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SCENIC BEAUTY AND ART ON VIEW IN ARIZONA

By *Melody Wren* - October 30, 2016



The Aji Spa in Chandler, Ariz. MELODY WREN PHOTO



Arizona is full of contrasts, with spectacular scenery amid arid deserts, and an art and food scene packed with surprises at every corner. Temperatures are generally good for exploring and dining al fresco in the many eclectic cafés and restaurants.

I stayed in Tempe just outside of Phoenix for the first few days. Tempe has a healthy, active, green energy pulsing throughout. I walked through the Arizona State University Campus directly across the street from my hotel. This largest university in the United States has also been dubbed one of the “greenest universities in the nation” – a tobacco free campus with smiling, friendly students passing on bicycles, skateboards and a free bus to reduce driving.

The City of Tempe encourages bike travel by hosting monthly promotional events including bike pub-crawls with up to 400 participants at a time.

A walk along the iconic Palm Walk, lined with date palm trees, takes you to historic Old Main Street, past the ASU Gammage auditorium. In 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright was called on to assist with its design. Wright used plans originally prepared for an opera house in Baghdad that did not come to fruition to design this imposing theatre. It stands eight stories high with two pedestrian bridges that extend like welcoming arms and add to the feeling of vastness.

I attended a "Motown musical" in the auditorium one evening, and it is designed so that there isn't a bad view from any seat. www.asugammage.com.

Unlike other hot destinations, this is a city to walk in. Showcasing more than 70 pieces of art throughout the city, a self-guided art walk started at historic Hayden Flour Mill and included unique installations hosted in public buildings and along pathways.

For more of an art hit, the ASU Art Museum has unusual exhibits by contemporary artists, and the Mesa Arts Center has five art galleries with changing exhibitions and workshops



The Phoenix Street Art and Mural Tour is a walk on the cultural side of Roosevelt Row (Ro-Ro) with a well-informed guide who explained how the area transitioned from a poverty-filled neighbourhood into a thriving arts district. Tiny, unique art galleries are showcased in old shipping containers or back alley studios, some extending to murals decorating the buildings.

During the art tour, we walked past the historic Beth Hebrew Synagogue, which, after being saved from the wrecking ball, has been completely restored over the past year. The building, opened in 1955, has seen stucco removed from the exterior as well as stained glass windows revealed inside. It hosted the first Shabbat service in nearly 40 years in January this year, the building representing the history of the Jewish community in Phoenix.

To book the art tour, contact rooseveltrow.org or do a self-guided tour with their online map.

If you love gardens, the Desert Botanical Garden is a short drive from central Tempe. Take a few hours to explore the world's best collection of arid-land plants. The theme of art carries through to the inspired cactus sculptures from renowned American glass artist, Dale Chihuly.

The areas in and around Phoenix are refreshingly green, and the desert unexpectedly beautiful, reinforcing the importance of travelling to explore unknown destinations.

Melody Wren was a guest of Visit Phoenix, Tempe Tourism and Visit Mesa. visitphoenix.com, tempetourism.com.

WHERE TO STAY:

Tempe:

For a location to walk to most central places, you can't beat the [Graduate Hotel](#). It's lively with a fun energy from the colourful kitchy decor and the location across from Arizona State University. Rooms are bright and decorated with a fun college theme. There are two restaurants: Tapacubo, a Mexican street food bar, has wonderful tacos and tortillas filled with grilled chicken, guacamole, lime juice, and delicious fare for a snack or a meal.

Early in the morning, I went in search of tea and ended up following a man in Burberry pajamas who appeared out of the elevator and headed next door to the Normal, a hip diner. Pancake house meets hip with eight-tracks covering the walls, '50s décor, and dance-worthy music. The menu offers some '50s-style food including a milkshake garnished with Lucky Charms and Fruit Loops or waffles filled with fried chicken.

A shuttle bus and six bikes are available for guests.

Chandler:

We also stayed at the [Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa in Chandler](#). After we moved to this native American hotel from the thriving centrally located Graduate in Tempe, we were aware that this desert oasis couldn't feel more different. It's situated on the Gila River on a reservation, and you can take a tour to get a glimpse of cultural and historical significance of the Pima and Maricopa tribes.

The Aji Spa is in a separate building with a pool. Unsure of what to expect, I felt calmer and lighter after a therapeutic Pima Medicine massage that incorporates energy anatomy and ancient techniques passed down for generations from Pima Medicine Healers. It is designed for ultimate relaxation with traces of spiritual healing. Bemen Stoneman is a 54-year-old therapist who has been practising the techniques "forever," she says. She has a wisdom that is somehow transferred while doing her treatment

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