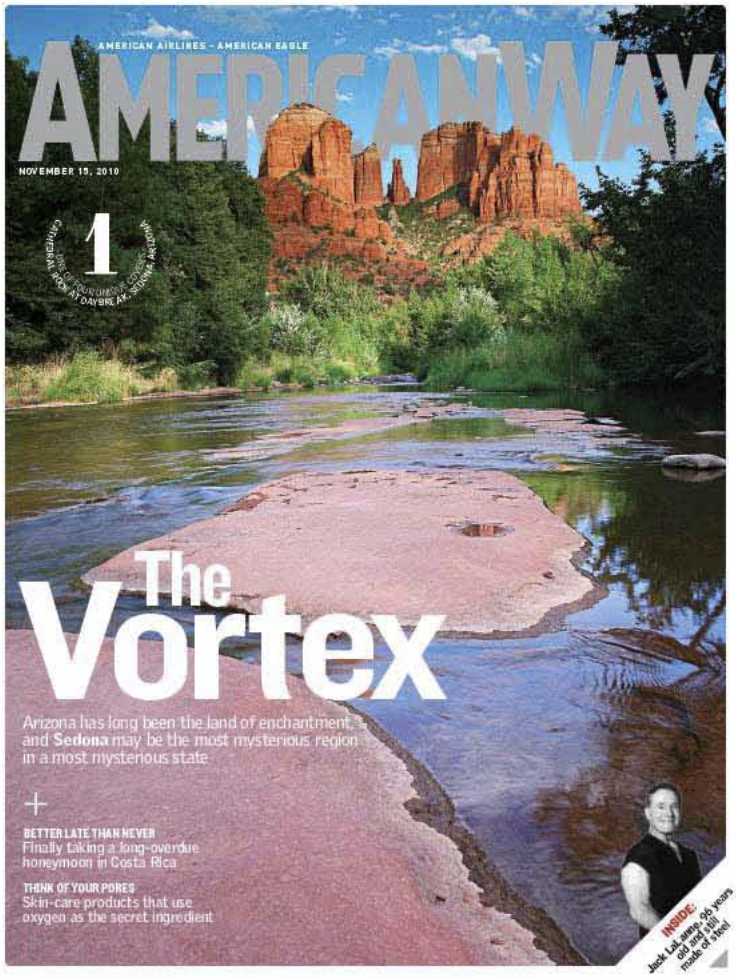
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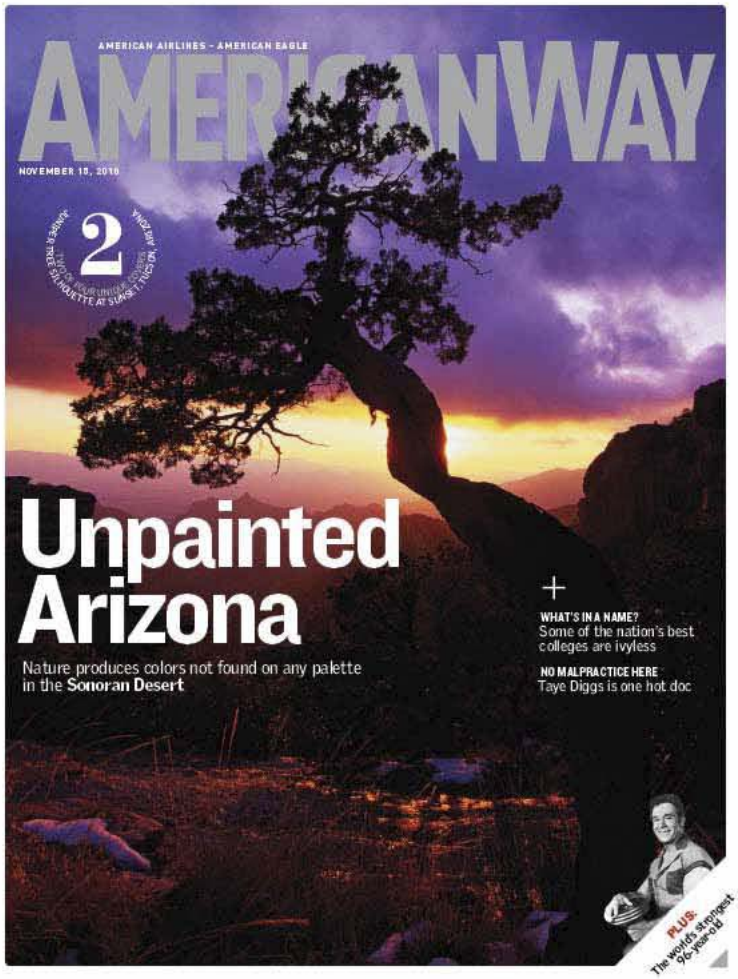
CENTENNIAL ROCK AT DAWN'S BREAK, SEDONA, ARIZONA
The Vortex
Arizona has long been the land of enchantment, and Sedona may be the most mysterious region in a most mysterious state
+
BETTER LATE THAN NEVER
Finally taking a long-overdue honeymoon in Costa Rica
THINK OF YOUR PORES
Skin-care products that use oxygen as the secret ingredient
INSIDE:
Jack LaLanne, 96 years old and still made of steel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Unpainted Arizona
Nature produces colors not found on any palette in the Sonoran Desert
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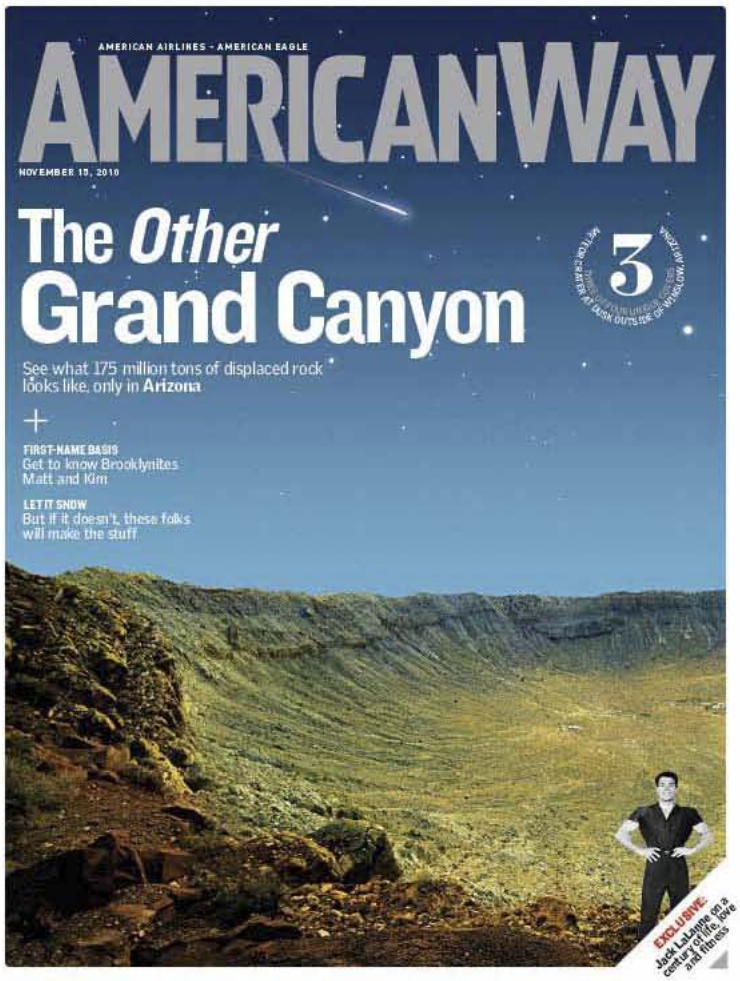
WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Some of the nation's best colleges are ivyless
NO MALPRACTICE HERE
Taye Diggs is one hot doc
PLUS:
The world's strongest 96-pound kid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See what 175 million tons of displaced rock looks like, only in Arizona
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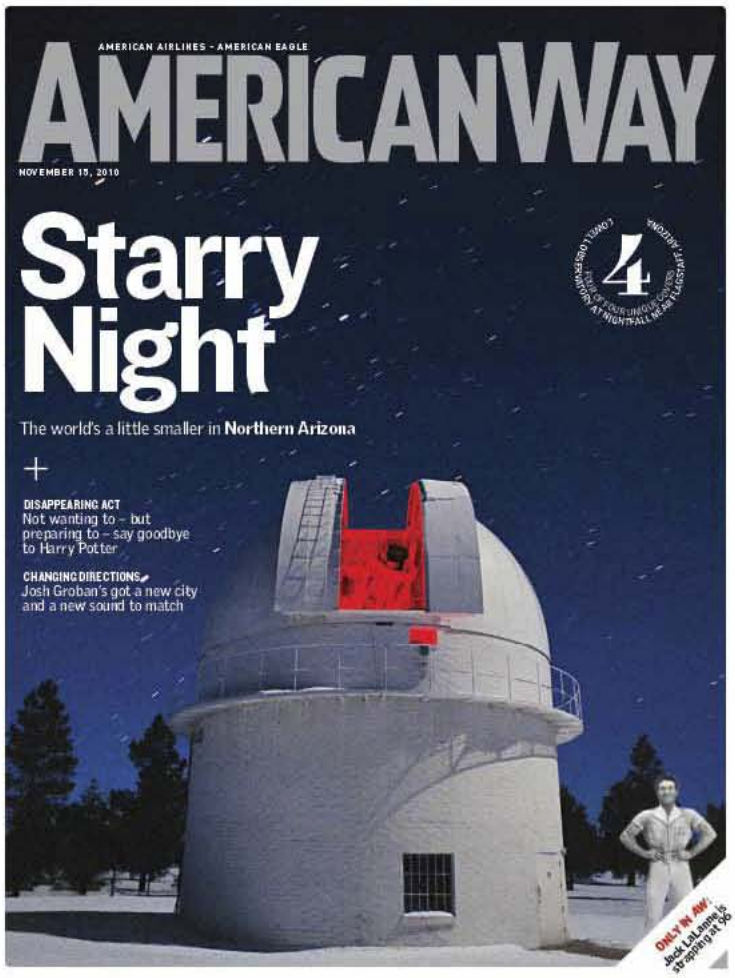
FIRST-NAME BASIS
Get to know Brooklynites Matt and Kim
LET IT SNOW
But if it doesn't, these folks will make the stuff
EXCLUSIVE:
Jack LaLanne on a century of life, love and fitness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Not wanting to – but preparing to – say goodbye to Harry Potter
CHANGING DIRECTIONS
Josh Groban's got a new city and a new sound to match
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Jack LaLanne is strapping at 96

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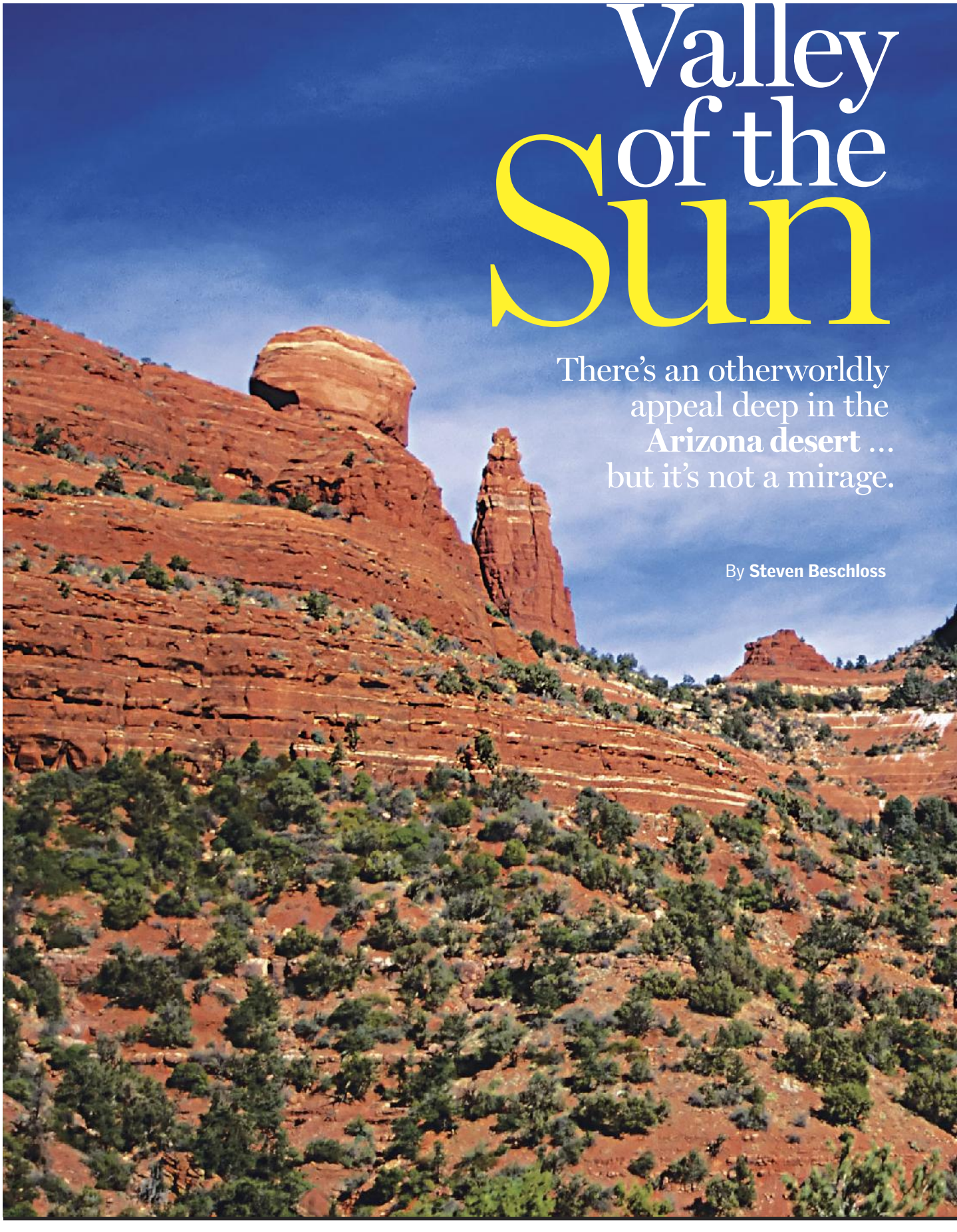


Valley of the Sun

There's an otherworldly appeal deep in the **Arizona desert** ... but it's not a mirage.

By **Steven Beschloss**

Visitors from around the world are drawn to the red rocks and rugged desert landscape of Sedona.

As I gaze in the distance, a hot blast of wind and dust whips across my face, clouding my vision. My eyes tear up as I strain to see. What is that scrawny creature tucked into the shadow? The blistering desert sun doesn't help. I move closer, then watch a gangly coyote emerge from the underbelly of an airplane fuselage and amble away. For just a moment, this seems like his natural habitat. A typical desert scene. Until I look around and regain my senses.

I have come to the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group in Tucson, Ariz. — better known as the boneyard. It's the American military's only aircraft-storage site and the largest of its kind in the U.S. More than 4,000 aircraft rest here now, as far as the eye can see. No, even farther.

Covering four square miles and chosen for its dry climate and hard ground, the boneyard is an aviation lover's dream, including everything from B-1 bombers to C-9 medevacs and aging stars: a helicopter that ferried former President Dwight Eisenhower; an A-4 Skyhawk, the type of plane once piloted by then Navy Cdr. John McCain; and the last chopper to leave Saigon, in 1975. Some will be used for parts, some will be refurbished and used again, some will be converted into drones, and others will end up in museums (including the nearby Pima Air & Space Museum).

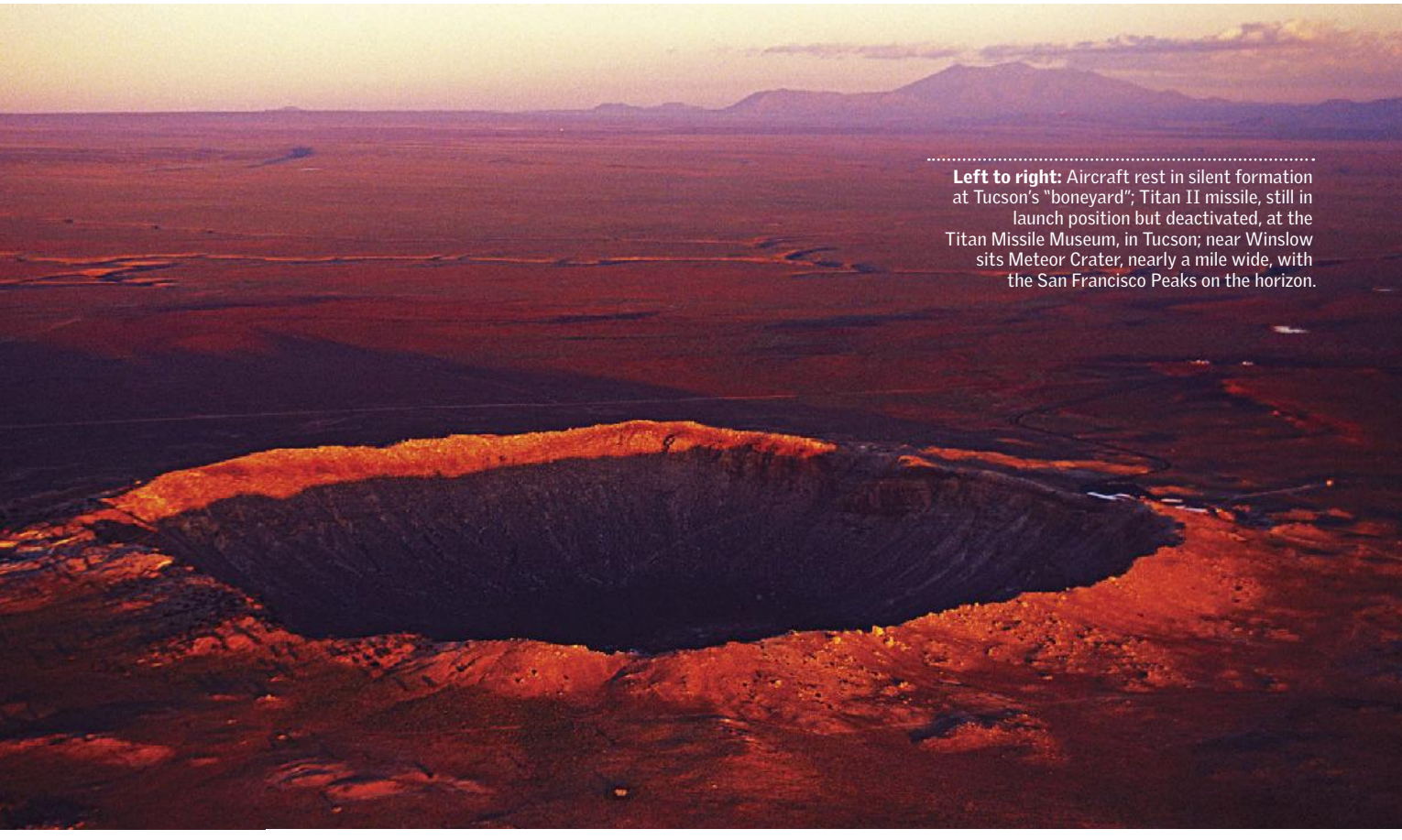
Much like an ancient city or ancient burial ground, the Tucson boneyard transports you back in time and overwhelms you with its hard-to-grasp magnitude. Lined up side by side and nose to tail in the blinding desert light, the parked machines create an eerie, otherworldly feeling, one that can make you wonder just where exactly you've landed.

That landing pad is Arizona, which is both a geographic entity and a vision-inducing state of mind. This strange, often overheated locale can play tricks with your sense of reality — or at least it's done so with mine. It's a state that often leaves you wondering about the curious concoction of geology and history that defines its identity.

* * *

You've probably gathered that this is not yet another travel story about beautiful spas, fine resorts and restaurants. Yes, Arizona — just like California, Florida, Texas and other warm-weather destinations — has them aplenty. But after five years of living here, I'm on the hunt to capture the state's less obvious magnetic pull, to identify its underlying ethos, the singular and mysterious qualities that make it unlike anywhere else.

Let's begin with first principles: I'm drawn by the state's uncommon rugged beauty — diverse desert vistas peppered with iconic saguaro cactus and prickly jumping cholla, painted rock and jagged mountains, petrified forests and grassy flatlands, grand and wondrous canyons. And I am inspired by the vast open landscapes that lie only minutes from population centers such as Phoenix, Tucson and Flagstaff — living, evolving topography that powerfully reminds you



Left to right: Aircraft rest in silent formation at Tucson's "boneyard"; Titan II missile, still in launch position but deactivated, at the Titan Missile Museum, in Tucson; near Winslow sits Meteor Crater, nearly a mile wide, with the San Francisco Peaks on the horizon.

that this was once the bottom of the sea, a place where lava flowed and dinosaurs roamed, a vibrant land long before man set foot on earth. Right before your eyes is an intriguing window into a world that exists between the known and the unknown.

While Arizona's special quality is tied to nature and geography and visions of prehistoric times, it's also influenced by exotica of the man-made world. Not many miles down the road from Tucson's boneyard, I begin to feel a strong sense of dread as we approach the Titan Missile Museum, a dramatic reminder of the terrible possibilities that America faced during the Cold War era — the threat of MAD, or mutual assured destruction. This silo, the only Titan II silo still open for viewing, housed one of America's 54 active nuclear missiles. Amazingly, 18 active nuclear silos were based around Tucson.

Before our guide leads us down and inside the missile's command center, we gaze through a ground-level glass window at the missile, 103 feet tall and 10 feet in diameter, still placed in launch position. The guide explains that the missile possessed 9 megatons of firepower, "more explosive capacity than all the bombs that were dropped during World War II, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki." It's a relief to hear that it was deactivated in 1982 and to later learn that several other of the Tucson sites now house, for example, a fitness center and a Methodist church.

We descend the steel stairs into the silo. "You are about to enter the strongest structure you'll ever be in," our guide says, showing us the 3-ton door and the 8-foot-thick walls. Our group arrives inside the launch command center, a room lined with push buttons and clocks and the green glow of 1960s-era lighting and design. A new guide takes over, then picks my 9-year-old daughter, Katrina, to sit in the commander's seat.

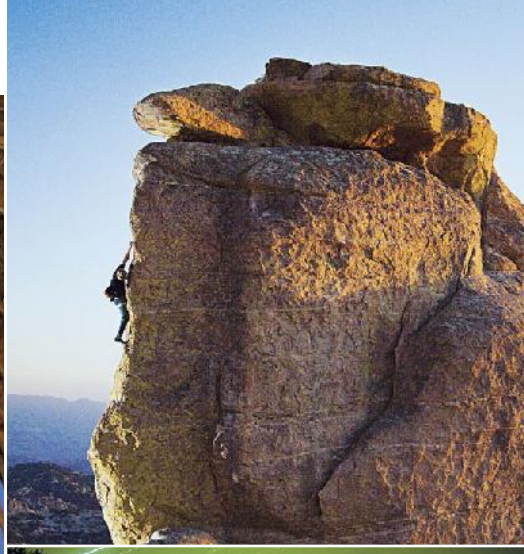
We enter the alternate universe of Dr. Strangelove.

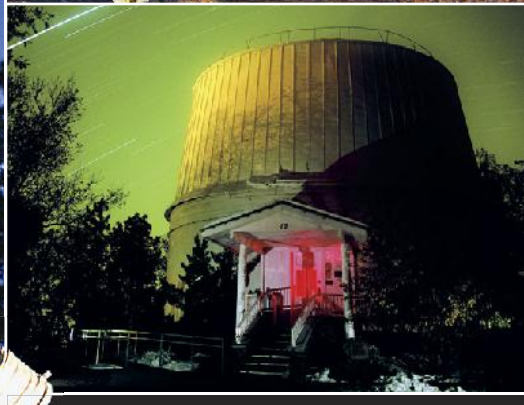
We enter the alternate universe of Dr. Strangelove: The guide pushes a series of buttons, then locks eyes with Katrina. "Commander!" he barks at her. "We're ready to launch! Turn the key!" Normally a sweet and compassionate girl, Katrina twists the key, and we all learn that 58 seconds later, the missile would be heading to its foreign target, the first stage in the final verdict of a MAD world. "The crew did not know, and we do not know even today, what the targets were," he tells me later. "The big picture was farther up the line."

Sumner Hayward, another Titan volunteer guide, was a commander at one of the Kansas missile sites in the late '60s. "I think we realized the enormity of what we had to do," he tells me, explaining that he was happy to exit the job after four years. Ironically, the crew's main purpose was to "do nothing," he says, not an easy task for an energetic 25-year-old. Luckily, Hayward never had to turn the key.

* * *

I BEGIN TO WONDER: WHAT KIND OF impact would a 9-megaton explosion create? The answer can be witnessed several





This page, clockwise from left: Alvan Clark Telescope at Lowell Observatory, near Flagstaff; rock-climbing in Tucson; Lowell Observatory's Lowell Dome at night, under Flagstaff's starlit sky; Mission San Xavier del Bac, completed in 1797, near Tucson. **Opposite:** A twisted juniper tree thrives in the rugged landscape near Sedona.

hours from Tucson near Flagstaff at the otherworldly site of Meteor Crater. About 50,000 years ago, an earthbound meteorite some 150 feet wide and traveling 26,000 mph hit the earth. It hit with such immense power that the meteorite — primarily iron and nickel — was mostly obliterated, shooting the surviving metal fragments up to 10 miles away and leaving a hole nearly a mile across and larger than 20 football fields. One scientist calculated that 175 million tons of rock were displaced to form the resulting crater.

The crater, reached after driving across a vast desert plateau between Flagstaff and Winslow, has been a great mystery for centuries. First discovered by Native Americans, then Spaniards, mining engineer Daniel Barringer acquired the crater in 1902 in a decades-long quest to confirm its origins and to unearth any valuable metal. In 1960, geologist and astronomer Eugene Shoemaker published a paper generally credited with clinching the crater's origin by comparing it with impacts caused by nuclear-test explosions in Nevada.

This meteorite is a far cry from the one believed to have hit the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico 65 million years ago. That was the mother of all disasters, the one estimated at 6 miles in diameter and responsible for an impact so explosive, it killed the dinosaurs, triggered fires and floods, covered the world in clouds of ash, blocking the sun and sending the planet into years of wintry darkness. By this measure, the Arizona meteor's devastating effect on nearby animals and plant life is barely worth noting. But it offers one of the most recent and best-preserved examples, a lunarlike location that NASA astronauts visited in the 1960s to prepare for their coming moonwalk, a place still capable of scaring children (and their parents) and making you wonder about the skies above.

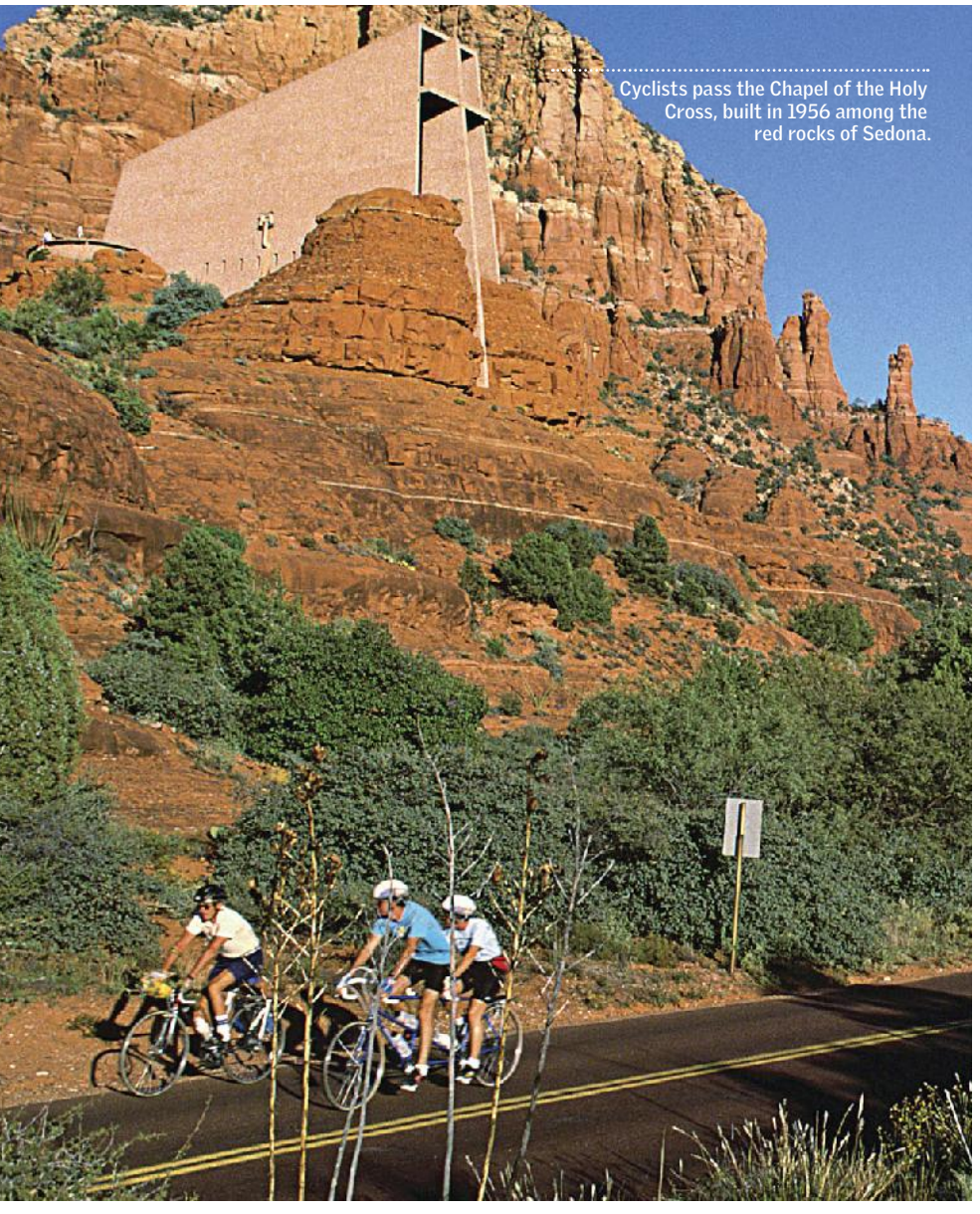
I open my eyes, see the red rocks across a distant valley. I feel connected to a distant past and transported to another place.

Why did the meteorite hit in what is now Arizona? Chief tour guide Eduardo Rubio doesn't know, of course, but he feels confident that his decision to live near the crater is a smart one. Rubio, a guide and resident at Meteor Crater for 14 years, says with a smile that he doubts another meteorite would ever hit the same place. Still, he maintains a healthy respect and appreciation for the forces of nature. He gazes up to the sky, then solemnly says, "I know that the heavens are up there and the meteors are up there too."

I look skyward, then gaze across the crater. The rocky ground below my feet suddenly seems less sure, the sky above more full of fascinating wonders. I dream about sleeping this night under the stars.

* * *

Instead, we head to a nearby destination where, night after night, scientists devote themselves to the exploration of deep space. The Lowell Observatory was founded in Flagstaff in 1894 by Percival Lowell. Among the observatory's significant achievements is the discovery and identification of Pluto as the ninth planet in our solar system in 1930 (since reclassified as a dwarf planet in 2006 by the International Astronomical



Cyclists pass the Chapel of the Holy Cross, built in 1956 among the red rocks of Sedona.

Union). Astronaut Neil Armstrong peered through its telescope to study the lunar craters before he, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins made their historic trip to the moon.

Why Flagstaff? The observatory benefits from an altitude of 7,200 feet, which is high enough to minimize atmospheric disturbance, and a town far enough away from a major population center that it has only limited light pollution. Flagstaff takes seriously its commitment to the astronomer's craft and the heavens above, passing its first lighting ordinance restricting commercial searchlights in 1958 and eventually designated in 2001 as the world's first International Dark Sky City. Unfortunately, while we see a demonstration of the 24-inch telescope through which astronomer Lowell searched for life on Mars, Flagstaff is experiencing one of its rare cloud-covered nights.

But perhaps no town in Arizona takes the unseen world as seriously as Sedona, known worldwide for its visually entrancing red rock formations. Sedona is a mecca for spirit-minded folks of all stripes — healers and psychics, energy and body workers, shamans and mediums, clairvoyants and channelers — some solely seeking enlightenment, others turning their spiritual interest into a business proposition for tourists and other travelers. They are aided by Sedona's growing reputation as a center for vortexes — forces that are believed by some to emanate from the rocks and to create unusual spiritual energy.

My wife, Kirsi, and I meet Pete A. Sanders Jr., a longtime Sedona resident who graduated from MIT with a major in biomedical chemistry and a minor in brain science. We tell him that Sedona seems to calm our blood pressure, but we don't know how to explain it. Perhaps it's just the town's vast spaces and visual beauty that quiets our frazzled nerves? Or is it really possible that we are tapping into the town's renowned vortex energy? Sanders is not prone to glib explanations. In a weekly lecture and occasional tours, he describes how the human brain's lymbic system, designed for disaster survival, "pulls you out of your 'soulness' into a physical-only perspective." He tells his audience about Albert Einstein and string theory and the notion that "everything exists in 10 or more dimensions." He explains that Sedona benefits from low psychic pollution because of its low population density and energy flows (vortexes), which are often found at sacred sites and assist with spiritual development.

And about the rocks — do they possess electromagnetic energy? He says only that "'metallicized' rock has more oomph."

Sanders takes us out to Airport Mesa, where we sit cross-legged on smooth red rocks and take in a 360-degree view of vast valleys surrounded by jagged and breathtaking rock formations. Another couple approaches, wanting to know where they can find the best sunsets. "Is the sunset an end or the beginning?" Sanders asks them. Speaking with a Russian accent, the man sagely replies, "It's a circle." These are the kinds of conversations that transpire in Sedona.

Soon, Sanders talks us through a meditation process to lift our minds outside our bodies to expand our perception to a higher order. I close my eyes, hope for some oomph and imagine my mind up in the sky. I'm feeling pretty good. I open my eyes, see the red rocks across a distant valley. I feel connected to a distant past and transported to another place.

I close my eyes again, touch the rocks underneath me, and smile. I must be in Arizona. AW

STEVEN BESCHLOSS lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., near saguaro cactuses, rocky mountains and Frank Lloyd Wright's winter retreat, Taliesin West. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *Parade* and many others. *Adrift*, his book about America, will be published next year by Prometheus Books.