

Kayaking in the Desert

AND OTHER CAREFREE ADVENTURES

A sunshine-filled respite
in Scottsdale, Arizona

By Lina Zeldovich



Kayaking on the
Salt River near
Scottsdale

"Steer to the right," instructed our kayaking guide Owen as we glided down the Salt River, which weaves through the northern Sonoran Desert near Scottsdale, Arizona. "And keep your eyes peeled for the wild horses!"

My husband, Dennis, and I did our best to steer across the light rapids—and then whipped out our phones to capture about a dozen wild horses as they came into view. "Because there isn't much grass in the desert, these feral descendants of horses Europeans brought here hundreds of years ago adapted to grazing on underwater grasses," Owen explained.

Kayaking in the desert sounds unexpected, but the presence of water is why Scottsdale is here in the first place. The Salt River was a water source for centuries for the Hohokam people who once had lived here and who built extensive irrigation canals to grow corn, beans, squash, agave—and even cotton.

In 1888, US Army Chaplain Winfield Scott recognized the area's agricultural potential and purchased 640 acres of land for a farm, which eventually led to the founding of Scottsdale. More farmers followed as well as cattle ranchers, building Scottsdale into a thriving market town. During the Great Depression, artists and architects came,

including the renowned Frank Lloyd Wright, who built Taliesin West, his winter home and studio, here. Later, nature enthusiasts and wellness seekers arrived chasing the year-round sunny weather, a trend that only gets stronger with time. "Wake up to sunshine!" could be Scottsdale's motto.

That's what brought us here too. We were escaping the Northeast's autumn chill, relishing warm weather, reconnecting with nature—and with each other. After a grueling year of college applications and financial decisions, we finally had deposited our 18-year-old freshman on campus and were enjoying being carefree together.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our journey began at Old Town Scottsdale, packed with artisanal stores. With so many choices, resisting temptation was impossible, so I tried on a few pairs of boots while Dennis donned a fringed leather jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, suddenly suave and saddle-ready. We lunched at The Frybread Lounge, a restaurant run by a Navajo chef, where we feasted on bison tacos, elk and venison salami, and the eponymous bread, a traditional Indigenous treat with a crispy crust and soft middle.

Walking hand-in-hand back to our nearby hotel, W Scottsdale, we passed by Fashion Square, where Neiman Marcus and Prada beckoned, and made a mental note to return. Right now, we had to hurry for our massage session—and then it was time to get ready for dinner at W’s posh new restaurant, Sexy Roman and its temptingly billed “seductive Italian” cuisine. The menu indeed presented with irresistible options, including burrata with heirloom tomatoes, Wagyu beef



COURTESY OF THE FRYBREAD LOUNGE

carpaccio, filet mignon and roasted salmon with Granny Smith apples. All four selections held up to the promise, amounting to a delightful dinner, after which we sipped wine on the balcony of our suite under a starry sky.

DISCOVERING THE DESERT

The next morning, we followed our guide Ken on a winding path in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, learning about local plants and creatures as we hiked. The iconic saguaro cactus—

that’s the one that looks like a tree with several “arms” sprouting upward from its trunk—is native only in the Sonoran Desert, which extends southward into Mexico. Though slow-growing, it can reach 50 feet during a lifetime that spans a couple of centuries.

When it rains, these and other cactuses can soak up to 200 gallons of water, swelling up. “If you wrap your Christmas lights too tight on one and it rains, it will break the strings,” Ken shared.

Just then, I spotted a little bird hopping inside a saguaro’s trunk through a hole. “It’s a Gila woodpecker,” Ken told me. “They make nests inside the cactus, and when they move out, other birds reuse the nests.” A few steps down the road, he pointed at a heap of twigs, leaves and prickly pieces of another cactus called cholla. “That’s a pack rats’ nest,” he said. “The rats put the cactus pieces around to discourage coyotes from digging in.” As we kept walking, I smelled a pleasant, mildly smoky fragrance. “That’s a creosote bush,” Ken explained. “The Indigenous people used it for medicinal purposes.”



PHOTO BY ERIC MISCHKE FOR EXPERIENCE SCOTTSDALE



PHOTO BY JORDAN DANKS / JRMV MAGAZINE FOR EXPERIENCE SCOTTSDALE

Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West

Later, when we visited the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, about four miles south of Scottsdale, we learned that the Indigenous people lived off the land here for thousands of years, finding everything they needed in the hot, arid landscape, including food, clothing and medicine. Today, two Native American tribes, Pima and Maricopa, still live and farm on their respective reservations. Among other things, they grow Pima cotton, known for its exceptional softness.

THE BEST OF THE WEST

After a quick brunch at Prep & Pastry (cast-iron duck confit is delightful!), we toured Scottsdale in an open-air electric cart with tour guide Kirk, who goes by Captain Kirk. Among other things, we learned about local cultural icons like the Rusty Spur Saloon, the oldest bar in town, and the Old Adobe Mission, the oldest standing church.

Next, we headed to Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West to marvel at the elaborate displays of vintage saddles, riding pants, gun

holsters and spurs. The museum also features a collection of bronze statues of Native Americans by sculptor John Coleman, all so exquisitely done that you can see the finest details of their clothing. A stationary decommissioned stagecoach invites visitors to experience what traveling was like in the 1800s. As we crammed onto the small hard bench, we were thankful for the comforts of 21st-century travel.

More art awaited at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art and Wonderspaces gallery, both of which feature rotating exhibitions, some immersive, others interactive, and all awe-inspiring thanks to the clever use of light and music effects that play tricks on your mind.

A visit to Taliesin West is a must. Located about 30 minutes outside downtown Scottsdale, it reflects Wright’s philosophy that buildings should emerge naturally from their environment. As we followed a self-guided audio tour, we quickly noticed that Wright was fond of small

entrances that opened into spacious rooms. That, we learned, was part of his organic architecture approach borrowed from nature, where you may walk through a narrow path that opens into a vista, invoking a sense of wonder.

After our thoroughly interesting visit to Taliesin West, we made a short stop at the meditation studio Shanti Sound to relax with a sound bath: soothing trills of bells and singing bowls—crystal vessels that produce calming tones when struck with a mallet, all skillfully played by owner Cary Ballou. Revived and refreshed, we found it easier to accept that our getaway was coming to an end.

For our farewell dinner, we chose Virtù Honest Craft, known for a creative Mediterranean menu. Raising our glasses to Scottsdale over bluefin tuna and scallops with saffron sambuca butter, we vowed to return to this captivating place again—and soon. You just can’t go wrong with 330 days of sunshine.