

From native indians to Route 66, there's more to Arizona than the Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon, Horseshoe Bend and Monument Valley often steal the headlines, but the southwest state of Arizona has some relatively unknown gems that are definitely worth fitting into your itinerary.

If you're flying in or out of the capital city Phoenix, it's worth exploring for a day. Highlights include the zoo on the outskirts of the city and the Desert Botanical Garden, a peaceful spot full of cacti of every shape and size, including the iconic towering saguaros, with their arms reaching up to the sky, found only in the Sonoran Desert.

Petrolheads and those fascinated by the "great American road trip" should stop by Flagstaff, an old railroad town in the mountains, on their way to the Grand Canyon (it's only half an hour's drive to the Canyon's South Rim). Here you can take a walking tour around parts of the old Route 66 highway, which until 1985 stretched from Chicago to California, then stop off for refreshment at one of the town's excellent craft breweries. For a more exhilarating way to explore the historic tarmac, hire a Harley-Davidson motorbike (or, as I did, cling on to the back of a more experienced rider).

Another side to Arizona that shouldn't be overlooked is its important Native American heritage. The Navajo Nation is the largest tribe in the US, and the reservation stretches into Utah and New Mexico, with some 170,000 Navajo people still living in it today.

Monument Valley and Antelope Canyon are its two most popular – and photographed – sights, but for a more personal and spiritual delve into Navajo history, visit Canyon de Chelly (pronounced "de shay"). While anything looks small compared to the Grand Canyon, it's still a big, impressive sight, winding deeply through layers of rust-coloured rock, and has been a home to tribes for thousands of years.

Use Thunderbird Lodge (a Native American trading post built in 1902 and now simple motel-style accommodation) as your base then take a bumpy jeep ride through the base of the canyon with a Navajo guide, where you'll spot ancient paintings, pathways and stone dwellings impossibly high up on the cliff faces while getting an insight into tribal customs and beliefs.

Sedona is also something special. Once the site of Native American trade routes and meeting points, it's now a beautiful, upmarket holiday town with excellent hiking trails around the red rock landscape (the inspiration for Walt Disney's Thunder Mountain). Many also flock to Sedona to



Clockwise, from above: The dramatic Sedona red rocks at sunset; riding motorcycles on the famous Route 66 at Flagstaff; the road leading to Monument Valley

experience the area's "vortexes" – hotspots of magnetic, electrical or spiritual energy. I admit I was skeptical at first, but I genuinely felt a physical buzzing through my body when I stood on top of the ancient rocks.

One of the best meals I ate in Arizona was at a little local hotspot called Amigo Café in Kayenta, on the way to Monument Valley. Unassuming from the outside, it serves simple but tasty Mexican food with plenty of traditional Navajo fry bread.

There's also a surprise down the road. Inside the town's Burger King is an exhibition honouring the role of the Navajo code talkers during the Second World War. Using their own language, they were able to send hundreds of encrypted messages, ultimately saving thousands of American lives.

Whether hitting the big sights or heading off the

beaten track, there's something fascinating for everyone in sunny Arizona. **S**

Laura Mulley

Laura travelled with the Arizona Office of Tourism (visitarizona.com). Harley-Davidson Motorcycle rides cost from £100 for day hire (eaglerider.com/flagstaff). Thunderbird Lodge offers rooms from £162 per night (grandcanyonlodges.com/lodging/thunderbird-lodge/). Hosted Canyon de Chelly Jeep Tours cost from £126 for a three-hour private tour for one to three people (canyondechellybeautywayjeeptours.com). A Sedona Vortex Jeep Tour with Safari Jeep Tours costs from £57 (safarijeeptours.com).