



Travel USA



Mountains of fun, food and spectacular views await you in beautiful Arizona

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One the many spots that can be visited from the rim of the Grand Canyon. One of the true gems of Arizona. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

When deciding where to vacation, the state of Arizona can offer unlimited experiences that will keep you coming back for more.

Enjoy a hot, sunny morning in Phoenix, then take a drive north, climbing 7,000 feet, passing through mountainous terrain and breathtaking landscapes, and end up at the [Grand Canyon](#) in the afternoon.

On a recent visit to Arizona, I was lucky enough to experience this first-hand with stops in Phoenix, Flagstaff, Prescott and the Grand Canyon.

While visiting the Grand Canyon is awe-inspiring, taking a helicopter ride above it is an experience of a lifetime.

Maverick Helicopters — a pretty cool name for Top Gun fans — is set up just outside the Grand Canyon. No, our pilot Chris doesn't look like Tom Cruise, but he still is a high-flyer and a master of his craft.



Maverick Helicopters offers flights over the Grand Canyon. Truly a unique experience. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

Having never flown in a helicopter before, Chris put our nerves at ease by going through safety procedures and explaining where we were about to fly.

My wife and I got front-row seats right up there with the pilot. After lift-off, we picked up speed and flew over the Kaibab National Forest en route to the Grand Canyon.

We are told the flight path is set by the Federal Aviation Administration, so that chopper tours stay far away from the busy tourists sections of the Canyon. Given its size — more than 445-km long and up to 29-km wide — that wasn't a problem.

As we approached the edge of the Grand Canyon, the sheer size of it was hard to believe. Hovering above and looking down 6,000 feet, the mighty Colorado River looked very small.

Chris told us about the Canyon, the rock formations and the different names of the monuments. Some of the areas we flew over are so remote, they have never been touched by humans.

Flying with Maverick Helicopters is truly a unique way to experience the Grand Canyon.

But you can also visit via tour bus, car, by hiking the many trails, riding muleback, or floating down the Colorado River.

The park is massive and driving around the rim allows you to stop and experience different views from all sides.

For the adventurous types, hiking down into the Canyon is a must. Most of the trails are steep and climbing back out takes twice as long and much more effort.

Just outside the Grand Canyon sits the picturesque town of Tusayan. There you will find a visitors centre, restaurants, and hotels.

Just five minutes from the South Rim is the [Squire Resort at the Grand Canyon](#).

Recently purchased by Delaware North, the 322-room hotel and resort is undergoing a massive renovation to attract even more tourist and business.



Sales manager Greg Espinoza says they are hoping to work right through the winter in order to get the renovation done quickly. The building we stayed in had already been renovated and had been done with great attention to detail and care.

The property has many food and beverage options, including Coronado, a fine-dining restaurant, and Squire Pub, both of which we enjoyed.

There's also a banquet facility, indoor and outdoor pools, a fitness centre that is being upgraded, and a bowling and arcade area.

Just imagine hosting a work conference only a few minutes from the Grand Canyon. Work in the morning, have lunch, take a swim, and then head up to the Canyon for an afternoon of adventure. The Squire Resort is perfectly situated for visitors to the Grand Canyon.

FLAGSTAFF IS OUT OF THIS WORLD

Flagstaff is one of the more unique cities in Arizona and it will keep you entertained for days.

For starters, it is the world's first International Dark Sky City. The commitment needed to achieve such a designation demonstrates how much the residents care about the environment.

Every outdoor light must be yellow and pointing down. It's an honour system, but compliance is mandatory. People who move into the area are educated quickly by neighbours.

Having a dark sky is important for operating the historic Lowell Observatory.

Established in 1894 by Percival Lowell, today's version of the observatory offers advanced telescopes that can be used to explore the cosmos.



The telescope inside the Clark Dome at the historic Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

We took a fascinating guided tour through the facility and learned about Percival Lowell, a man who laid the groundwork for the discovery of Pluto.

We also went inside the Clark Dome, which has a working massive telescope. Visitors can look through it if weather permits.

Another hidden gem within Flagstaff is the [U.S. Geological Survey Astrogeology Science Center](#).



The front entrance of the Astrogeology Science Center. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

Bet you didn't know that every astronaut who has ever walked on the moon has trained in Flagstaff.

The topography, including the Meteor Crater and Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, resembles the surface of the moon. Astronauts are sent to Flagstaff for science training, instrument development and lunar mapping.

The staff of the Astrogeology Science Center are proud of what they have achieved and have a mission to share it with the public.

Flagstaff promotes its astronaut history with a Lunar Landmarks trail map and passport that guides you to places such as the Apollo astronaut training sites

There are many more must-see attractions in Flagstaff, including the Walnut Canyon National Monument.

Stopping in at the visitors centre beforehand is a must. The guide tells you about the rich history of the place and helps you choose which hikes would be suitable.

Taking the steps down inside the Canyon on the Island Trail is like walking back in time. There is evidence of homes of ancient inhabitants that were abandoned some 800 years ago.

It's hard to image people living in homes carved out of vertical rock faces, but the evidence is there for all to see.

The Rim Trail is much less strenuous and still offers stunning views of the canyon and cliff-dwellings below.

Other things to do in Flagstaff include the [Museum of Northern Arizona](#), the Visitor Centre, which is located in a train station, exploring the [Wupatki National Monument](#), and taking the historic downtown walking tour.

WHERE TO STAY

Located on the famous Route 66, the [American Hotel](#) recently went through a renovation and offers funky, cool space-themed decor inside the rooms.

There's also an outdoor heated swimming pool that's open year round, lawn games, and fire pits.

You can just imagine how much fun this place would be to stay at on a busy summer evening. The staff is friendly and committed to making your stay a good one.

WHERE TO EAT

Before arriving in Flagstaff, I had read a lot of good reviews about [Shift Kitchen and Bar](#) and as it turns out, they were 100% correct.

It's not often you leave a restaurant thinking, "That might have been one of the best meals I have ever had," but that was the case for us.



Some of the delicious food offered up at Shift Kitchen and Bar in Flagstaff. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Tornoto Sun

As we chatted with our cook during our meal, he told us that pastry chef and owner Dara Wong changes up the menu every couple of weeks.

Striving for culinary perfection, she is constantly coming up with new recipes to keep her customers coming back for new, bold creations.

Their delicious pickled French fries are a staple and remain on the menu. Thank goodness for that.

The scallops were prepared to perfection, as were the elote agnolotti, risotto, and pork chops.

It's hard to image Chef Wong topping the food and desserts we sampled, but I will be back, first in line, to dine there again the next time I'm in Flagstaff.

PRESCOTT IS AWESOME, PARTNER

Strolling through the main street of Prescott, then sitting down for a drink in the same place where Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday once ruled the roost is a pretty cool experience.

Famous for its cowboy history and Whiskey Row, Prescott is another fantastic town in Arizona that is well worth a visit.

Whiskey Row earned its name because of the 40 saloons it boasted once upon a time.

Back in the day, after a hard day's work, you can bet a lot of fun — and the odd shootout — took place.

Today's version of Whiskey Row is a lot more civilized, with art galleries and shopping and yes, there still are a few saloons.

We stopped in at the historic Palace Restaurant and Saloon. Along with great food, drink and service, the saloon has artefacts on display dating back well over a 100 years to a time when Whiskey Row was filled with cowboys, gold prospectors, and gamblers.

A cornerstone of Whiskey Row is Hotel St. Michael. Opened in 1901, it has stood the test of time and offers guests beautiful accommodations in rooms and suites, and it has a trendy bistro that serves savoury comfort food and a wide range of drinks.

For outdoor enthusiasts, the 7.7-km Watson Lake Loop trail is perfect for exercise and offers stunning landscapes.

During our hike, we found ourselves regularly admiring the unusual rocky terrain surrounding the lake.

There's also the Constellation Trail, Upper Goldwater Lake Trail, and Thumb Butter trail that offer great vistas and hiking.

Prescott also offers winery tours as well as a casino. At an elevation of 5,200 feet, it has four moderate (as compared to Canada) but distinct seasons.



Hiking the Constellation Trail located just outside of Prescott. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

WHERE TO STAY

[SpringHill Suites](#) is located just a short walk away from Whiskey Row and the Courthouse Plaza.

It is very inviting and has tasteful decor. The lobby has two comfortable sitting rooms with a fireplace and coffee ready for you when you need it. There's also an indoor pool and hot tub with an adjacent outdoor patio that has a fire pit and barbecue grill.

SpringHill Suites offers a really impressive breakfast at no cost to guests. What sets it apart from others is the quality and variety of the food. For example, fruit and nut options were generous and plentiful. Given the price of food these days, it was a tasty surprise.

SCOTTSDALE AND PHOENIX

Arriving in Scottsdale, it quickly becomes clear why so many Canadians vacation and spend their winter months in these vibrant cities.

From the luxury resorts, restaurants, golf courses, warm climate, culture and attractions, Scottsdale has it all.

We had the pleasure of staying at the Royal Palms Resort and Spa.

A stunning piece of property situated on the footsteps of Camelback Mountain, it was originally built as a winter home.



The front entrance of the Royal Palms Resort. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

Many years later, after significant expansion and renovations, Royal Palms Resort and Spa has 119 unique rooms, suites and villas.

The landscaping is meticulously cared for throughout the resort. Walking around, you are immersed in a very satisfying botanical gardens vibe — more on that later.

Management has done a great job providing guests with plenty of things to do. Their pool and cozy outdoor reading nooks are very popular.

They take their health and wellness seriously. The fitness centre is filled with Matrix equipment and has a Peloton bike. They also offer Defining Body, Yin & Yang Yoga and Yoga Nidra classes complimentary to guests.

After a good workout, the staff at the Alvadora Spa are ready to pamper you with massages, citrus body therapies, facials, and nail services.



Royal Palms Resort and Spa goes the extra mile to make your stay an unbelievable one. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

Scottsdale is known for its fine dining. Royal Palms Resort and Spa's T. Cook's helps live up to that reputation.

This stylish restaurant, which boasts two outdoor patios, serves up a Mediterranean menu that rotates "selections that reflect the season's bounty for breakfast, brunch, lunch, and dinner."

Royal Palms Resort and Spa is an elegance personified and well worth a visit when staying in Scottsdale.

One of the highlights of our trip was spending an evening at Desert Botanical Garden.

During the day, learn about the desert plants that can thrive in the Phoenix heat.



Las Noches de las Luminarias.



A night filled with music and lights at the Desert Botanical Garden's Las Noches de las Luminarias. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

For the holiday season evenings, it is transformed to Las Noches de las Luminarias, a popular attraction filled with candle-lit trails that wind through the gardens.

Many entertaining and talented musical acts, food and drinks made the evening even more magical.

GIDDY UP

It's not often you get to feel like you are starring in your own western movie, minus the guns and moonshine.

But that's the feeling we got when we visited [Fort McDowell Adventures](#) located in the Sonoran Desert.



Erin Mifflin is all smiles before crossing the Verde River at Fort McDowell Adventures located in the Sonoran Desert. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

We saddled up on our well-trained horses and followed our guides Charlie and Peyton out of the paddock and into the desert.

With a faithful dog following closely behind, we began our 90-minute ride surrounded by cacti, grazing cattle and beautiful vistas.

When asked if anyone ever becomes afraid while riding the horses, without hesitation, our guide Charlie calmly replied, “It’s our job to make you feel safe, there are no freak-outs.”

And indeed we did feel safe, as we were led through windy paths and even across the fairly deep Verde River — twice!

Fort McDowell Adventures also offers Jeep and Segway tours, as well as cattle drives and wagon rides and is a blast to visit.

WHERE TO EAT

Built in 1934 as a school for girls, El Chorro is an institution in the area and offers views of the Camelback and Mummy mountains while you eat food to die for.

It was raining the night we visited, but we were told most people eat on their stunning outdoor patio.



El Chorro is known for its food and elegance and beautiful scenery of Camelback and Mummy mountains. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

The menu includes delicious starters such as Crab and Tuna stack, Flash Fried Lobster Tails and five mouth-watering salads.

For entrées, the shrimp linguine and old fashioned broaster fired chicken were cooked to perfection. The menu also includes trout almondine, red wine braised beef short ribs, El Chorro vegetable steak and much more. Our server was knowledgeable and charming.

Having returning customers is always a sign of a good business. At El Chorro, the inviting atmosphere, ideal location, top-notch service and savoury food makes it clear why this restaurant is full night after night.

MERKIN VINEYARDS

Enjoying dinner at Merkin Vineyards on a hopping Friday night in the Old Town Scottsdale was a delicious experience.

The contemporary bar has a welcoming atmosphere, filled with people sharing stories over fine wine and food.

Luis and the rest of the service staff are proud to share their knowledge of their wine and where it comes from.

Produced at the Estate Vineyards in the Verde Valley and Willcox, Ari., it is stored in concrete barrels.

They produce their own fruits and vegetables in gardens and orchards to insure their wine is uniquely theirs.

Their Chupacabra line of wines are very popular, as are the new Caduceus wines.

To go along with the wine, they specialize in artisan pizzas baked in wood fired ovens and also serve up many delicious pastas.

There's a section on the menu called "Gardens" that included foods such as bacon dates and warm citrus olives produced in their farms and local growers.

Merkin Vineyards checks all the boxes as far as food, drink, atmosphere, service and enhances the already great Old Town Scottsdale.



Merkin Vineyards is a contemporary bar with great food and wine. PHOTO BY PAUL FERGUSON /Toronto Sun

THE GLADLY

Boasting over 300-plus whiskies, The Gladly is a popular eatery that has a great atmosphere and vibe to it.

It is famous for its delicious Chopped Salad, which includes smoked salmon, couscous, arugula, pepitas, Asiago Cheese, currants, dried super sweet corn, marinated tomatoes with buttermilk herb dressing.

Some of the Gladly's other menu items include roasted Brussels sprouts, Bernie's Mac 'N Cheese, Chimichurri Chicken, Garrison's Poke Bowl, Faroe Islands Salmon and much more.

Because of how the endless number of experiences Arizona can offer, its climate, and friendly residents, it is hard to imagine finding a destination more worthy of your vacation.