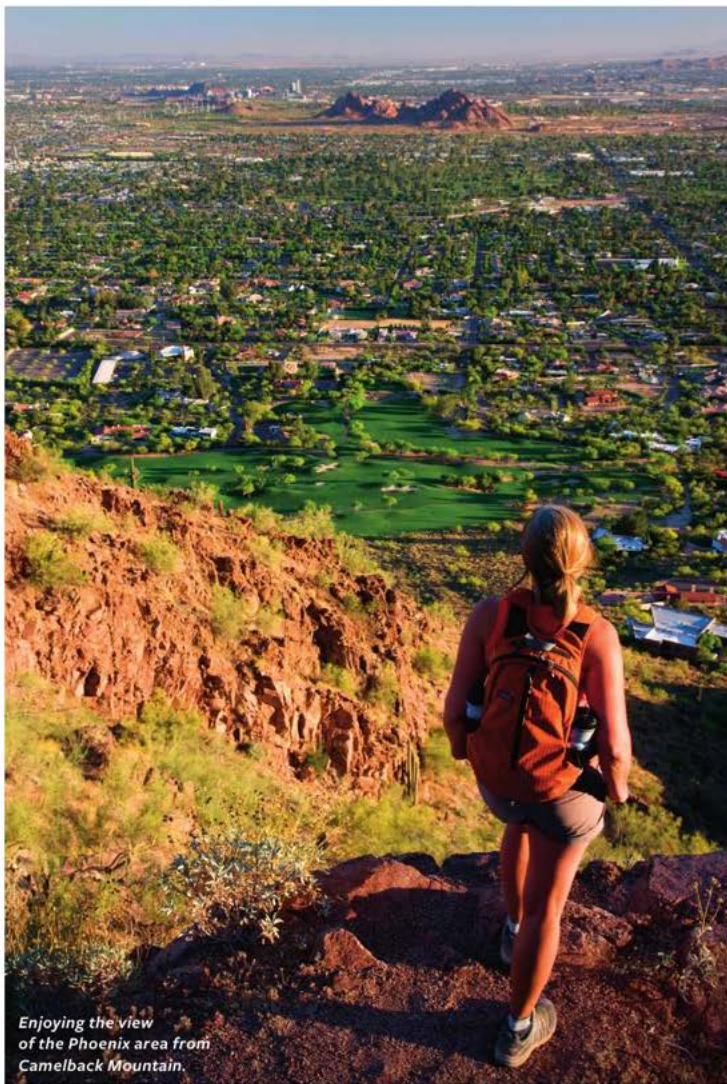


SPRINGTIME IN THE SONORAN DESERT

Cultural and recreational gems shine in famously sunny Phoenix

By Renee Brincks



Enjoying the view of the Phoenix area from Camelback Mountain.

» Early on a cloudless March morning, I stop outside monOrchid gallery in downtown Phoenix to see one of the city's increasingly popular sights.

It's a mural, titled *The Garden*, on the building's west-facing wall, and it centers on a red-haired boy emptying a watering can. Before the droplets touch the ground, they transform into birds that soar across the structure and curl around a quote by Mother Teresa, a Catholic saint who spent her life helping India's poor. The quote states, in part, that at the end of life, we won't be judged by how financially successful we were, but by how well we took care of those who are homeless.

Artist Brian Boner partnered with the I Have a Name Project to create the work as part of a campaign to bring attention to homelessness. It's one of many striking murals in the Roosevelt Row Arts District. Studios and small businesses line the streets of this pedestrian-friendly Phoenix neighborhood that's also known for gallery walks and art events held on the first and third Fridays of each month.

After photographing a few other murals in the area, I swing by the beautiful Phoenix Public Market Cafe for tea and a cinnamon roll to go. I've got a baseball game to catch.

The center of Major League Baseball's Cactus League, the greater Phoenix area is home to 15 baseball teams that gather here to play their spring-training games. The league annually draws about 1 million fans to watch games at 10 stadiums located in the region. This year's spring training runs to March 26. The regular season begins March 28 for all Cactus League teams except the Oakland Athletics and the Seattle Mariners, who open the season March 20 by playing each other in Tokyo.

Once the season begins, baseball fans can watch the Arizona Diamondbacks play their regular-season home games at Chase Field in downtown Phoenix. The NBA's Phoenix Suns and the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury play at the adjacent Talking Stick Resort Arena.

The Phoenix area also is full of cultural attractions, including the Arizona Science

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» THE FEED
WHEN IN PHOENIX

Center, which offers hands-on science activities, a planetarium and touring exhibitions. "Mummies of the World: The Exhibition" is on display through September 2, and features 40 real human and animal mummies found in various countries. The Children's Museum of Phoenix, located a block away, is full of family-friendly activities, such as exploring an inside climbing apparatus and building with blocks.

The Valley Metro Light Rail system links downtown with cultural institutions such as the Phoenix Art Museum, a world-class visual arts center with more than 19,000 pieces that include works by European artists Monet and Rodin and by contemporary Chinese artist Sui Jianguo. The light rail also passes near the Heard Museum, which is dedicated to the advancement of American Indian art and collaborates with many tribal communities. Highlights include Hopi *katsina* dolls and Navajo and Zuni jewelry.

In the Camelback East Village, north of downtown, you'll find the tiki-themed bar UnderTow, which has been a hit since opening in 2016. The tiny, reservations-recommended lounge is accessed from a stairway inside the Sip Coffee & Beer Garage. The stairs lead to the floor below and the UnderTow's front door. Postino, a wine lounge with Italian food, and Le Grande Orange, a spacious culinary hub that's part cafe, part pizzeria and part retail market, are located nearby.

To the north, in the Desert Ridge South neighborhood, the Musical Instrument Museum showcases nearly 7,000 instruments from around the world. The exhibit "The Electric



Guitar: Inventing an American Icon," on display through mid-September, features guitars played by Pete Townshend of The Who and Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones.

Spring is the perfect time for getting outdoors here, and one of the best places to explore is the 1,500-acre Papago Park to the east of downtown. The park's wildflowers reach their peak from mid-March to late April. Visit the park's Desert Botanical Garden, where you can explore the Sonoran Desert plant life on the garden's 140 acres and see about 4,400 flower, tree and cactus species.

Camelback Mountain, a Phoenix icon, is located farther north. The popular hiking spot features challenging trails climbing nearly 1,300

feet in elevation to the mountain's 2,707-foot peak, offering spectacular views of the area. More moderate trails wind through the rugged, rocky landscapes at Dreamy Draw Recreation Area in the Phoenix Mountains Preserve, northwest of Camelback.

Such parks show the beauty of this desert landscape, and offer one more reason to make a visit to the Valley of the Sun. ✈

Renee Brincks writes from the Bay Area.

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) offers service between Phoenix (PHX) and Anchorage (ANC), Portland (PDX), San Francisco (SFO) and two Seattle-area airports (PAE and SEA).

» Papago Park's Desert Botanical Garden, above, contains a variety of cactus species. A bronze statue, right, titled Intertribal Greeting, stands outside the Heard Museum. Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Archie Bradley, far right, signs autographs for fans.

