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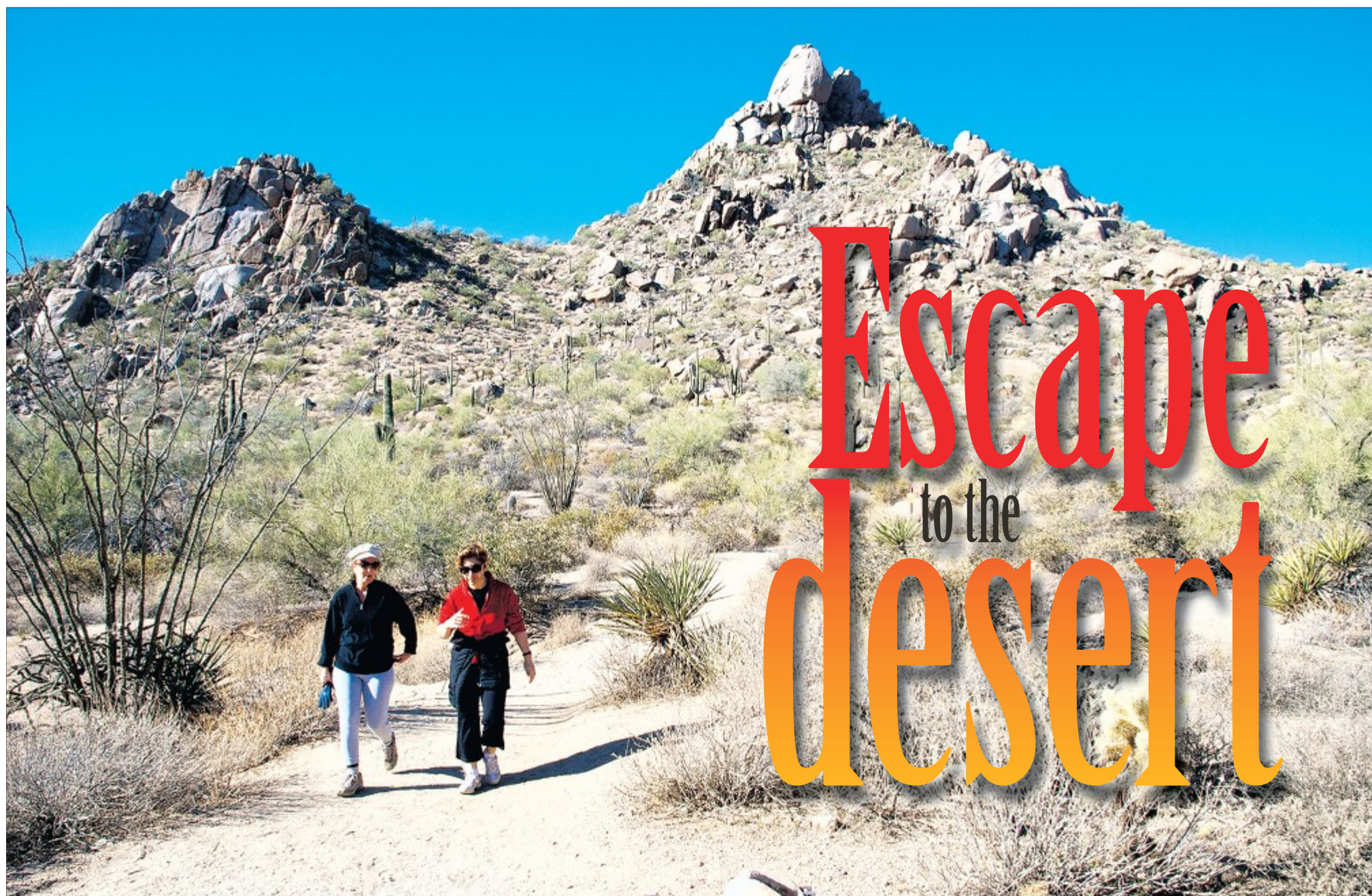
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Pinnacle Peak Park, near the Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale

PHOTOS: ALISON APPELBE

Nature's colours, art, luxury — and blissful warmth

Stories by ALISON APPELBE
Special to The Journal
SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ.

Seven-thirty a.m. seemed an ungodly hour to be standing on an unpaved road in the Sonora Desert, surrounded by thorny trees and tall-armed cacti. Yet I was smitten.

Was it the barren beauty of this bone-dry patch, north of Scottsdale? Or the subtle desert colours? The lovely morning light? Or the crisp, clean desert air?

Then head balloonist for Hot Air Expeditions, Patrick Stevens, walked up to our passenger van and said: "Strong winds off to the west at 15 to 25 miles an hour ... first and foremost is safety." The morning balloon trip was cancelled.

"There's more to ballooning than meets the eye," said our driver as we watched, disappointed, as the open-sided trucks, loaded with baskets and balloons, sped away from this Cave Creek region, and we headed back to our Scottsdale hotels.

But the remark could refer to Scottsdale itself — with its renowned resorts, spas, restaurants and arty shops, world-class golf and other pleasures. Because beyond the luxury and glamour are some less obvious (and harder to find) gems.

Scottsdale is part of Greater Phoenix — a 1,295-square-kilometre sprawl criss-crossed with freeways, and best avoided if you don't want to spend much of your vacation com-

muning with your rental car's GPS. Anyway, Scottsdale, flush with the McDowell Mountains, is where you find most of the better accommodation.

Among the top-rated is the Four Seasons Resort at Troon North, in northern-desert terrain. From this multi-hectare site, dotted with (oh-so-carefully spaced) Saguaro cacti, it's a short walk to Pinnacle Peak Park — a bone-dry pile of Brobdingnagian-sized boulders graced with a popular hiking trail.

The Intercontinental Montelucia, where I also stayed, is an enclosed Andalusian-themed spread in Scottsdale's central Paradise Valley. And while it's filled with exotic Spanish and Moorish touches — from fountains to furnishings — the Andalusian motif felt a little too superimposed on the American desert.

Both resorts boast fabulous pools, full-service spas (Montelucia's Joya Spa has a Moroccan theme), and fine restaurants. At night, from the veranda of the Four Seasons' distinguished Talavera Restaurant, you can see the distant lights of downtown Scottsdale.

The 48-hectare Desert Botanical Garden is located among the red-rock buttes of Papago Park, west of Scottsdale. At 8 a.m. the setting is tranquil, the light perfect. Referring to my trail map, I walked several of the stone-paved "loops" that take you among the garden's 50,000 desert plants, some of which are rare or endangered.

See SCOTTSDALE / I4



The Pink Jeep tour of the Red Rocks of Sedona

From rough rides in a Jeep to smooth spa pampering

SEDONA, ARIZONA

"It's called the 'Road of no Return,'" said our Pink Jeep driver, as he bounced the 4x4 (yes, it's pink), tilted at 45 degrees, down a step-like series of rock ledges. We were somewhere on the Broken Arrow Trail in Arizona's Coconino National Forest.

Tourists come to this Sedona region from Phoenix-Scottsdale — 200 kilometres on Interstate 17 — to experience red-rock canyons, buttes, mesas and pinnacles.

Our two-hour jeep tour (\$75, adult) rumbled over seemingly impassable dirt tracks; up and out of flood-prone "washes"; and onto red-rock plateaus with names like Submarine Rock and Chicken Point.

After this rough-and-tumble introduction to this knockdown gorgeous region, I retreated to one of America's great escapes, the Enchantment Resort in Boynton Canyon, eight km from Sedona.

Nestled among its own red-rock massifs, the luxury resort features adobe style "casitas" with cosy interiors, beehive fireplaces and great views. Enchantment's high-end Yavapai restaurant, in a central lodge, will delight serious foodies and wine aficionados.

Also at Enchantment, the stand-alone Mii amo Spa has been named one of the world's best. "The beauty of the rock — it's like a skin, so soft and gentle," said a young tourist from India as he emerged from the spa's Crystal Grotto and headed off to tai chi.

I relaxed with the Sedona Clay Wrap (\$150, 60 minutes) in a complex that offers a range of therapies, spiritual healing treatments, consultations and fitness classes. It also boasts several pools and a restaurant.

A major destination, the Sedona region has become a hotbed of spiritual and New Age practices. According to my guidebook, you can find (and pay for) everything from "angelic healing" to "electromagnetic field balancing," the latter related to natural rock cavities or "energy fields" known as vortexes.

One of the best-known vortexes is in Boynton Canyon (Enchantment manager Nicholas Gold, a transplanted Brit, told me the canyon emits relaxing vibes); another is at picturesque Cathedral Rock. Time spent at a vortex is said to heighten awareness and bring "emotional balance."

A worldlier Sedona offers hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, golfing, kayaking and birding. In uptown Sedona, among the "dream-catchers" and crystals, souvenir sellers flog what appears to be hundreds of thousands of "red dirt" T-shirts on a myriad themes. You can also order a cone of prickly-pear ice cream.

A major gallery sells celebrity paintings (Tony Curtis is apparently still wielding a brush); another offers top-notch native-American pottery and baskets. More art, knick-knacks and ultra-chic clothing are found at a bucolic Mexican-themed arts-and-crafts village on the south side of town, called Tlaquepaque.



Poolside at the Intercontinental Montelucia Resort in Scottsdale

IF YOU GO

Getting there

WestJet, Air Canada and U.S. carriers serve Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

Where to stay

Intercontinental Montelucia — Glamorous Andalusian-styled resort in Scottsdale, with full-service spa, family and adult pools and several restaurants. Expensive. www.icmontelucia.com
Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North — Elegant adobe-style desert spread, with casitas, pools, spa and fine dining. Adjacent to golf course and Pinnacle Peak Park. Expensive. www.fourseasons.com
Enchantment Resort, Sedona — Set in the red-rock Boynton Valley, with casitas (also suites or rooms), fine dining room, pool and sophisticated Mii amo spa. Expensive. www.enchantmentresort.com

Hotel Valley Ho — Faithfully restored '50s-style complex with sleek-lined suites, pools, retro lounge and restaurant. Central Scottsdale. Mid-priced. www.hotelvalleyho.com

Desert outings

Desert Botanical Garden — Gorgeous entree to the diversity of the Sonoran desert, with trails and activities. West of Scottsdale. Adults, \$15 US. www.dbg.org
Pink Jeep — Rugged off-road travel among Red Rocks of Sedona. From \$72. www.pinkjeep.com
Hot Air Expeditions — Balloon rides above the Sonora Desert, Phoenix-Scottsdale. From \$175. www.hotairexpeditions.com

Architectural sites

Taliesin West — Frank Lloyd Wright's former winter home and school. Tours offered through the day. From \$24, adults. www.franklloydwright.org
Cosanti and Arcosanti — Designer-philosopher Paolo Soleri's wind-bells foundry and gallery in Scottsdale, and prototype metropolis (and bells) north of Phoenix. www.arcosanti.org
Arizona Biltmore — Upscale hotel complex strongly influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. www.arizonabiltmore.com

For more

Scottsdale — www.scottsdalecvb.com
Sedona — www.VisitSedona.com

Scottsdale a 'Miami Beach in the desert'

SCOTTSDALE

Continued from 11

The Agave Yucca Forest, for example, is devoted to that spiny species. Another loop winds around a rugged hill graced with stately, centuries-old saguaro. Small Gambel's quail, recognizable by a black top-knot, even jackrabbits, flit about.

"Miami Beach in the desert" is how one wag ironically described downtown Scottsdale, with its Old Town and Arts District. Here native-American jewelry emporiums jostle with spots like the Rusty Spur Saloon and family-friendly Sugar Bowl, where the Top Hat Sundae is an ice-cream-filled cream puff "showered with hot fudge."

On Friday evening the Cowboy Ciao restaurant was packed with mostly well-dressed locals, dining on the likes of barbecued pulled pork on creamed polenta.

But downtown Scottsdale may be best-known for its Thursday night Art Walk, during which — along deftly lit sidewalks — dozens of galleries, from traditional to ultra-modern, remain open to the public. At the Saturday morning farmers market, you can buy vegetables that thrive in the desert, and preserves like pickled jalapeno slices.

In the 1930s, an enviably warm winter climate attracted modernist American architect Frank Lloyd

Wright to Scottsdale, where he established his winter home and school, known as Taliesin West. Wright's influence is still strongly felt here.

And while you can visit Taliesin West — tours are offered daily — Wright's love of the materials and colours of the desert are echoed in other properties.

They include two fabulous historic hotels: the 80-year-old Arizona Biltmore, with its handsome facade of textured pre-cast sand blocks, and the fully restored 1956 Valley Ho, said to be the finest example of mid-20th-century American hotel architecture.

Not to be missed is Cosanti, a funky outpost devoted to the work of one of Wright's pupils, the Italian designer-philosopher Paolo Soleri. Here you can see (and hear) Soleri's celebrated bronze and ceramic pre-cast bells (an original costs as much as \$20,000), and chat with the Greenpeace-nurtured architect Roger Tomalty, who has been involved with the Cosanti Foundation for four decades.

Cosanti, like Taliesin West, is a pilgrimage site for architecture lovers. Another is the Arcosanti Project, 105 km north of Phoenix. Established by Soleri in 1979, Arcosanti (combining "architecture" with "ecology") is the prototype for a city of 5,000 people, drawing on contemporary urban and environmental principles.



PHOTOS: ALISON APPELBE

A saguaro cactus at the Desert Botanical Garden west of Scottsdale

Tomalty, who is also closely involved in Arcosanti (he and his wife live in a flat over the foundry), and Soleri, now 90, would like "to remove the automobile from the city" (a brazen idea in a region where the lead item on the evening newscast — "great news" — is the addition of three lanes of freeway).

Yet Arcosanti tour guide Erin Jeffries is philosophical about this far-from-complete "urban laboratory," and the criticism it faces. "It's a really big idea that will take time," she says, as we amble through the site in which 75 mostly volunteer artists and builders live year-round, and others come to visit or study.

Arcosanti, smack in the desert,



Crews inflate balloons in the desert north of Scottsdale.

reminded me of my aborted balloon ride. So on my last evening in Arizona I was back at a Cave Creek launch site. Winds were light.

"Is this your first balloon ride?" asked pilot Stevens, as our basket, carrying a dozen passengers, lifted off the ground. "So if I do something wrong, you'll never know," he continued, turning up the gas jets. "Actually, if I do something wrong, you will know," he said jokingly.

Far below, the empty trucks moved off the launch sites. The crews would track the balloons' trajectories by

radio phone, and collect us where the balloons landed.

We floated over outlying subdivisions and desert toward low-lying mountains. Sweaters went on at 300 metres. Stevens hung out the "positioning lights." We continued to gain altitude as dusk turned to dark.

At 2,100 metres — the maximum height permitted for balloons — Stevens said we were getting the "super-deluxe flight."

Moments later, at precisely 5:21 p.m., the sun went down over the Sonoran Desert.