

Why Arizona is the ultimate destination for the ultra-fit and ultra-rich

This under the radar location is home to a flurry of professional athletes, world class facilities and equally highbrow coaches

By Eilidh Hargreaves

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Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain Resort is one of the most luxurious in Arizona

Arizona is famous for its old country western vibe, sierra-filtered hue and the gigantic, pronged cacti standing guard absolutely everywhere. It is known for incredible Mexican food (don't insult the locals by enquiring about 'Tex Mex' - Arizonians like the real, authentic deal) and, more recently the state has become a popular destination for spiritual retreats - Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King check in to the ultra-luxurious Miraval resort in Tucson together annually, which offers 'transformational experiences'.

It is not, however, widely known as a top sporting destination, despite obviously suitable geography, which ranges from mountains to boiling hot stretches of desert. The city of Boulder, Colorado, which itself sits at altitude a little north-east of Arizona, has been regarded as a fitness centre for decades, with a bounty of triathletes, cyclists and runners taking up residence.

But word on the block is it's getting a little crowded - and there's nothing luxurious about that. So perhaps it's time to give Arizona a chance. It's warmer, for a start. And, under the radar, a flurry of professional athletes migrate there annually to train at world class facilities, with equally highbrow coaches. If you know who to call - and are willing to pay a certain amount - you, too, can enjoy this world class experience and train like a pro.

From the performance sprinting centre in Scottsdale where Olympians train, to the park high up in the Flagstaff mountains where you'll find Mo Farah and the hot desert region of Tucson where one of the world's most esteemed coaches resides, Arizona has become the ultimate destination for the ultra-rich, ultra-fit.

Scottsdale, Phoenix

Just 45 minutes from Phoenix airport, the desert city of Scottsdale is a gateway to long stretches of road and challenging climbs. Triathletes, marathon runners and hikers pound the streets, roads and trails that see 365 days of sunshine a year, and key events like the Mesa marathon (a Boston qualifier) and Ironman Arizona run nearby.

Many professional athletes live locally, including triathlete Kristen Kasper, who will compete for the USA in the Tokyo Olympics this summer, and Olympic medallist sprinter, Schillonie Calvert of Jamaica. Alistair Brownlee also spent time in the area fine-tuning ahead of the World Ironman Championships last year.



The state is sprinkled with trails and cacti | CREDIT: Feifei Cui-Paoluzzo/Getty

Time trial bikes whizz over long rolling roads, which are also ideal for recovery runs and interval sessions, and a score of mountains provides serious climbs to tackle. Then there's the facilities. Unlike in the UK, sports in the USA are often oversized and hyper funded, and one of the best training organisations in the world is [Altis](#), based at high performance sports centre [EXOS](#), a ten-minute drive from Scottsdale.

A bounty of Olympic track and field athletes are known to train here, and the mere mention that I was going drew gasps from my runner friends. The centre is an athlete's dream: a sleek warehouse, with a massive bootcamp-style central gym, groups of international competitors working out and ten massage tables

ready for action. The gym leads out to an outdoor drills track and grassy field, where coaches focus on athletes' technique.

Elsewhere on the property there's a lap pool, ice bath, basketball court and throwing grounds. Scoring training sessions with a coach here will give you a serious edge. (£POA; [altis.world](#))



Altis is one of the best coaching centres in the world | CREDIT: Altis World

Hiking and trail running are extremely popular ways to get fit here, too. Paradise Valley, Scottsdale's ultra-exclusive neighbouring town (which has just been ranked the 14th most affluent town in the USA in Bloomberg's [2020 analysis of US census data](#)) is home to Camelback Mountain, the best known climb in the area.

The great hump of red rock with panoramic city views proves a challenging but short ascent for hikers and runners alike. As the heat soars throughout the day, it's best to head out in the early morning to stay safe.

[Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort and Spa](#) sits on the mountain itself. A suite- and villa-only hotel, it is imbued with a knowing sense of privacy and discretion, which is perhaps why Beyoncé and Jay Z chose to spend their honeymoon there. Aside from its natural beauty, the resort is a fantastic base for a luxurious, fitness-focused trip.



The outdoor, candlelit bathtub in spa suites is a bonus at the end of a long day at Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain

From the lavish spa suites, the infinity pool, training pool, gym and tennis courts are just a few steps away. The hotel has long standing relationships with several athletes and coaches to enrich the service it offers. A swimming lesson was arranged for me with Misty Hyman, who won the gold medal for 200m butterfly in the 2000 Olympics.

I was impressed that the staff I encountered throughout my stay knew Hyman as if she were part of the family. The session itself was exceptional - she provided in-depth feedback and was open in discussing her fascinating career. Being coached by someone of this calibre in private, a one-minute walk from my room, was real luxury.

After a day of exercise, the tranquil stone spa is the best place to unwind. The 60-minute salt stone massage nearly sent me to sleep, but I felt instantly revitalised afterwards, as I padded back up to the central infinity pool for an afternoon of relaxation and reading.

The most exceptional moment of my stay here was a sunset dinner at the hotel's restaurant Elements. Our booth looked out of panoramic windows onto Paradise Valley as it turned pink then purple, until finally the mountains became dark cutouts in the sky. Fresh, seasonal Asian cuisine and Californian wine provided a great way to refuel, ready for the next day.

At Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort and Spa, Villa Luna, where Beyoncé and Jay Z stayed, starts at \$3,500 in off peak months (summer) and at \$4,100 in peak months (winter). There is a two night minimum on all eight villas. Spa Suites start from \$469 in summer, and from \$949 in winter;

sanctuaryoncamelback.com

Flagstaff

Vast mountains, partially obscured by a low hanging mist, emerge from planes of ponderosa pines and yellowed grass in Flagstaff. Located high up in northern Arizona, the city sits at a starting elevation of 2,100m, and is a gateway to summits that include Humphrey's Peak at 3,851m - and the Grand Canyon.



A view onto snow-capped Humphrey's Peak in Flagstaff | CREDIT: Getty

Flagstaff is known as a summer training location among athletes, and an escape from the heat for those from elsewhere in Arizona. Altitude training is an important element in many endurance athletes' annual programmes, for which Flagstaff is geographically perfect. For comparison, St Moritz, Switzerland, and Boulder, Colorado, which are both famous destinations for top elites, sit at 1,800m and 1,624m respectively.

But what does altitude actually achieve? "The thinner air will make your body start to produce more red blood cells (which carry oxygen to the muscles) so it makes more oxygen available to the muscle and will ultimately improve your aerobic capacity," says Dan Bergland, sport physiologist at [Hypo2](#), an altitude training specialist in Flagstaff.

Performance boost isn't instant, however. I am told that one month at altitude above 2,000m is ideal. "We see the biggest changes in weeks three to four," says Bergland. "When you go back to sea level, the increase in cells will last three weeks to a month, but there is a residual effect. You will initially increase your maximum aerobic capacity, and three or four months down the line that is maintained even though those red blood cells don't exist anymore."

Symptoms of training at altitude include a shortage of breath, initially decreased aerobic capacity and delays in recovery. My swimming session on the first day was manageable, but I found myself more out of breath than I usually would be, and the next day I was exhausted. Over the ideal period of one month, your body would adapt to cope with this.



Mo Farah running in Flagstaff | CREDIT: [Twitter.com/mo_farah/](https://twitter.com/mo_farah/)

At city level is Northern Arizona University (NAU) which has top level facilities that anyone can use for a fee, from an aquatic complex to a track and field. But the 215-acre Buffalo Park, which sits above the city, is where a lot of the action happens.

Summer here is peak season, when you'll find athletes such as Mo Farrah charging around his favourite trails, and countless national sporting teams, from UK Athletics to USA Track and Field, checking into next door Hypo2 for testing. Because of the level of professional athlete Hypo2 deals with, this is where the best and most qualified trainers and specialists in Flagstaff work. *(Contact the team for one-on-one sessions and group training classes, £POA; hypo2sport.com).*

In order to get the real benefits from altitude, like the professionals, you need to not only train there but sleep there too. Flagstaff is a nostalgic old city, which was originally built up on the lumber, railroad and ranching industries, and still feels very old school. Read: motels, thrift stores, Route 66. In terms of a place to rest your head, the city is lacking in ultra luxury, even though it provides a world-leading training experience.



Hotel Little America is situated in a huge ponderosa pine forest

That said, I found hotel [Little America](#) a sweet and extremely welcoming spot, and have been told it's the best in town. The suites (mine was a Fireplace Suite) are most comfortable and set out with a lavish ranch-style feel.

An extraordinarily cosy bed, living area and working area were made all the more homely by the presence of the crackling fire. In summer, the hotel's pool and hot tub are open for use, and all year round the ponderosa forest in which it is situated is open for walks and runs.

Luxury cabins are also available through Pine Canyon, which is based a little out of the centre of Flagstaff but includes facilities like a fitness centre, tennis courts and a spa. At night, be sure to visit the [Lowell Observatory](#) for a clear view of the constellations and to learn about its fascinating history.

If you are willing to forgo the benefits of sleeping at altitude, in favour of a super luxurious experience, head instead to Sedona, a city slightly below Flagstaff, and check into [L'Auberge de Sedona](#), [Enchantment Resort](#) or [Amara Resort and Spa](#).

At hotel Little America, Fireplace Suites range from \$499 - \$599 based on availability and season; flagstaff.littleamerica.com.

Luxury lodges at Pine Canyon start from \$750; pinecanyon.net

Tucson

The golden desert city of Tucson in southern Arizona, has vast geographic diversity. From The Loop, a flat bike ride along The Wash (131 miles of interconnected cycling routes along the city's riverbeds) to the great Mount Lemmon, which is the highest of the region's Santa Catalina mountains, rising to an elevation of nearly 3,000 metres, there is much training to be done here.



The road to Mount Lemmon, the highest peak in Tucson | CREDIT: Christopher A. Jones/Getty

Every November, thousands of pros, locals and visitors enter [El Tour de Tucson](#), the 100- and 50-mile cycling races through the dusty, closed roads of the city. The day has a festival-like atmosphere and the locals come out in force. Cycling in general is a big thing here (Pima County and the City of Tucson opened The Loop in 2016 to encourage the sport in the city) and wherever you go, you'll be in the company of others - a happy comfort in a new place.

The city is home to a number of the world's best athletes, including Ironman champion Ben Hoffman, and sees a host of visiting athletes during the warm winter months. Lance Armstrong is one of the most famous athletes known to have spent time training there. Tucson's base altitude is just over 700m, so training will feel slightly harder, albeit less so than in Flagstaff.



The relaxation pool at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort

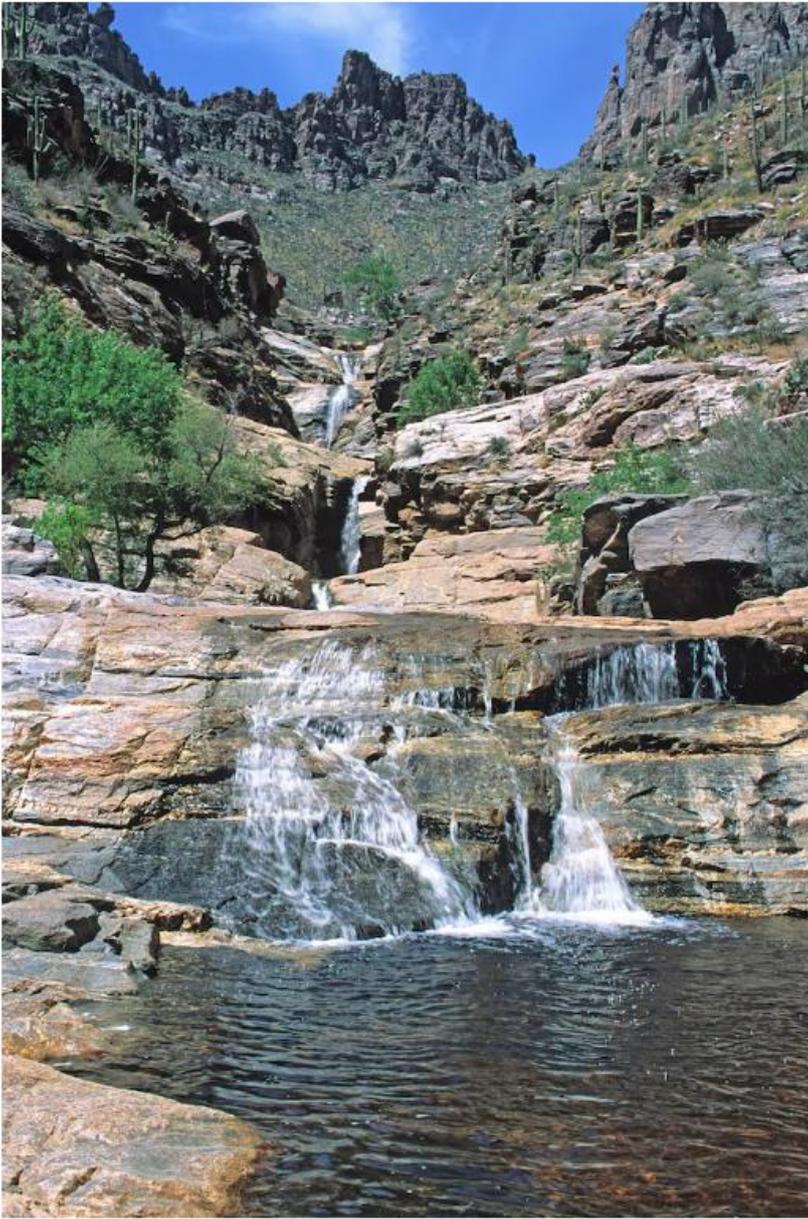
To lead you in your training ventures here, it's worth hooking up with a top coach. Tucson happens to be home to one of triathlon's legends, Jimmy Riccitello. Head referee for Ironman and world-leading coach, Riccitello is a former XTerra world champion who has worked with many of the best in the business.

Riccitello took me to the Sabino Canyon recreation area, located in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains and the Coronado National Forest - an extremely popular running and hiking area, with a number of trails for various levels of ability. We ran the road out to Bear Canyon, which features steady rolling climbs over rocky terrain (watch out for the cacti standing on either side - that's not where you want to take a tumble).

Riccitello tells me this area is where elite marathon runners often come to train, including four-time US Olympian and friend of Mo Farah, Abdi Abdirahman. For those with a head for heights, the Phonline trail, a 15km out-and-back route with an elevation gain of approximately 500m is said to be exceptional.

[Loews Ventana Canyon Resort](#) is primed for fitness-related holidays, with two pools (one a specific training pool), newly refurbished gym, spa and golf course. Outside of the heart of the city, in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, it feels quiet, remote and removed from the hubbub. Cooling down from the day with laps in the training pool is certainly an on-site bonus - and the sunset, which can be admired from the balcony of your suite, is quite magnificent.

Tucson has a young, cool vibe and to add to its burgeoning reputation, in 2015 it became the first UNESCO City of Gastronomy designated in the United States. The Flying V Bar and Grill is a stellar choice on the hotel property, especially if you enjoy wagyu beef.



Seven Falls, which marks the end of the Bear Canyon trail | CREDIT: Wild Horizon/Getty

Over in downtown Tucson, don't miss dinner at [Penca](#), which pays homage to the diverse traditions of Mexico City. The small plates, created to share, are zingy and inventive reflecting Spanish, French and indigenous ingredients made with Mexican techniques.

At Loews Ventana Canyon Resort, the recommended Saguaro suites start from \$479.00 per night; loewshotels.com

To find out more visit visitarizona.com, discoverflagstaff.com and experiencescottsdale.com

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/luxury/travel/arizona-ultimate-destination-ultra-rich-ultra-fit/>