

PHOENIX RISING

Wide open desert, lush mountains and a buzzing metropolis – Phoenix has it all, says Mike Ward

I've been in Phoenix only a few days and already I've ridden a horse through the cactus-strewn desert, savoured a spectacular mountain sunset, supped some of the region's wonderful wine (I say supped, but it was more like guzzled – due to the astonishing heat). I have also witnessed a shoot-out.

The shoot-out, I should explain, was the kind that settles an ice-hockey game, like penalties in football. Arizona Coyotes (whose fans actually howl – it's very odd) lost it to Carolina Hurricanes. But I blame myself, a first-time visitor to their Gila River Arena. I must have been a jinx. I usually am.

Yes, you could never accuse Phoenix – or Greater Phoenix, as I'm including cities such as Glendale, Scottsdale and Tempe – of lacking variety. The main city is now America's sixth largest, with a population of 1.4million (150 years ago there was pretty much nothing here but cacti) and attracts 16m tourists a year.

I'm lucky enough to be spending the week with my old school friend, Adrian, and his family, who've lived here for 20 years. They've loaned me their car, which is handy, because you do really need one to make the most of what's on offer around these parts.

Hiring a vehicle is simple, of course: 14

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Main picture:
Organ Pipe
Cactus National
Monument

Right: Riding
in South
Mountain Park



rental firms operate from Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

The multi-lane highways may look intimidating, but driving here really isn't stressful. The grid system means even a ninny like me would struggle to get lost.

Hence I found my way fairly effortlessly to Phoenix Zoo. Now I appreciate not everyone likes zoos, they get a bad press, but Phoenix is big on conservation and its animals look healthy and happy. My two hours there were blissfully crowd-free, too, because this was Super Bowl Sunday, the biggest occasion in the American football calendar. And this year's game, besides whipping millions of TV viewers into a frenzy, was being played just up the road at Arizona Cardinals' University of Phoenix Stadium.

Without wishing to bang on about sport, it's huge here. Depending on the season, you can watch top American football, ice hockey, baseball and basketball.

There are also around 200 golf courses. In fact, I arrived on the day Tiger Woods stepped out to compete in the prestigious Phoenix Open. Admittedly, he soon stepped back in again, having played his worst game ever, but like I say, I'm a jinx.

The Desert Botanical Garden, a 50-acre expanse right next to the zoo, is also stunning. You'll see enough varieties of ▶

Ten things you must do in Phoenix



Phoenix has over 200 golf courses set in breath-taking desert scenery



1 Treat yourself to a hot-air balloon flight (above) for a unique view of the desert.

2 Get a feel for Arizona's proud Native American cultural heritage at the Heard Museum.

3 Challenge yourself to take a 2,700ft hike up Camelback Mountain.

4 Watch some first-class professional US sport: ice hockey, baseball, basketball or American football, depending on the season.

5 Find everything from self-playing pianos to Elvis Presley's last guitar at the fascinating Musical Instrument Museum.

6 Stroll around the Desert Botanical Garden and marvel at the wildlife that thrives in these arid conditions (below).



7 Book a horse ride through the South Mountain Park, ideally as the sun is slowly sinking behind the mountains.

8 Sample a selection of the finest local wine in picturesque surroundings at Page Spring Cellars or Alcantara Vineyards.

9 Venture out to the Grand Canyon. Yes, it's almost 200 miles away, but Phoenix is the nearest metropolis and considered its gateway.

10 Discover lions, tigers, rhinos, giraffes and more at Phoenix Zoo (below) and Arizona Centre for Nature Conservation.



cactus here to last you a lifetime. I mean that in a good way.

Likewise, Scottsdale's Butterfly Wonderland. It's mad, but it actually works. You step inside a huge, steamy, glass atrium to find yourself surrounded – and repeatedly settled upon – by about 2,500 butterflies of countless stunning varieties. It's curiously calming.

I also had a go at horse riding at Ponderosa Stables, a short drive from Downtown Phoenix, where a guide led a group of us on a lovely hour-long sunset trek in South Mountain Park.

In an altogether different vein, I loved the Musical Instrument Museum on East Mayo Boulevard, crammed with 15,000 instruments from around the world. You're even allowed to play some.

If, on the other hand, it's the region's colourful history you're interested in, visit Heard Museum on North Central Avenue, which celebrates Arizona's Native American heritage. Nearby there's the highly acclaimed Phoenix Art Museum.

Phoenix can get very hot. Everywhere is bracingly air-conditioned, of course, but the record outdoor high is 50°C. And although the local red wine I sampled during a very pleasant tasting session at Page Springs Cellars in Cornville comes thoroughly recommended, I've since learned it's not intended as a thirst-quencher.

So my advice is to visit Phoenix in the spring or autumn, when temperatures are more comfortable.

Accommodation-wise, options are plentiful, with city hotels ranging from mainstream choices such as the Holiday Inn Express to the rather more extravagant Royal Palms Resort and Spa.

Even with a very dear friend as my guide, I've only had time to skim Phoenix's surface, but it's clear it offers the best of both worlds – the buzz of a thriving modern city and the timeless, spiritual appeal of its vast rugged desert.

Phoenix has really surprised me. I think it'll surprise you too.



Learn about Native American history at the Heard Museum



The Arizona Coyotes go down to the Carolina Hurricanes

WAY TO GO

Flights from London Heathrow to Phoenix with British Airways (britishairways.com) currently start at £698 return, including taxes. For more details on accommodation and attractions in the area, go to visitphoenix.com.