DeGrazia Gallery in the Sun, a ten-acre property created by Ted DeGrazia, the late Arizonan artist and architect whose spectacular body of work includes more than 15,000 original pieces.

I was shown around by executive director Lance Laber, a close friend of the DeGrazia family and

**Vintage Arizona: the vineyards of Sonoita**

a man who has dedicated his life to the artist's work. "Ted designed and built this whole place himself," Lance told me. "And after he passed, we found pieces of his work lying literally everywhere."

The Gallery building served as a gallery and home for Ted and his artist wife Marion. The myriad rooms display DeGrazia's art as it evolved over the years and visitors are free to explore the estate and even pay respects to the couple, whose last resting places are on the property.

Heading further west, you reach cowboy country proper. Just over an hour's drive along historic Highway 80 (the south west's version of Route 66) brought me to historic Tombstone — "the town too tough to die".

It was a prosperous boom town founded by prospector Ed Schieffelin who discovered a 50ft vein of silver there in 1879, heralding a massive silver rush. The population grew from 100 to 14,000 in just seven years, and the proceeds from the mines attracted outlaws, gambling and bordellos. The rest, as they say, is history.

Tombstone is no cheesy theme park reconstruction however; it feels genuinely authentic. The buildings date back to the 1880s and the town is an official American landmark. The Earps and Doc Holliday really did live here — and, yes, there is a re-enactment of the famous gunfight at the OK Corral, but it takes place in exactly the same spot where the original happened, and it is genuinely entertaining.

There's also an excellent six-mile guided tram tour, the Good Enough Trolley and Mine Tour, visiting 55 historic landmarks, while a guided underground walking tour inside one of Tombstone's original silver mines is not to be missed.

Despite the costumed actors walking around, Main Street — with its covered wooden boardwalks — is well preserved and lined with authentic Western outfitters. You'll also find the infamous Birdcage Theatre here; the site of notorious bar fights, shoot-outs and the longest poker game in history — it lasted eight years!

Just off the main drag, I also discovered Boot Hill graveyard; the

last resting place of the good, the bad and the ugly. The small site is also home to an even more unexpected find — a separate section for the town's Jewish residents.

It seems there were more than 300 Jewish residents of Tombstone in its heyday, although today little is known about the individuals buried here — not even the gravestones remain today. The graveyard itself was abandoned for decades, with its records lost, before it was restored in 1991, when the Jewish Friendship Club of Green Valley erected a monument to its Jewish inhabitants.

Town explored, it was time for my long-awaited stint in the saddle at the nearby Tombstone Monument Dude Ranch. Even though it's been rebuilt to look like a Wild West town, it is still a working cattle ranch with its own 140-year history.

My horse went by the name of Jez, a big stallion clearly impressed with the confident way I mounted up.

My bravado lasted until Becky, our ride wrangler, announced, "Just so you know, it's rattlesnake season, so keep your eyes peeled."

Fortunately, gentle Jez was a dream ride and safely carried me around the Tombstone hills, past ancient Native American petroglyphs, and old prospector monuments — and there wasn't a rattler in sight.

That night some good old boys regaled us with country and cowboy songs, and I was in Wild West heaven.

You're no longer limited to sipping whisky at the saloons either. Despite the burning heat of summer and the chilly desert winter nights here, the tiny towns of Elgin and Sonoita are at the forefront of a fast-growing wine region boasting more than 20 thriving wineries.

As I tasted some delicious wines on the sun-drenched patio of Los Milics Vineyard, I discovered that soon you'll be able to stay overnight, with a clutch of luxury casitas opening later this year for overnight stays.

A few minutes' further on, Dos Cabezas Wineworks couldn't be more different, but is just as enticing. Kelly and Todd Bostock have an entirely different approach to winemaking at this homely ranch-style property, which not only produces excellent-value wines but serves delicious wood-fired pizzas out of a trailer.

"What can be better?" said Todd, as we munched on slices of pizzas accompanied by perfectly paired wines.

Finally, it was time to drive off into the sunset, along an iconic single road disappearing into the horizon. Staring out at that timeless Sonoran landscape never stops feeling like you're starring in your very own Western. See you next time, partner.

**GETTING THERE**

▼ **DIRECT flights from Heathrow to Phoenix Sky Harbor cost from around £570 return with American Airlines. [aa.com](https://www.aa.com)**

**Two nights at Tombstone Monument Ranch costs from £381 B&B, including horse riding for all skills and ages. [tombstonemonumentranch.com](https://www.tombstonemonumentranch.com)**

**For more information, go to [visitarizona.com](https://www.visitarizona.com)**