



Way out West

Go beyond the Grand Canyon to southern Arizona and discover a wealth of adventures from Sonora to Scottsdale, writes **Laura French**

The gravel crunches underfoot as we bump along a dusty desert track. In front, marbled cliffs jut up in colossal, finger-like shards, dominating the skyline with their dusky pink silhouette; below, the river meanders peacefully, as iridescent as a shimmering sheet of glass.

I'm at Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch, a scenic lodge in the heart of Mesa, Arizona, exploring the grounds on ➤

Saguaro Lake
Guest Ranch

CULTURAL
ATTRACTIONS

Goldfield Ghost Town, Mesa

Half an hour outside of downtown Mesa sits this abandoned 19th-century gold-mining town, now recreated and turned into a tourist attraction. Expect a Wild West-style strip of characterful wooden shops and attractions. The mine tour is especially interesting, with an actor-guide taking visitors underground to explore the history of the town and the challenging life of a miner during the gold rush.

Mission San Xavier del Bac, Tucson

Dubbed the ‘Sistine Chapel of North America’ thanks to its impressive array of religious art, this immaculate, white mission church is considered one of the best-preserved examples of Spanish architecture in the US. Visit to explore its elaborate interior and intricate, dome-topped facade, set against a sweeping mountain backdrop.

Talesin West, Scottsdale

Built to reflect the natural scenery of the McDowell Mountains, this Unesco-listed design feat was the project and winter home of legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Visitors can tour its eclectic, slanted-roof rooms, and learn about Wright’s ‘organic architecture’ concept via an insightful audio guide.

Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum, Tucson

This outdoor wildlife sanctuary is fascinating – a trail leads from botanical gardens to reptile rooms, hummingbird aviaries, coyote habitats and plenty more.



ABOVE: Saguaro cacti in Sabino Canyon PICTURES: Shutterstock/Wirestock Creators; Rhonda Spencer

horseback. It’s one of several memorable adventures I have during my stay here; one morning, I head out on a kayak, gliding down the Salt River as wild horses graze on grassy banks and giant tangerine-orange rocks soar into the sky. In the evening, I venture off on a hiking trail, watching as the landscape turns deep ruby at sunset. It feels as if I’ve stepped into a John Wayne movie.

In fact, the whole Mesa region looks like something from a cowboy flick, yet still remains off the radar for many travellers to Arizona. While most flock north to the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley and Sedona, fewer venture south – but

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after a week exploring the ins and outs of the sprawling Sonoran Desert, I think they’re missing a trick.

DESERT DAYS

It wasn’t just Saguaro Lake that had me charmed. After the ranch, I travelled to Tucson, Arizona’s second-largest city, which is a

two-hour drive farther south and sits right in the heart of the desert. It’s another familiar view as the setting for many a western.

Among the hoard of outdoor attractions is Saguaro National Park, a 36,000-hectare expanse that flanks the city to the east and west. Like the ranch, it’s named after its large population of saguaro cacti, the giant structures that can exceed 12m and are native to the Sonoran Desert. Hiking trails criss-cross the park, but I opted for a loop drive instead to escape the heat, winding carefree along an empty road. Viewpoints along the way offered sweeping vistas over the biscuit-hued mountains and ➤

DESTINATIONS

THE US | ARIZONA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

McDowell Sonoran Preserve; Mission San Xavier del Bac; Saguaro Lake Ranch; kayaking on the Salt River

PICTURES: Visit Tucson; Slaven Gujic; Shutterstock/86Eric_Anthony_Mischke 86



vast, scrubby plains, flecked here and there with patches of rugged greenery and cacti.

COOL CANYON

Tucson's crowning glory is the Sabino Canyon – a deep gorge carved into the Santa Catalina Mountains by a sparkling emerald creek, where jagged granite cliffs plunge into the scenic valley.

Walking trails wind through the canyon, with varying lengths to suit different abilities, but for those who'd rather rest their legs, there's a round-trip road train that makes several stops along the way. I rode halfway and made the downhill hike back and it was well worth the effort, with kaleidoscopic boulders spread across a rushing stream, with the silence interrupted only by the sound of the water trickling.

Tucson's crowning glory is Sabino Canyon – a deep gorge carved into the mountains

CITY SCENES

The gateway to this phenomenal rural scenery was the rather more urban setting of Scottsdale, where my trip had begun. In this polished Phoenix suburb, I got my introduction to the Sonoran Desert, exploring the McDowell Sonoran Preserve on a guided hike with REI Co-op Adventure Center.

My guide taught me a great deal about this unique landscape – the lushest desert in the world, thanks to two rainy seasons – as

we explored the hilly slopes of the Lost Dog Wash Trailhead, taking in views of McDowell Mountain, a monolithic hulk on the horizon.

I then ventured to nearby Papago Park, full of magma-like red-orange rock formations, before the 10-minute pilgrimage to the Hole in the Rock – an ochre sandstone formation perched atop a hill, whose gaping great hole offers sweeping views over the city.

DUSTLAND FAIRYTALE

The most memorable moment, though, came on my final day in Phoenix, when I embarked on a sunrise hot-air balloon flight with Rainbow Ryders.

Linger in the cool desert air at 5am, we watched as the crew blasted flames into the balloon, then clambered into the basket ➤

WHERE TO stay

Mountain Shadows Resort, Scottsdale

Set in Scottsdale's chic Paradise Valley with Camelback Mountain for a backdrop, this plush resort offers a photogenic split-level outdoor pool and whirlpool bath, plus an acclaimed golf course and upscale restaurant, Hearth 61. Rooms are sleek and spacious, and downtown Scottsdale is a 10-minute drive away. Deluxe rooms start at \$214 a night.

mountainshadows.com

Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch, Mesa

Originally built in 1928 as a camp for workers constructing a nearby dam, this historic retreat on the Salt River offers a true escape in spectacular surroundings. It's home to 20 cabins with a rustic feel, plus a quiet outdoor pool, dining room and communal area decked out with traditional wooden interiors and ranch memorabilia. King cabins start at \$194 a night, including breakfast (minimum stay of two nights).

saguarolakeranch.com

The Tuxon Hotel, Tucson

This boutique Marriott outpost is bright, colourful and quirky, with a bar, restaurant and lively outdoor pool (popular with younger groups as well as families), plus a busy calendar of cultural events. Local artworks decorate crisp-white rooms, and it's handily located with the buzzy Mercado San Agustin a three-minute drive away and downtown 10 minutes away by car. King rooms start at \$101 a night.

marriott.com

and drifted gently into the air.

Gliding over the desert-scape was nothing short of surreal. I watched as the sky turned from peach and lilac to pastel-blue and topaz, the desert rising and falling in a camel-coloured sea of sand below, accompanied by the silhouettes of other hot-air balloons floating around us. It was one

of my most magical moments.

This region of Arizona might not always get the glory of its northerly counterparts, but that's all part of the charm. For clients who want to see another side to a sprawling state that has all the western magic one could wish for, there's a lot more to the great Arizona outdoors than just the Grand Canyon. **TW**

BOOK IT

America As You Like It combines two nights at Mountain Shadows Resort in Scottsdale, two nights at Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch in Mesa and three nights at The Tuxon in Tucson from £1,985 per person, travelling in May 2025. The price is based on two sharing a room and includes British Airways flights from Heathrow to Phoenix and seven days' car hire. americaasyoulikeit.com

Inspiring Travel offers a luxury self-drive itinerary that combines adventures in Scottsdale and Tucson (including a ranch stay) with Sedona, Lake Powell and the Grand Canyon. The 14-night trip, Discover Arizona's Canyon, Deserts & Ranches, costs from £4,899 per person, including accommodation, ranch activities, car hire and flights from Heathrow, departing March 1, 2025. inspiringtravel.co.uk



Flying high over Phoenix

PICTURES: Rainbow Ryders/Chris Bank; Visit Phoenix