

FINDING SANCTUARY IN SCOTTSDALE ON CAMELBACK MOUNTAIN

By Lavanya Sunkara



The new year means snow on the ground and a list of resolutions. There's an easy solution to escape the cold and cross off a few items—jet to Scottsdale, Arizona where sunny skies, hiking trails, luxurious spas, and fine dining await. As a nature lover who craves comfort and cosmopolitan culture, I was drawn to the “West’s Most Western Town.” Driving up to the Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain, I was enamored with the perfect backdrop of the eponymous mountain and the top-notch accommodations of this modern resort.

Situated on 53 acres of the mountain’s north slope in Paradise Valley, Sanctuary on Camelback Resort & Spa is 20 minutes from Sky Harbor Airport and just ten from downtown Scottsdale. It offers seclusion with

105 intimate Mountain and Spa casitas and suites that blend in with the red rock terrain. With lush greenery on premises, towering cacti at every corner, and dazzling sunsets that seem to go on forever, I was truly in paradise.

A panoramic view of endless mountain ranges, from Four Peaks to the Superstitions, greeted me as I stepped into the spacious balcony suite. The living and sleeping areas were chic and recently renovated with tile flooring, a wood-burning fireplace, state-of-the-art technology and comforts, including a soaking tub in the bathroom with stunning views. The décor is naturally Southwest with small cactus plants scattered through the suite, desert-inspired sculptures and photography on the walls, and colorful

animal-printed accent rugs.

Black and white photographs of Camelback beckoned me to hit the trail to experience the vivid desert beauty. With the help of a resort-provided guide, I set out on a bike to the Echo Canyon trailhead towards Praying Monk—an iconic 100-odd foot tall red sandstone formation shaped like a kneeling monk. Ditching the bikes, we ventured on the mile hike to the summit. The incredible views of the valley made it clear why Camelback is one of the most hiked mountains in the country. However, with its sheer cliffs and rough terrain, the summit trails are not for novices. But worry not, there are easier trails at the base.

After a relaxing dip in the infinity-edge pool at the resort, I was ready for a night on the town.

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Specifically, Old Town, where stores like Shades of the West and River Trading Post & Traditional Pueblo Arts sell cowboy apparel, Native American artifacts, and southwestern jewelry in historic buildings. The Old Adobe Mission built by Mexican immigrants in the 1930s, invites reflection. Statues of cowboys on horseback stand proudly at street corners. After browsing the shops, I rested my weary legs sipping a Tito's and Tonic at Scottsdale's last real Western watering hole: The Rusty Spur Saloon. Walking through the swinging doors of this former bank, which holds liquor in the vault, offers travel back in time 150 years. Old western decor and license plates from every state fill the walls, and there's always a musician singing country songs.

Country music isn't the only thing happening in Scottsdale—the city's museums feature everything from Southwestern culture to wondrous contemporary art. The next morning, I found myself admiring rare historic artifacts and cultural treasures depicting the ever-evolving American West at the new Museum of the West (which opened in early 2015). A short walk led me to the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMoCA), where futuristic visions of Earth and Mars in "Orion Tide" and "Tales on the Horizon" by Kelly Richardson took my breath away. The magnificent "Ferryman's Crossing" by Bruce Munro was the highlight. Pulses of light shimmered across thousands of

colorful compact disks, evoking a sense of sunshine bouncing off flowing water, in an installation that's part of the Desert Radiance series.

Munro's series continued at the Desert Botanical Garden, a 140-acre attraction located in Papago Park, showcasing plants and wildflowers from deserts worldwide. Munro used this setting for "Sonoran Light at Desert Botanical Garden," with the impressive "Water Towers" installations—69 towers staggered among the Garden's saguaro cactus plants, and "Field of Light," which brightens the night with 30,000 individual spheres depicting Papago Butte.

Back at the resort, I savored dinner at Elements, Sanctuary's iconic restaurant where Food Network Celebrity Chef Beau MacMillan whips up delicious Asian-inspired dishes with area produce. Overlooking Paradise Valley, the restaurant is ideal for watching the sunset. Private dining room XII, featuring an 800-bottle wine corridor, a sommelier station, and a sliding glass door view of the kitchen gave me a glimpse into this world-class restaurant; the food on my table, specifically the kung pao cauliflower and the mouthwatering Maine lobster udon noodles, were some of the best dishes I've ever had.

Live music spilled from the neighboring Jade

Bar, an indoor/outdoor haven with a stand-up bar made of authentic jade and floor-to-ceiling windows. This hot spot provides hand-crafted cocktails curated with spirits and fresh juices, herbs, and vegetables. I imbibed signature drinks, including Sugar Snap Southside and Grapefruit Basis, nestled by a fireplace under the stars.

After all the drinking the night before, I needed to detox. I headed to the Asian-inspired Sanctuary Spa, which offers indulging treatments such as the Sanctuary Luxury Facial, Sumatra Coconut Body Ritual, and In Harmony Massage. With 12 treatment rooms that open up to a lush courtyard, a Watsu pool for hydro treatments, and a serene meditation courtyard overlooking Praying Monk, I felt like I was in an oasis. For 60 minutes, in a warm and contemporary treatment room, I indulged in the Jewel Facial, which used Naturopathica all-natural products. For the next few days, I caught myself admiring the glow on my face. Perhaps it was the desert radiance, the delicious gourmet meals, or simply the spa treatment that had me beaming from ear to ear. Next year, I resolve to return to the Sanctuary with friends to experience the new Spa House for a true meditation retreat. ♦

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