



Red rock formations in Sedona (left).
The author and a jalopy in Jerome

I'D NEVER WANTED

yuck. Furthermore, I am skeptical about most things mystical. That's probably why I won a seven-night luxury stay in Sedona, Ariz., spiritual-tourism destination of the Upper Sonoran Desert. Gift certificates in hand, I invited a Wiccan friend from Phoenix, packed my hiking gear and resigned myself: At least I'd get some decent Mexican food.

Some three hours south of the Grand Canyon, at 4,500 feet, and way cooler than Phoenix, Sedona is renowned for the massive red-rock formations that surround the town and for its invisible "energy vortexes," which reportedly channel energies in ways best understood by American Indians and New Age seekers. It is the planetary meeting place of spirit and commerce.

Sedona gets some 3.5 million visitors a year, most of them looking for a hit—or at least a hint—of mysticism. Most of them find it, because you can't step out of your hotel room or campsite without encountering the mystic, either in person, in the rocks or in the hundreds of businesses that make up Sedona's center.

The town's main streets intersect at a Y that connects Uptown, the Gallery District and West Sedona. Each area bustles with businesses touting enlightenment. Endless signs advertise healers, past life readings, American Indian sweat lodges, psychics, nature-inspired feng shui, tarot card readers, spiritual massage, tai chi, chi gong, fire walking, earth spirit learning, crystal energy work, "Crystal Blue Persuasion," etc. You and your aura can get massaged, read, treated, healed and photographed all on the same day, even before you hike to the nearest vortex (marked with a white spiral on the tourist map).

Although vortexes affect everyone differently, it's agreed that

to see the desert. All that hot sand and prickly cacti—

emotions and spiritual intuitions are amplified in their vicinity, so whatever your path, it will be sped up in Sedona. Personally, I felt most drawn by the Cold Stone Creamery ice cream vortex and was literally unable to walk by it without feeling the pull of strong internal urges. It sucked me in day after day to peruse its many offerings, and when I departed I always felt brighter, sweeter, more intensely alive.

In preparation for our Medicine Wheel ceremony with Sedona Vortex Tours, we were asked to fill out a questionnaire: "Where are you on your spiritual path? What books have you read?" Each question was followed by a tiny blank space. When my friend and I laughed, the guide shared some of the answers she'd seen:

Q: Where are you on your spiritual path?

A: Here.

Q: Books read?

A: All of them.

The next day, before heading for my first "vortex hike," I completed the Sedona Spirit Yoga and Hiking Responsibility for Personal Well-Being form ("I promise to move cautiously and honor my body's needs"). Though I honored my body's needs by wimping out halfway to the top, the journey was nonetheless enchanting. The leader, Roxeanne, explained how native people had used local plants for medicine and food, and I clambered high enough to do tai chi on a stone plateau overlooking the green-and-red valley. While my fitter companions carried on to the spiraling vortex center, I rested on a flat rock. I watched huge birds gliding on the air currents, and I sent telepathic encouragement to the doll-size hikers below. I don't know if it was the vortex energy, but I felt high.

Although Sedona may have its silly aspects, every single tour guide, psychic or server, every healer or hotel employee I met had their feet on the ground and a strong sense of humor. "In Sedona, we all put a safety shield of white light around our vehicles," one guide mentioned as we entered a busy road, "but sometimes folks from out of town forget to put theirs on, so there can be accidents." No one read doom in my aura or channeled energy at me. No one even threatened to share their feelings.

Well beyond gay-friendly, Sedona embraces any visitor who appreciates fine scenery and a good massage. Same-sex couples mingle with straights in the Jeep tours and hot tubs, and everyone's happy on vacation. No one blinked when we asked for queer newspapers. Furthermore, the service at nearly every restaurant and hotel was excellent. The staff at the cushy, creekside Amara Resort made me feel especially welcome, and ex-New Yorker Peter may be the best bell captain on earth. In decades of world travel, I've never before seen a valet sprint.

To meet the locals, try to visit the city pool, the Wildflower Bread Company or the amazing Café Raw Bliss & Chocolates (organic, orgasmic, sugarless gourmet sweets). Bring an extra-large suitcase and a little extra cash to raid the fantastic thrift store, Twice Nice, where the donated designer fashions scream of being cast off by wealthy women with exquisite taste and where profits benefit a women's shelter. Also, Jerome, a former ghost

town turned arts village, hosts a monthly event called "Out in Jerome," when the gay-friendly galleries and eateries (i.e., all of them) stay open late, and people pack the Mile High Grill for silly drinks, magical salads and conversation.

Despite Sedona's tourist attractions, one longtime resident told me that she dislikes going into town and mostly stays on her property in the hills. "So," I asked her, "Sedona's about the spirituality, for you?"

She corrected me: "It's about the land." I agree. This former desert-phobe is no longer skeptical about the wonders of Sedona. I did eat great Mexican food at Oaxaca and Rincon's, but even better, I enjoyed a sugar-scrub massage at the hands of Beth Ernst and heard American Indian storytelling and music from flutist Kelvin Mockingbird. After a week of hiking and sweating, shopping and sightseeing, I finally got quiet and relaxed, listening to Navajo stories of the people, the animals and the mystics of the desert, but most of all, the land. ■

I
SAT ON A
FLAT ROCK. I
WATCHED HUGE
BIRDS GLIDE ON
THE AIR CURRENTS...
I DON'T KNOW IF IT
WAS THE VORTEX
ENERGY, BUT I
FELT HIGH.



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