



The breathtaking Grand Canyon, top-end eateries and fascinating Wild West lore are among the many gems awaiting Arizona visitors, writes **Nicola Tallant**

I FELT like the college days would last forever, but life has a way of keeping you busy. As myself and my pal, journalist Lynne Kelleher, settled in different parts of the country and had families and careers, the decades — not just the years — slipped by.

Of course, there were nights out grabbed way too infrequently, there were weddings, birthdays and celebrations, the odd weekend away, and there was always the phone.

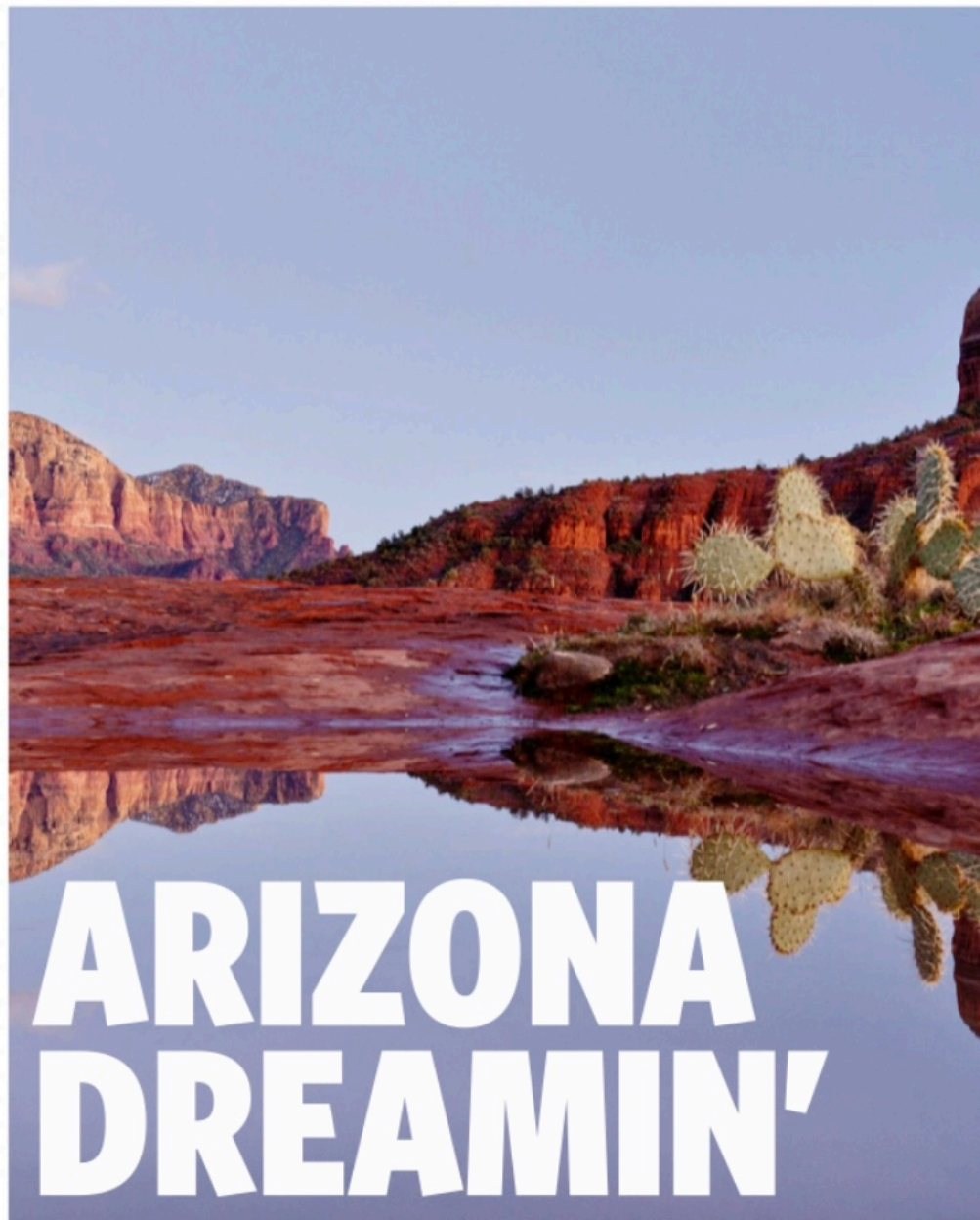
But last May, when we boarded a flight at Heathrow's Terminal 3 bound for Phoenix Arizona, leaving behind responsibilities, lunch-making and normal life for more than a week, that sense of 20-something adventure seemed to come flooding back.

Now, I've always been partial to a cowboy and I can safely say Lynne isn't much better. So Arizona — with its 'dude ranches', stunning wild mustang and incredible changing landscapes — couldn't have been better handpicked as a destination for us.

I'm way over sitting by a pool for days on end, slathered in sun cream and baking like a gecko. I like a holiday to be busy, interesting and different — where I can't be sure what is going to happen next.

So if you are like me and prefer a bit of adventure mixed with relaxation, I can highly recommend one of the most unique states I've ever been to in the US.

From the majestic Grand Canyon to the cactus-filled desert, the pine-covered



mountains to the terracotta town of Sedona and deep into the heart of the old west, where gunslingers fought it out at the OK Corral, Arizona is simply a tapestry of colours, change and experience.

Even the weather seems to be an unknown, with temperatures dropping by up to 20 degrees from one place to the next. It's hard to know where to start but I suppose the beginning is as good a place as any.

For us, that was Phoenix — a stunning and cool university city with rooftop pools, trendy bars and top-end eateries.

Arizona is dry, and the heat — while up to 40 degrees — doesn't feel unbearable because the desert climate means there is little humidity. However, it is important to drink water constantly, because it is really easy to get dehydrated.

Not far from Phoenix is the area of Glendale, which is sure to interest sports fans or those wanting to enjoy big entertainment events. It's all about shopping and shows, baseball or NFL, and it is home to the Arizona Cardinals.

Glendale is modern and purpose-built with high-end restaurants, casinos and

TRAVEL FACTFILE
ARIZONA, USA
 See visitarizona.com

- **STAY** at the boutique Hotel Vendome in Prescott (vendomehotel.com).
- **DINE** at Nic's Italian Steak & Crab House in Cottonwood (nicsaz.com); and enjoy a drink at

The Palace in Prescott (whiskeyrowpalace.com).
 ■ **TAKE** a Grand Canyon helicopter tour with Papillon (papillon.com); and hot air balloon ride with Rainbow Ryders (rainbowryders.com).



bars to match. The air con at the Renaissance Phoenix Hotel and Spa will probably be forever seared in my memory, as will my first steak of many at the Nineteen 86 Steakhouse in Desert Diamond Casino.

Onwards to Cottonwood and the Verde Valley, where Arizona produces its own wine, similar to neighbouring California.

What's nice is that you can kayak down the river and pull in at a little vineyard like Alcantara (alcantaravineyard.com), where there is lunch in the shade on offer, and tasting platters for the wines — whites being my favourite, as I don't like red in the sun.



CLOUD WINE: Nicola, Lynne and the gang take to the skies in a hot air balloon; an actor on the Grand Canyon Railway; wine tasting at the pretty Alcantara Vineyard



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The middle of the night wake-up call for a sunrise hot air balloon ride is certainly worth the red eyes. The balloons are absolutely enormous, and fold out of huge bags before they are inflated. I couldn't even fold a tent away neatly, let alone a balloon, and I'm not good with heights. But the view from above of the Sonoran Desert and Deer Valley is quite extraordinary and I never knew that the arms of cacti are a reflection of their age — 75 years per arm — making them ancient trees.

Rainbow Ryders have been bringing tourists up in these majestic balloons for years, and I found some security in chatting to our pilot about the thousands of times he has gone up and come down safely.

The Mexican influence in Arizona is ever-present so if, like me, you like a burrito for breakfast and folded street food for lunch, it will be right up your street.

Cottonwood is historic, with pretty buildings dating to the early 1900s and many containing wine tasting shops and gourmet stores. It's relaxed and a good central point to hill walk or hike into the mountains. Beware, of course, of the lions. Yes, mountain lions, who rarely stray into the populated towns but which Arizonians tell you to face with courage. There are plenty of cool places to eat. but we went to Nic's and gorged on crab, steak and cocktails.

Upwards next — to Flagstaff, sitting at 7,000 feet, surrounded by a Ponderosa pine forest, and famed as a 'dark sky city', which is truly beautiful. At Lowell Observatory, the story of Flagstaff's relationship with the sky is mapped out since its 1894 opening as a research facility.

The High Country Motor Lodge — a new hotel with an outdoor pool, fire pits and a modern bar and garden area — is the perfect start to the west Route 66 adventure and its 1960s vibe. It was along the road that thousands travelled headed for the sea. While there isn't a huge amount to see, there is the story of the famous route and

LATE DEALS

ALL ABOARD

RIVER cruising has been increasing in popularity over the past two decades, and Sunway has become a leading agent for some of the best trips available.

They have a Danube trip that will blow your mind — for just €1,487pps, you can indulge in an eight-night holiday of a lifetime. You'll start with a night in the historic city of Nuremberg followed by seven nights cruising on a modern Travelmarvel river ship.

This is a full board trip with return flights, plus 10kg checked-in bag, all meals including drinks, all transfers, port charges and tipping. See sunway.ie.



FAIRYTALE GETAWAY

THE time has come to indulge in some opulence in one of the country's oldest and most salubrious hotels with their 'Summer Escape' package, available for the next three months.

For those seeking a romantic and intimate getaway, Dublin's **Fitzpatrick Castle Hotel** has created a special couple's package which offers a two-night stay in a luxurious room, complete with a delicious breakfast each morning. On an evening of your choice, enjoy a three-course meal in the Mapas Restaurant. Prices start from €284 pps. Go to fitzpatrickcastle.com.



HORSING AROUND:

Nicola and Lynne get a flavour of ranch life



← the ultimate photo opportunities. If you are lucky, you may get to meet 95-year-old Angel Delgadillo, the barber who fought to make sure tourists stopped at this town and that Route 66 didn't bypass Seligman.

Tusayan is the gateway to the Arizona end of the enormous Grand Canyon. For those who have never seen it, a helicopter ride is expensive but worth every penny for a bird's eye view of the contours and depth of the canyon. Looking down on it feels like soaring above the moon, and is a thrill well worth the splurge. It's worth a walk along the south rim too, to get a feel for the sheer

vastness of the Colorado River and its impression on the earth.

The El Tovar Hotel sits atop, with spectacular views and an old-world feel that captures the old west. There is still the Grand Canyon Railway that travels into Williams — an authentic Western village that time has forgotten. Neon signs, roadside motels and dive bars mean it is one of those places where there is an element of 'what goes on tour stays on tour.'

Prescott, with its Hotel Vendome is one of the prettiest places we stayed in, and just a short walk from a bar called The Palace — nearly as famous as its Dublin namesake. The Palace is steeped in history. In the late 1870s, Wyatt Earp drank there, lowering whiskeys before dusting off his guns for the OK Corral.

Outside Wickenburg was the highlight of the trip — the Kay El Bar Guest Ranch, a western dude ranch surrounded by mountain trails and riverbeds, where Mexican horses carry visitors on their backs along the rough and dusty terrain. The food is cooked by staff at the ranch, and the rooms are authentic too. But it's the silence and the calm of the dusty ranch that was most memorable for me — and of course, the whiskey and ice.



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