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TRAVEL

Sedona offers special energy all its own

RED ROCK COUNTRY | Famed vortexes just part of the attraction in mountainous Arizona

Comments

October 25, 2009

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

SEDONA, Ariz. — A funny thing happened on the way to Sedona in Arizona's Red Rock country.

Thirty minutes out, our GPS screen suddenly stopped computing. It faded to black for a minute before blinking to life as if nothing had happened.

» Click to enlarge image



The natural beauty of morning clouds giving way to blue skies over Red Rock country at Sedona is part of a breathtaking trip to the mountains of Arizona.

(AP)

"Could be an electrical connection," said Steve, looking puzzled. "Not that it matters. We know where we are, even if it doesn't."

A GPS glitch seemed trivial compared to the scenery in Oak Creek Canyon, made up of towering sandstone peaks and ragged pinnacles rising beside the road for the last 13 miles of our drive from Flagstaff south to Sedona.

We were reminded of our GPS' technical difficulties the next morning in Sedona, when our compass failed on the trail to the head of Boynton Canyon. The needle should have locked on "north," but to our surprise, it wobbled uncertainly.

Were the two events related? Who knows? But here in Sedona, where New Age proponents claim the presence of strange magnetic forces, even skeptics never say never.

Did the area's so-called vortexes, famously promoted as the source of the spiritual and magnetic energy "discovered" here in the mid-1980s, deserve a closer look? Would we feel it, too? That was one of the "must do" items on our autumn visit to Arizona's mighty Mogollon Rim, 30 miles south of Flagstaff.

"That's what everyone asks," said Nicholas Gold, the general manager at the Enchantment Resort in Boynton Canyon, next to Sedona. "I'm no expert, but some people say they sense the vortex on Airport Mesa, just off the highway," he said with a bemused smile. "Don't forget your camera — the view from the top is outstanding."

The Airport Mesa vortex, a top Sedona tourist attraction, is the easiest one to reach because you can drive within 300 feet of its location. Look for a small parking lot before you reach the airport; the path starts there. We didn't see a sign, but cars were pulling in and out and people were coming and going. We followed a family with kids toward a rocky knoll, then scrambled to the summit. Momentarily winded, I felt a force of some kind, probably just gravity.

If there is indeed magnetic energy in the rocks, it originated over a span of 300 million years at the bottom of a series of ancient seas, now the uplifted Colorado Plateau. Farther north, the plateau appears as rolling land. But here at 4,500 feet elevation, on the plateau's exposed southern edge — the Mogollon Rim — wind and water have eroded away the softer

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cage – the megaton rain – wind and water have eroded away the softer layers, leaving a vast panorama of wondrous towers, ridges, pinnacles, hoodoos and narrow canyons.

One of those canyons, Boynton Canyon, was where we spent the first couple of days, checking into a tree-shaded casita at the sprawling Enchantment Resort. We slept late, hiked, soaked in the palatial hot pool at the resort's Mii Amo Spa and sampled the cuisine at Yavapai, Enchantment's fine-dining restaurant.

The next day, we investigated Sedona's signature tourist attraction, the off-road jeep tours into the red rocks outback. Though each outfitter operates with a national forest permit for a different sector, all guarantee adventure. The Broken Arrow tour sounded promising, so we went with Pink Jeep Tours, whose 57 specially modified jeeps make short work of crawling up and over giant boulders and 50-degree vertical slopes.

When our driver, Jen Mekrut, shouted, "Buckle up," she meant it. "We'll be going three miles an hour and it will feel like 30," she hollered to the eight of us. The ride stopped for a break at two unbelievable vista points: you'll need a camera to convince your friends you were really there.

We also volunteered to test a proposed winery tour organized by Red Rock Western Jeeps to Page Spring Cellars in nearby Cornville. Riding with guide Wendy Robertson, a knockout in a gambler-style cowboy hat, vest, sleek ankle-length skirt and cowboy boots, we toured the winery, inspected the vineyard and tasted the latest crush. Never far from a view, we stopped on the way to put names to the most familiar peaks.

"That's Cathedral Rock," said Robertson, "and there's Bell Rock, Capitol Butte and Munds Mountain. When you're working outside, you get to know them pretty quickly."

For the last three days of our trip, we moved into town to a creekside cottage at the luxurious Hotel L'Auberge, paying discounted rates offered to travelers willing to brave a full-scale remodel and expansion. A good choice if you like to walk, L'Auberge is close to galleries, shops and restaurants.

We also spent a full day exploring Oak Creek Canyon, where the Sedona story began. You'll need a Rock Parking Pass at most parking pull-outs. You can buy it at several locations, including the tourism office downtown and the Coconino National Forest Visitors Center on Highway 179 in Oak Creek Village. Passes cost \$5 a day or \$15 a week.

After a short morning hike, we stopped for lunch at Indian Gardens, a wide spot in the canyon where Native Americans once farmed corn and beans. Today, it's a lunch place with tables and a deli counter selling made-to-order sandwiches and salads.

If you have kids – or remember what old-fashioned swimming holes were like – bring a picnic and your bathing suits to Slide Rock State Park, the Pendley family's former farm and apple orchard. A sign marks the entrance and there's plenty of parking. A path leads to the river, which flows over flat rock terraces, forming mini-waterfalls and pools. You can dabble your feet in the shallow spots or dunk in the pools.

For drop-dead scenery, Sedona's red rocks are the gold standard. But it hasn't always been this way. In the mid-19th century, eastern city dwellers dismissed Arizona's arid deserts and fantastic geology as grotesque. Not until the first pioneers drifted into the area did tastes begin to change. Staking claims on the meadows near Oak Creek in the 1880s, farmers and ranchers raised cattle and planted apple orchards. When the next wave of settlers built homes near the mouth of Oak Creek Canyon, Sedona was born (named for Sedona, wife of the first postmaster).

First known for its apples shipped to markets near and far, Sedona was soon synonymous with fresh fruit. Later, Sedona made it into the movies, bringing Western filmmakers to town to shoot on location. Painters and artisans followed, many of whom stayed on to open galleries, museums and art schools. As the community grew, so did tourism.

Despite its deliberately western connections, Sedona wears a coat of many colors. If you're a painter, a photographer or a collector, it's an artists' colony. To naturalists, hikers, rock climbers, bicyclists and environmentalists, it's the launch pad for the Coconino National Forest's pinyon and cypress forests, trails, campsites and peaks. For everyone else who loves this place – poets, folklorists, nature writers, families doing the great American road trip and burned out corporate suits – there's something that resonates. And if your paranormal radar zings, this is the IT place.

Before driving home we stopped at the Airport Mesa vortex again. As we sat on the summit, an airplane came in for landing, the roar drowning out our voices. But the noise wasn't enough to discourage a circle of people sitting nearby, touching fingers and determinedly meditating.

"Close your eyes, breathe deep and feel the energy," said their leader, a 30-something blond in a madras skirt, who beckoned us to join her. We smiled and declined. But a bit of the magic rubbed off anyway.

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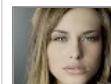
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Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based free-lance writers.

Overnight accommodations were provided by Enchantment Resort and Hotel L'Auberge.

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