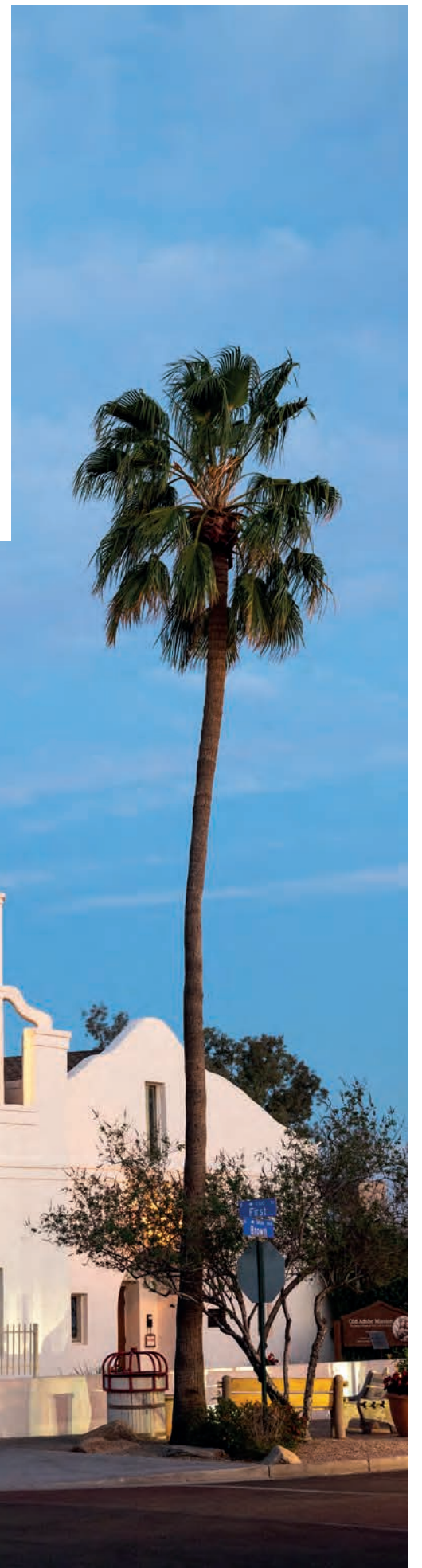


# DESERT DREAMING

SCOTTSDALE'S OASIS-LIKE POSITION HAS LONG APPEALED TO ARTISTS, MUSICIANS AND EXPLORERS, AND MAKES IT THE IDEAL BASE FOR DESERT ADVENTURES.

WORDS: LYNN HOUGHTON  
PHOTOS: JORDAN BANKS





Just devils appear, whipping up sand in a circular frenzy like mini tornados. These stretch and expand 65ft into the sky with incredible ferocity and remind me of the gyrating inflatable tube men that inhabit car forecourts. They seem to be alive, angrily scooping up pale sand from the valley floor, flinging it up into the sky then back down to earth again.

My vantage point is the roof of an eight-storey tower at the Hotel Valley Ho. Built in 1956, just five years after Scottsdale was incorporated, this property has kept much of its original '50's style. Though Scottsdale has expanded from a one-square-mile dot on the map to the sprawling city it is today, only a few buildings remain from the original settlement, including a 1930s adobe church, the former post office (now Porters Western Saloon) and the Mexican mercantile. Artistic souls have long been

drawn to this desert settlement, including painter Fritz Scholder, performers Nils Lofgren and Stevie Nicks, and renowned architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Paolo Soleri.

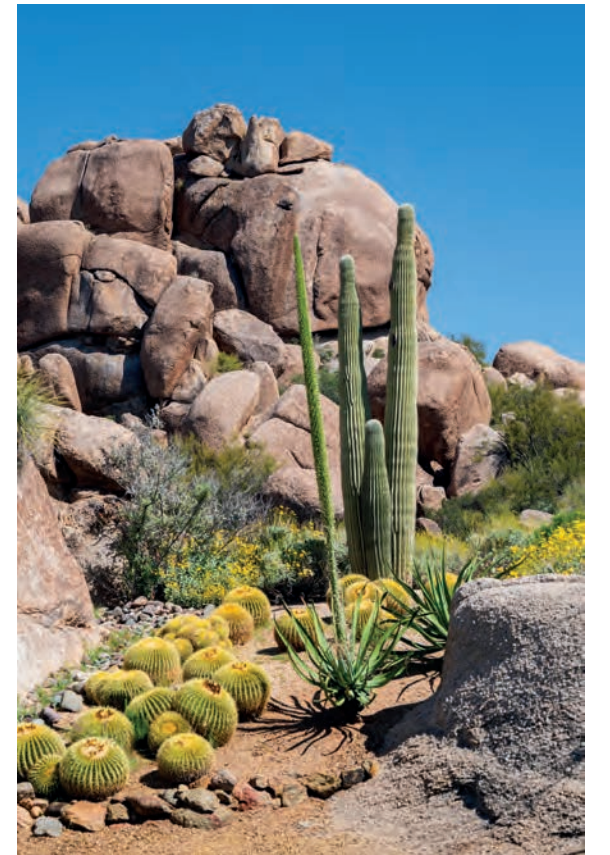
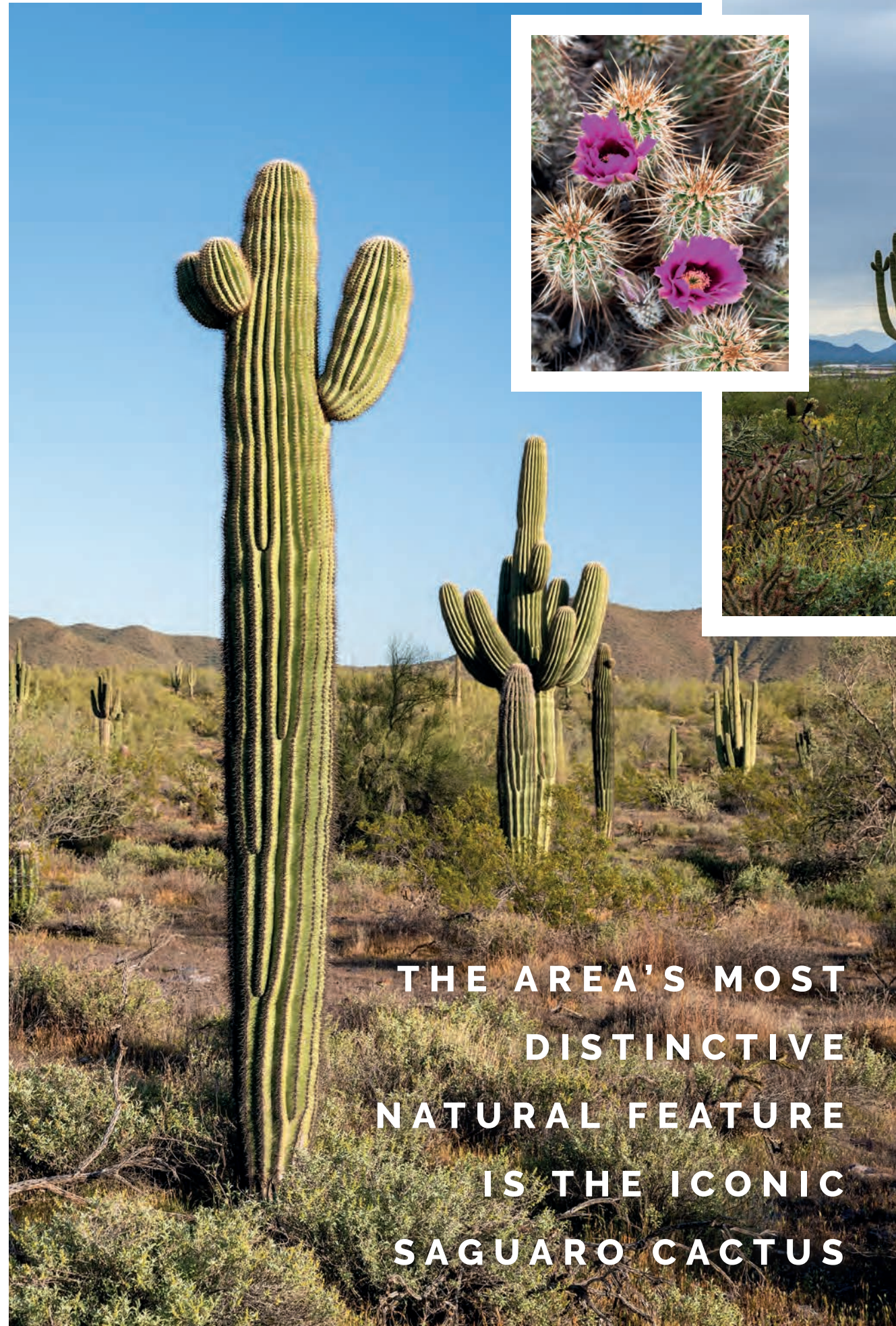
Looking east, flat sun-baked land sprawls for miles under searingly blue cloudless skies, punctuated only by the soaring heights of the McDowell Mountains. Much of this vista is reservation land belonging to the Akimel O'odham tribe, whose ancestors migrated here millennia ago. Their name translates to "People of the river", but when this early Indigenous clan met the colonising Spanish, they were incorrectly called "Pima" – a name that stuck. The O'odham thrived along the Salt and Gila rivers for many hundreds of years, creating life-giving canals that are still in use today.



**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Hot-air balloons taking off for an early morning flight.

**THIS SPREAD**  
**CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM TOP LEFT:**  
Hotel Valley Ho; Trading Post in Scottsdale's Old Town; The Old Adobe Mission; Pool at the Valley Ho Hotel.



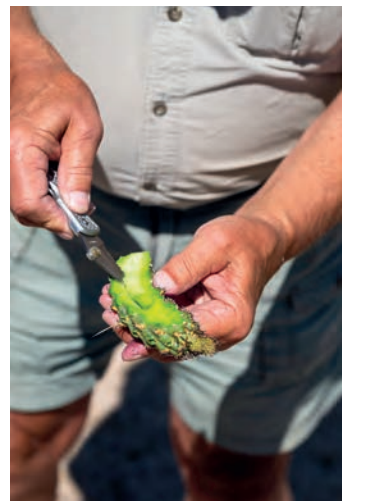


By a country mile, the area's most distinctive natural feature is the iconic saguaro cactus. Tall, thin with extending 'arms', they are only found in the Sonoran Desert, and initially only grow an inch a year. After ten years, this accelerates to two inches per annum and these prickly giants can achieve heights of over 130ft. Some believe these sentinels of the desert are resurrected braves, with each appendage representing one of their wives. Hikes along any number of trails in the area, including the Gateway Loop Trail in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, highlights this species as well as other

desert flora and fauna. Our guide Cactus Jack, who leads the Sonoran Explorin' hike based at Scottsdale's Boulders Resort & Spa, tells me that Saguaro Cactus can live 200 to 250 years.

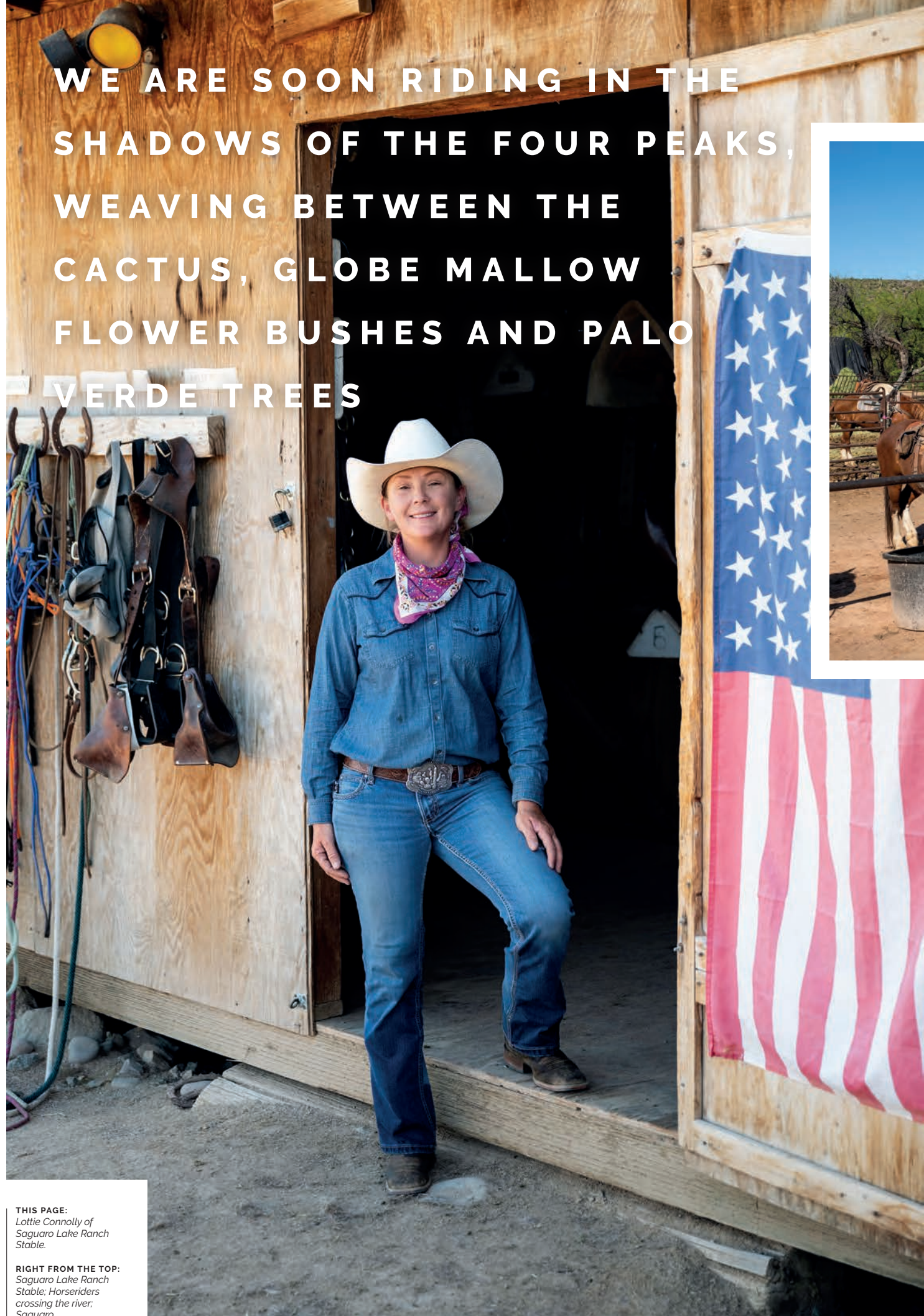
This terrain is the greenest desert in the world. And it is remarkable that domestic animals, wildlife and humans survive temperatures that soar to over 41°C

**THIS SPREAD  
CLOCKWISE FROM  
BOTTOM LEFT:**  
*Giant Saguaro cactus;  
The flowers of the  
hedgehog cactus;  
Hiking the Gateway  
Loop in the McDowell  
Sonoran Preserve; A  
quail in the desert;  
Desert cacti; Cactus  
Jack preparing a  
prickly pear.*





WE ARE SOON RIDING IN THE  
SHADOWS OF THE FOUR PEAKS,  
WEAVING BETWEEN THE  
CACTUS, GLOBE MALLOW  
FLOWER BUSHES AND PALO  
VERDE TREES



**THIS PAGE:**  
Lottie Connolly of  
Saguaro Lake Ranch  
Stable.

**RIGHT FROM THE TOP:**  
Saguaro Lake Ranch  
Stable: Horseriders  
crossing the river,  
Saguaro.



during summer.

I hit the road and make my way to Saguaro Lake Ranch Stable, 32 miles east of Scottsdale, for a horseriding session by the Salt River. I'm heading out on a trail ride with Lottie Connolly, cowgirl and manager of the stables.

A true dyed-in-the-wool Arizonan, Lottie greets me like long-lost family. "What's your riding experience?" she asks. As I haven't ridden in over a year, I confide that my legs may well turn to jelly after any time in the saddle. "Don't worry," she says. "An adult beverage and a hot tub will solve that problem." Lottie tells me that she grew up around livestock and remembers "lots of eggs" being part of her childhood. She became a trail leader about seven years ago and has never looked back. The clutch of horse enthusiasts who have joined this ride appreciate this experienced leader.

My horse, Clark, is saddled up and ready for me to mount. After a brief group lesson, we are soon riding in the shadows of the Four Peaks, weaving between the cactus, globe mallow flower bushes and palo verde trees growing along the riverbank. Clark and I have a bit of a splash at the water's edge while Lottie points out places where they have seen otters and javelinas (wild pigs) scampering about, enjoying a cooling bath. During that moment, my worries about leg cramps are forgotten. Emulating the pace of life in the Old West, our trail ride is feels like the perfect choice for an authentic





Western experience.

Early the next day (after recovering from horseriding with suggested hot-tub soak) it's onto a more vertical outdoor experience: boulder climbing. "Nose over toes" is the mantra introduced by Bob Pettit, one of the climbing instructors based at Boulders Resort & Spa, which helps us visualise good posture as we hike to reach the boulders. We scramble up a steep, rocky and gravelly hillside to reach the starting point. Above the mesquite foliage, we get a good view out beyond the resort and its golf course to the rugged hills in the distance: craggy mountains and creeks lined with palo verde trees.

The granite boulders on our other side are dotted with large screws and bolts, with a rope through them, which will act as anchors for us climbers. Bob teaches us specific techniques, including foot positions and hand grips for clinging to the granite, to help us achieve a smooth ascent. Most, including me, chose the smaller boulder to climb, with an ascent of only about 3ft; nonetheless, it's exhilarating to be almost suspended like this.

A quieter part of the Salt River meanders

west from Saguaro Lake, about 20 miles from Scottsdale's Old Town. Here, kayaking, rafting and fishing are king. With the sacred Red Mountain as a backdrop, the water makes an enchanting gurgling sound while fly-fishermen flick their lines out to catch Snake River cutthroat trout. Several hundred feral horses live along the river's banks, and it's possible to spot a bald eagle nest. Other wildlife that thrives here includes red-winged blackbirds, roadrunners, turkey vultures, gophers and beavers.

My small group, organised by REI Co-op Center outfitters, takes to the water with kayaks and a raft at Canal Hawes Trailhead Park. We are soon paddling towards the confluence of the Salt and Verde rivers where we manoeuvre into a shallow, quieter section of water. As we paddle, guide Kate Cameron points out historic sites and interesting wildlife. There is a stoic green heron perched along the shoreline and evidence of old docks with crumbling foundations. Along the way, we stop at the appropriately named 'Jumping Off Rock' for a refreshing swim. It's only possible to use the river with the permission of local tribal people; the discovery of ancient burials on the mountain makes this a sacred area.

After the kayak experience, I head to Taliesin West, on the northeastern outskirts of the city's Old Town, to find out how the magnificent landscape fired the imagination of architect Frank Lloyd



**THIS PAGE**  
**FROM THE TOP:**  
Desert landscape  
around Boulders Resort  
& Spa; Rock-climbing  
instructor Bob Pettit;  
Kayaking guide  
Kate Cameron.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
Rafting and kayaking  
on the Salt River.





**THIS SPREAD  
CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP LEFT:**  
*Taliesin West;  
Exterior; Sculptures in  
the grounds; The quirky  
interior; Sitting room;  
Theatre.*



Wright. Relocating to the desert in 1937, Lloyd Wright acquired 500 acres of untouched land; here, he began building what could be described as a compound, with a family home, a workshop/classroom for his apprentices, a library, theatre and cabaret, making use of the natural materials that surrounded him. Along with his huge cohort of apprentices, many of whom camped in the surrounding desert, Lloyd Wright created an oasis of calm and order in what could otherwise be described as a hostile environment.

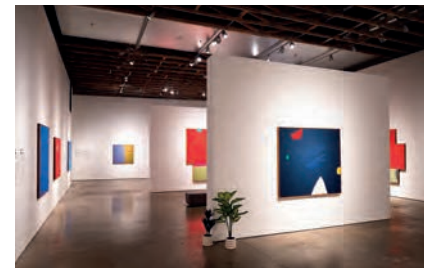
Now a UNESCO World Heritage site, a guided tour of the property provides insight into the workings of a great architectural mind. Each room was created to allow visual access to the outdoors and the whole place works with its environment, such as the self-styled 'pergolas' – roofs created from canvas to repel the elements and allow in diffused light.

Leaving Taliesin West, I head back into the Old Town. Its name is a bit of a misnomer – there were only a few buildings along the main street here by the 1950s. But, while it may at times resemble





## THE OLD TOWN BECKONS WITH ITS SALOON-TYPE BARS, TEX-MEX RESTAURANTS AND EMPORIUMS

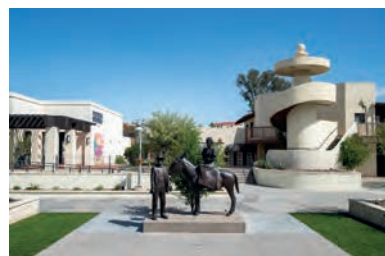


the 'Wild West' section of a theme park, its art galleries, including Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMoCA) and Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West, provide inspiration. Many paintings, sculptures and installations here celebrate the unique colours of Arizona's landscape: not just ochre, dusty pink and intense blue, but bronze, vermillion and turquoise, too. These are colours that are seen not just in the landscape but in and around homes, shopping centres, places of worship and even schools.

The Old Town also beckons with saloon-type bars (I enjoy sampling an Arizonan favourite – margaritas), Tex-Mex restaurants and a variety of emporiums. The Native American Market on Main Street features artisan products, jewellery, pottery and sundries such as Native Ground Winter's Coffee, produced by the local Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community.

Wandering a few blocks south to Scottsdale's old arts district, I stop at the award-winning F&B Restaurant. Chef Charleen Badman opened her establishment here, at Craftsman Court, in 2009 and it was soon declared "the epicentre of creative Arizona cuisine" by *Food & Wine* magazine; many more accolades have followed, including the prestigious Best Chef Southwest award

**THIS PAGE  
FROM THE TOP:**  
Cowboy and Native  
American clothes and  
accessories for sale;  
Art exhibit at  
Western Spirit;  
Scottsdale's Museum of  
the West; Western Spirit:  
Scottsdale's Museum of  
the West; Public art in  
the Old Town.

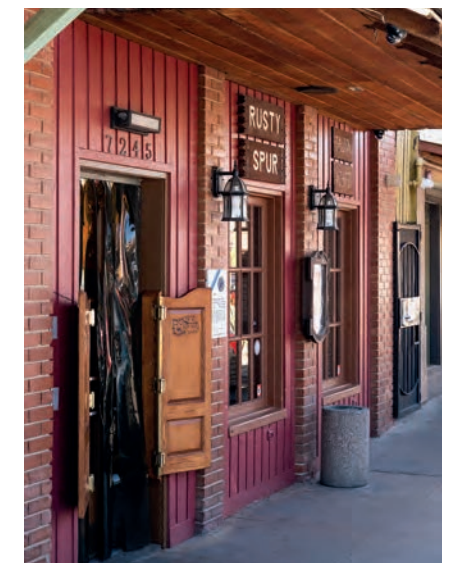


in 2019. Charleen, who is known for her heavy focus on local produce, was born in Tucson but lived in Scottsdale for 14 years before relocating to New York City to develop her cookery skills. It was in NYC that she began experimenting with local produce, something that she brought back with her to Scottsdale.

The 1940s building is festooned with stained-glass windows and has a dark, moody interior. It's easy to see why Charleen's inventive veggie menu is a hit. It starts with crunchy spring vegetables and heirloom tomatoes before moving on to pasta with fava beans and leeks. The fresh flavour of the produce is absolutely delightful – and even better when washed down with a scrumptious Arizonan Tempranillo.

Charleen is also dedicated to community work and is part of the Blue Watermelon Project. "We are chefs and food advocates working with the community to assist schools in rethinking relationships with foods," she tells me. "We're teaching children about the importance of what they eat."

**THIS PAGE  
CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT:**  
Old Town: Golf-cart tax-  
i is taking visitors around;  
Classic shop exteriors;  
The Rusty Spur Saloon;  
Shopfronts.







Less than five miles north of downtown Scottsdale is Cattle Track, an artists' colony based on a former farm that has a wellhead that existed long before the town. The settlement was given its moniker in the 1930s, when it played a vital role on cattle drives, when animals were brought here to drink before being driven west to the Phoenix stockyards or east to Los Angeles.

On my visit, I meet Janie Ellis who grew up here and still lives in the compound. In those early days, she tells me, there weren't any roads here – only a ferry across the Salt River to connect to Tempe. Today, a select group of artisans have taken up residence, setting up studios in old barns and apartments in farm structures. Each artisan has a different skill: some create lithographs or sculptures, others make ceramics, drawings and paintings.

As my Scottsdale adventure draws to a close, I head for a different view of the desert: floating above this remarkable landscape in a hot-air balloon. Arriving at the take-off point, huge, deflated balloons, looking like bedding for giants, lie on the ground ready to be inflated.

Soon filled with heated air, our balloon is ready for flight and we clamber into the basket. Rising above the desert



floor, the quiet is only punctuated by the occasional roar of the burner flame.

Below us are mischievous jack rabbits and a couple of roadrunners scampering among the cacti. The sky is painted in watercolour shades of pink, purple and blue, with the sun's cool early-morning glow slowly revealing every undulation of the distant mountains. It is the perfect way to end my time in this desert oasis.

**THIS PAGE FROM THE TOP:**  
An artist's studio at Cattle Track; Artist Mark McDowell in his studio at Cattle Track.

**RIGHT:**  
Rainbow Ryders Hot Air Balloon over the desert landscape.



## NEED TO KNOW

### GETTING THERE

Several airlines offer direct flights from the UK to Phoenix, 8 miles southwest of Scottsdale, including British Airways, KLM, Finnair, United, American Airlines and Jet Blue.

### GETTING AROUND

Scottsdale's town centre is walkable, but hiring a car is a must for going further afield. Hybrid and electric cars are available with the larger companies, including Avis, Hertz, Enterprise, Dollar or Alamo.

### BEST TIME TO GO

With year-round sunshine, there isn't really a bad time to go, however temperatures can be high in July and August.

### WHERE TO EAT

FnB Restaurant in the arts district, The Mission in Old Town for modern Latin cuisine, and Buffalo Chip Saloon and Steakhouse in Cave Creek, north of the city.

### WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Valley Ho ([hotelvalleyho.com](http://hotelvalleyho.com)), Mountain Shadows Resort ([mountainshadows.com](http://mountainshadows.com)) and Boulders Resort and Spa ([TheBoulders.com](http://TheBoulders.com)).

### FURTHER INFORMATION

[experiencescottsdale.com](http://experiencescottsdale.com)  
[visitarizona.com](http://visitarizona.com)