

# DESTINATION

THE SOUTHWEST'S BEST SMALL TOWNS & GETAWAYS

## Sedona

Fierce sunsets and iconic geology are just two of the forces that pull travelers to this wintertime desert oasis. **Stephanie Pearson** explores Arizona's mystical red rock country

**LATE BLOOMER**  
Sedona's evocative landscape is a beautiful contradiction of grand geological formations and surprisingly delicate cacti.

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In the past 16 years, my parents have spent 99 weeks between January and April hiking amidst the red rocks of Sedona. They've logged a grand total of 3,564 miles, wearing out a half-dozen pairs of hiking boots in the process. No one is officially counting the miles, but my dad takes his position as "Trail Boss"

seriously and likes to curate his hikes so that no guest takes the same adventure twice. That's why he has meticulously recorded every foray in the pages of his Revised 5th Edition of *Sedona Hikes* by Richard and Sherry Mangum.

Dad's notes are cryptic and entertaining, like this entry from March 6, 2004, on the Woods Canyon Trail: "Hiked to 4m point got lost. Bushwhacked and our legs looked like porcupines." Or this from March 10, 2006, on the Turkey Creek Trail: "Cold day — 46 degrees — no lunch."

Or, from March 10, 2009, on Brins Mesa West Trail: "Went to mountain top on right of Mesa, 380-degree [sic] spectacular view."

My parents "discovered" Sedona in 1999, roughly 1,349 years after the Sinagua Indians settled among its buttes, mesas, mountaintops and secret stashes of cool springs that sit at 4,500 feet north of dead center in what is now

Arizona. Sometime in that last 1,000 years, the Sinagua gave way to Angelinos seeking solace from 10-lane freeways, snowbirds seeking refuge from shoveling drive-ways, and anyone who loves to watch the sun set fire to the intense blue sky, preferably with a margarita in hand.

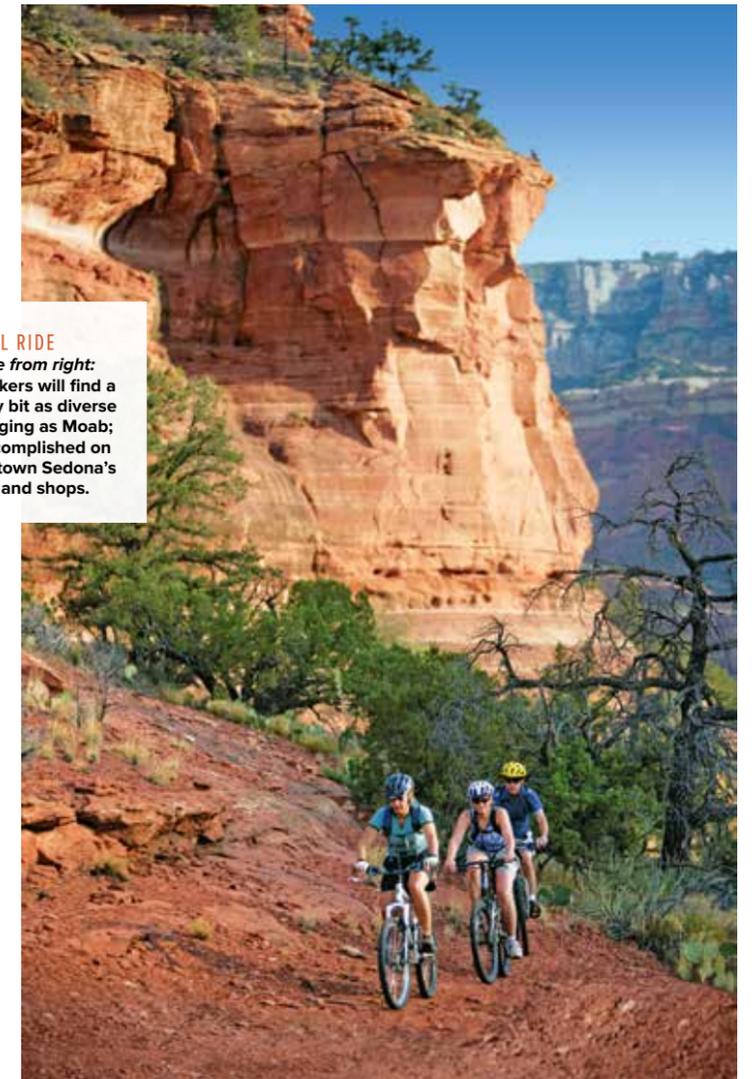
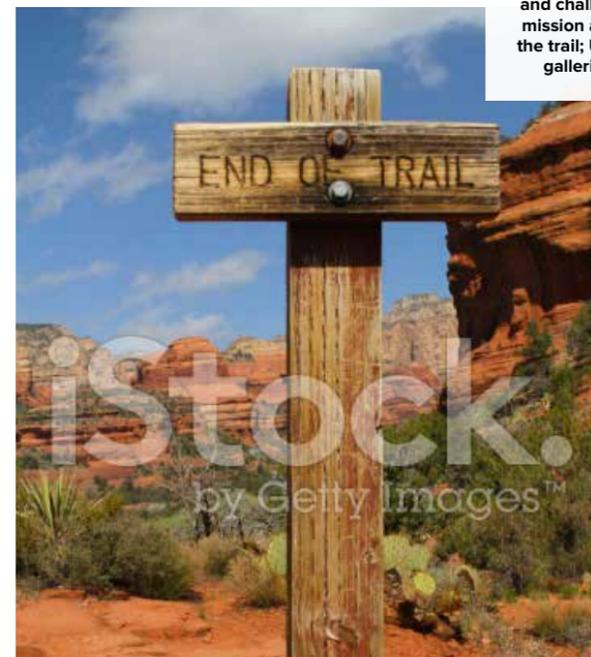
I live most of the year in Santa Fe, which is a dreamy desert destination in its own right. But right around February, I crave the 80-degree heat, stark red landscape and quality of play that can be had in Sedona, especially



**TAKE IT OUTSIDE**  
Clockwise from right: An outdoor cedar shower at L'Auberge de Sedona Resort; sunset at Enchantment Resort in Boyton Canyon; cocktail hour calls for charcuterie and wine at Enchantment.



**TRAIL RIDE**  
Clockwise from right: Mountain bikers will find a terrain every bit as diverse and challenging as Moab; mission accomplished on the trail; Uptown Sedona's galleries and shops.

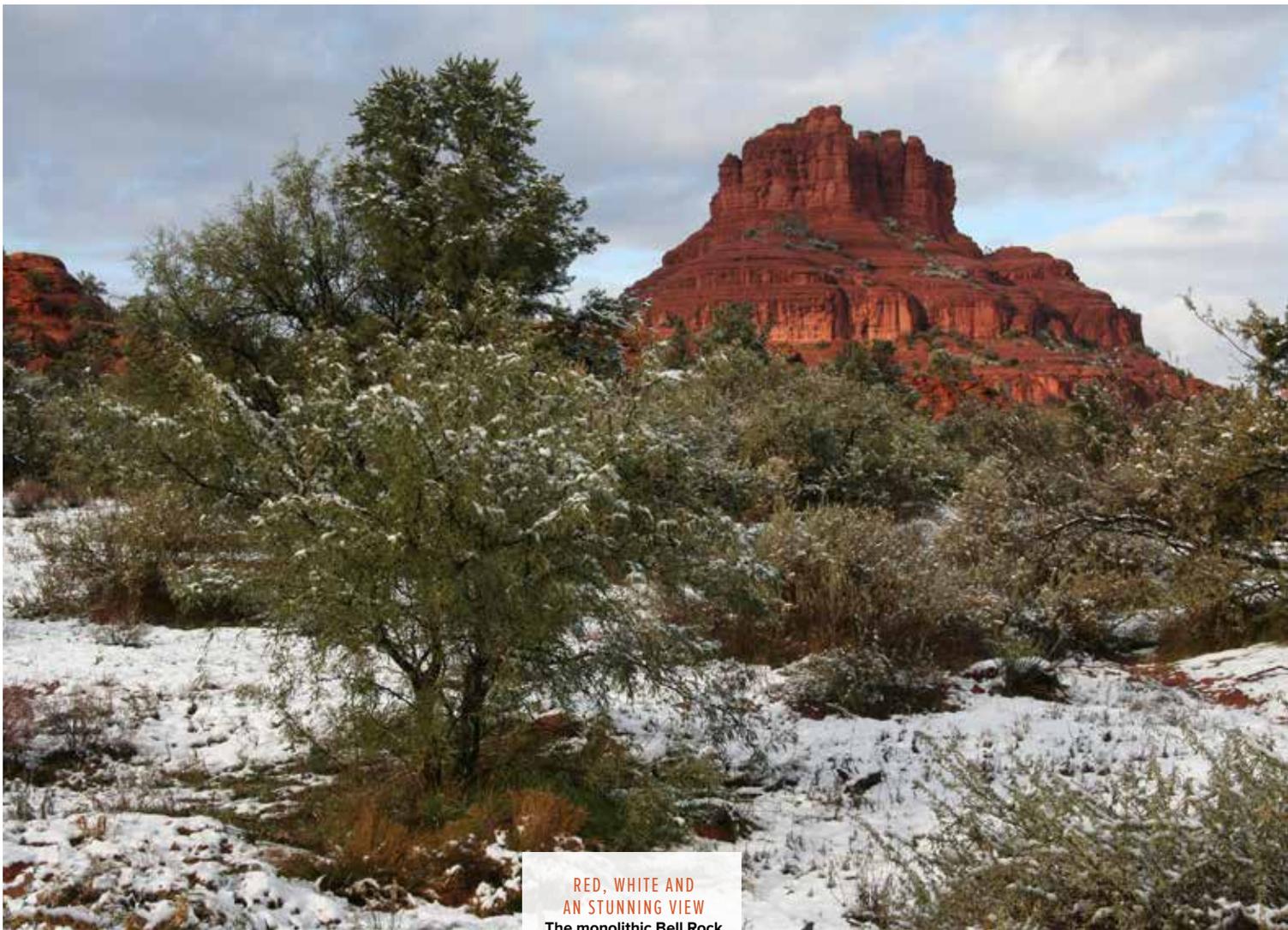


in the winter. I've spent roughly 20 weeks here with an ever-revolving cast of friends and family. My memories include carrying nieces and nephews in baby backpacks, all six of whom can now corner singletrack on a mountain bike better than I can; getting lost in philosophy while hiking with a theologian friend who has since died of cancer; sipping Sardinian Cannonau creekside at L'Auberge de Sedona Resort with a 1970s supermodel and her author boyfriend; and meeting an airplane mechanic-turned-vagabond mountain biker who had a beard to his waist and was on a mission to ride in every state.

Some say that Sedona has four main vortexes — areas of heightened spiritual and metaphysical energy. I would argue, however, that all of Sedona and the surrounding Coconino National Forest are one giant zone of magic — from the well-worn path around Bell Rock to the solitary

mountain bike spur trail, Western Civilization, to the fire crackling on the outdoor patio of Enchantment Resort. In each of these places, in very different ways, I've felt awe.

A few years ago, Jose, a photographer friend who happens to be deaf, was passing through Sedona on his way to Yosemite. He asked me to take him to the best vantage point from which to photograph the sunset. My plan was unoriginal: We hiked 4 miles to the saddle of 4,921-foot Cathedral Rock, a striking formation with 50 shades of red sandstone and rock pinnacles that jut like a hand hundreds of feet into the sky. To reach the saddle requires a vertical scramble up the smooth red sandstone, where footing can be tricky and a tumble can mean broken bones or worse. This iconic vista is one of the most photographed in the United States, but we had the place to ourselves, arriving just in time to watch the sun torch the



**RED, WHITE AND AN STUNNING VIEW**  
The monolithic Bell Rock formation rises above snow-dusted ponderosa pines and twisted cottonwoods.

sky, sending light rays of sublime pink and orange bleeding across the horizon.

Because my sign language skills are nonexistent, Jose and I had to communicate via scribbles on a yellow legal pad.

“I’m highly visual,” Jose wrote. I was so caught up watching him joyfully click away on his Canon that I didn’t think about how difficult it might be for a us to navigate our way back to the parking lot in the dark. Neither of us came prepared with headlamps and by the time Jose finished photographing the sky, the sun had dropped below the horizon. I panicked as I felt my way over the red rocks one step at a time. Jose, on the other hand hiked behind me like a sure-footed mountain goat, practically skipping down the rock, kicking up red dust as we nearly ran back to the car.

As we were wolfing down salads at the ChocolaTree,

a vegan restaurant in Sedona that has a 100 percent organic menu and a display case full

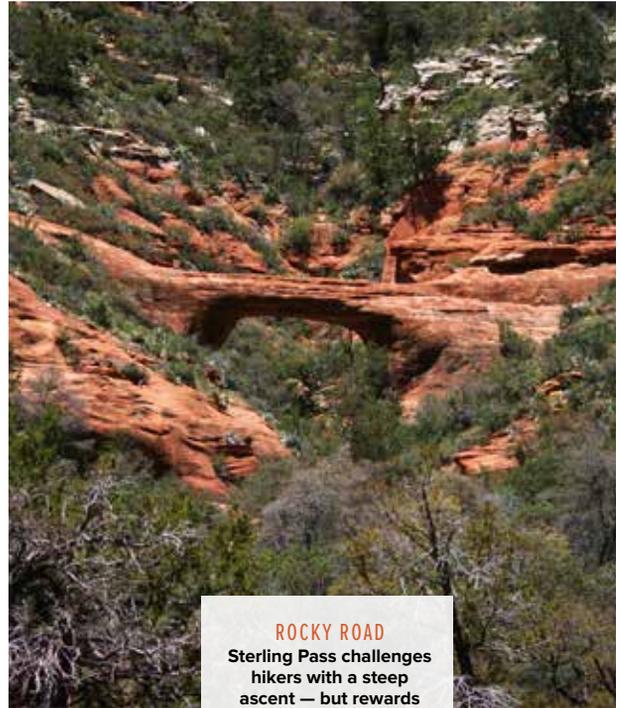
of truffles made on-site from Ecuadorean cacao, I asked Jose how he could see so well in the dark.

“A deaf person is born sensitive to vibrations,” he wrote. “If you put your foot on the ground, I can feel it, so I just followed your vibration back to the car.”

I thought about his response for a while and realized that Jose’s way of being is similar to the sensation I feel when I’m in Sedona. Its clear beauty pares life down to the simplest elements, so I can screen out the distractions and focus on the connections, or vibrations, that matter the most.

Now that my dad is 80 years old, he doesn’t hike with the same force he used to. But that hasn’t stopped him from setting some serious goals. This year’s is to retrace, for once, a trek up Sterling Pass. Starting unceremoniously at a small trailhead off of US 89A, the hike isn’t

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**ROCKY ROAD**  
Sterling Pass challenges hikers with a steep ascent — but rewards with formations like Vultee Arch.

obvious and is less loved than so many others closer to town. Perhaps it's also because the trail rises 1,000 feet in 1.65 miles. As the aforementioned guidebook says, "This is a true mountain pass."

My parents and I last hiked Sterling two years ago. When I saw the immediate incline, I was a little nervous to set out with two people whose collective age was 149 years. But being the well-seasoned hikers that they are, my parents took the steep grade at their own pace, their hiking poles tapping away at the slickrock in a slow, rhythmic beat. They stopped every so often to gaze in awe at the red sandstone cliffs towering above the ponderosa pine. At the precipitous switchbacks, my dad would climb each boulder step, wait for my mom to catch up, then reach his hand out to gently pull her up and over the rocks.

We eventually reached the top, a small notch with a flat boulder big enough for the three of us. My mom unpacked our trail lunch — the familiar sandwiches, grapes, carrots and homemade chocolate and peanut butter cookies that have been fueling us here for more than a dozen years. We munched in silence, enjoying the sun and our small accomplishment. I didn't read Dad's notes from this particular hike, but I would imagine the entry would read something like, "A beast of an uphill, but one hell of a view." 🌞

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