

Blazing the Desert Trails of Scottsdale

By BRAD BARTH 05.13.2011



No matter what people are talking about in Scottsdale, the conversation always seems to wind up in the same place: the heat.

News flash, people: the desert is hot! There, now that we got that out of the way, let's talk about what else the great outdoors of Scottsdale has to offer aside from blazing temperatures — like an array of trailblazing adventures across the stunning Sonoran Desert, home to the famed saguaro cactus and its giant prickly arms that are almost cute enough to hug. Almost.

On my recent Sonoran sojourn, I ambitiously signed up for three distinctively different departures into the wilderness, each offering the opportunity to behold, up close and personal, the desert's forbidding beauty. Over the course of three consecutive days, I would get to explore Arizona's stunning landscape on four wheels, two wheels and my own two feet.

EAT MY DUST!



Excursion No. 1 was as an exhilarating all-terrain vehicle romp through the Fort McDowell mountain preserve, a beautiful stretch of desert located on the Yavapai Native American reservation. Yes, there's a nearby casino operated by the local tribe, but there would be no time to lose money. Today was about hitting the road, or rather the "off-road," with the folks at Green Zebra Adventures, a touring company specializing in Tomcars, which are repurposed, open-air Israeli military vehicles built to handle the demands of harsh desert terrain.

Eagerly strapping myself into the Tomcar, I was ready to get down and dirty... literally. In fact, the vehicles can kick up so much dust that tour guides have been known to blast guests clean afterwards with a compressed air hose. (Although apparently they have halted this practice.) As it turned out, however, a pair of goggles and a bandana were more than enough protection from the elements.

My driving partner Shelley, a fellow journalist who was visiting from Canada, took the driver's seat first as I grabbed my camcorder and captured video from the passenger perspective. Just for fun, I would nickname the various stretches of dirt trail as Shelley approached them: "Here comes Dead Man's Drop, Rattlesnake Ridge, Rockslide Corner," etc. Fortunately, none of my foreboding monikers proved to be prescient. At the second of our three designated stops, we switched places and I took over the wheel. Driving was a blast — every banked turn, sudden dip and undulating hill was its own mini-adventure as I carved my way through the desert.

Our stops took us to numerous scenic points, including the banks of the Verde River, a surprisingly lush and green swath of land that cuts through the arid surroundings like an oasis. Surface bubbles on the water hinted at plenty of fish activity, though fishing is not allowed here. I kept my eyes peeled for additional wildlife — previous tours have encountered everything from wild mustangs and javelina (pig-like rodents — they say you can smell them before you see them) to bobcats and even mountain lions. Other than a gecko lizard and a small, slithery snake that Shelley spotted, there wasn't much to be found today — that is, until our tour guide took us to a special lookout set up by wildlife officials, where we could observe a fledgling bald eagle preparing to leave its nest. Peering through telescopes, we watched, mesmerized, as the young bird experimented with flapping its wings, perhaps only days away from moving out of his parents' place.

Green Zebra Tours are priced at \$129 per person if two drivers share a car, or \$179 for a single driver (kids under 12 accompanied by an adult are \$59, but they can't drive). And while that's hardly a drop in the bucket, how many times in your life do you get to drive something as badass as a Tomcar?

OVER THE HUMP



Don't worry. Brad's only pretending to exhausted on his hike (we think).

The next day's adventure required a bleary-eyed 5:30 a.m. wake-up call, but then again, if you're planning to hike up an Arizonian mountain, it's best to do it in the morning, before the mid-day sun really gets cooking. (See that? Now I'm talking about the heat.)

Reaching an elevation of approximately 2,700 feet, Camelback Mountain is a famous granite and red sandstone rock formation in Phoenix's Echo Canyon Recreation Area that resembles the silhouetted head and hump of, you guessed it, a camel. The mountain challenges hikers to four trails of varying difficulty. The two options leading to the top, the Cholla and Echo Canyon Trails, are both considered strenuous workouts, resembling more of a rock scramble than a pure hike.

I took on the 1.2-mile Echo Canyon Trail, a breathtaking climb in more ways than one. In fact, it took all but a few sets of railroad-tie steps at the base of the mountain to make me start huffing and puffing like a chain smoker. Of course, it didn't help that I wasn't wearing proper sneakers or climbing shoes, and that I accidentally spilled water all over myself when I failed to fully seal my wearable hydration system. Seriously, I would last about five minutes alone in the desert before the vultures would get me.

Luckily for me, I was accompanied by Kevin Cherilla, one of a small team of brave men who famously guided blind adventurer Erik Weihenmayer to the summit of Mt. Everest in 2001. An Arizona resident who uses Camelback as his training grounds, Cherilla is the founder of KC Summits, an organization that arranges expeditions for aspiring adventurers, including those with physical disabilities. Using his skills as a motivational speaker, Kevin coaxed me up the mountainside with minimal anxiety, punctuating our ascent with stories of his travels, which have taken him to five of the world's Seven Summits.

The climb includes a dauntingly steep slick-rock section that requires the assistance of metal handrails, followed by a couple of stretches featuring dizzying drop-offs. The second half of the trip consists of largely rocky terrain, with bulky boulders serving as natural stepping stones. The majestic views throughout the trek and the exciting surprises sprinkled along the way — including caves, desert flora and unique rock formations such as the "Praying Monk" — inspired me to push through my fatigue and keep pressing toward the peak, which boasts a 360-degree panoramic view of the Phoenix-Scottsdale area. Regrettably, as I approached the one-mile marker, I ran out of time and had to turn around prematurely. Still, at that point there was little doubt in my mind that I had that mountain conquered (No, really, I did!).

TRAINING WHEELS, ANYONE?

They say you never forget how to ride a bicycle. If that's true, then I must be the exception that proves the rule.

My final desert excursion was a mid-afternoon, mountain bike tour through the trails of the expansive McDowell Sonoran Preserve. Concerned that urban sprawl was rapidly shrinking the natural desert environment, the city of Scottsdale helped established this preserve over the last two decades by turning roughly one-third of its land, including its share of the McDowell Mountain range, into a non-developmental zone. Today, this scenic stretch of unspoiled land offers sweeping Southwestern vistas, untouched by man.

It was here that the desert finally beat me. Biking an intermediate trail with my guide from Arizona Outback Adventures (a half-day bike tour costs \$100-\$125), my sore legs were unprepared to endure the course's long, deceptively uphill stretches of road. The loose gravel only made the ride trickier, especially considering that the narrow trail was lined on both sides with spiny cacti that I did not want to make acquaintance with. After about 15 minutes into the approximately two-hour excursion, I made a U-turn and took the Ride of Shame back to the van. Hey, I did just hike up a mountain, you know!

With that said, the other bicyclists on my tour had little difficulty traversing the picturesque trails and found the experience to be a lot of fun. Moreover, as I headed back in the other direction, it quickly became evident that the return trip was more enjoyable, since I was now going downhill. I'll have to remember that next time I decide to go biking: downhill excursions only. Well, either that or get in shape.

Three days exploring the Scottsdale desert, from three very unique perspectives. After that, there was just one more thing I was ready to explore — a nice, cool bed.