

Verdant Valley

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino – who hosts a travel TV show called “State x State” that airs on the Planes, Trains + Automobiles network as part of Delta’s in-flight entertainment – drives us to **ARIZONA** for wine and good eats.

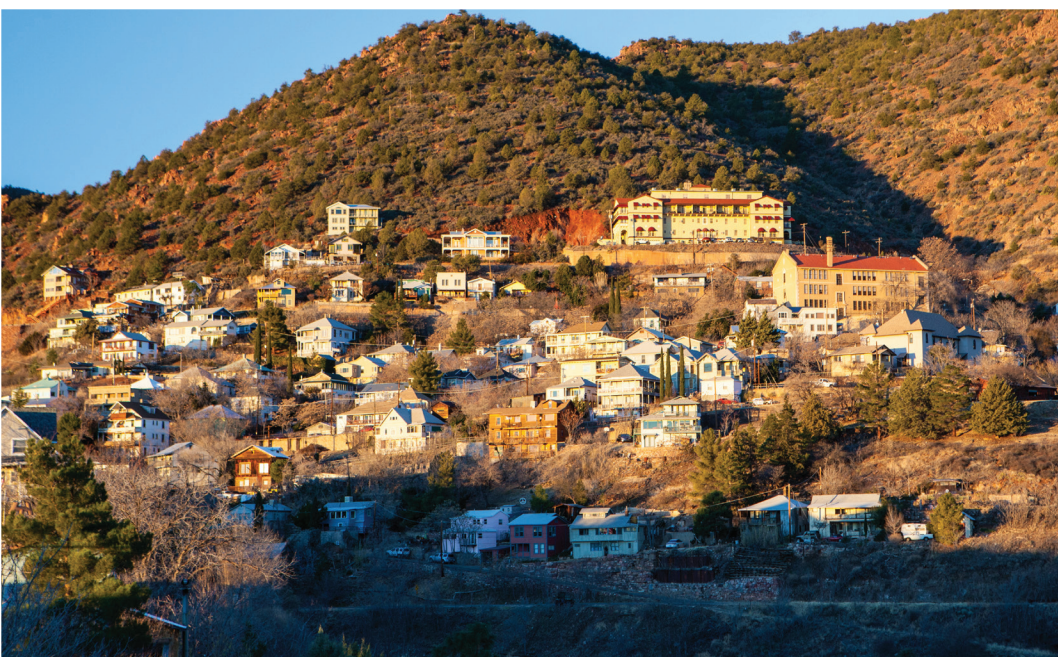
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RHIANNON COOPER**

Arizona is full of surprises: Grand Canyons, cactus, cowboys, haunted hotels and wine country. Wine country? Oh yes, I said it. Have a glass with some ghost towns, too!

Every time I road trip in Arizona – and I have done it a lot – I love the state more and more. Bonus: Fuel is usually 20 to 30 cents less per gallon here! This month takes me the Verde Valley, located in the middle of the state, about 90 miles north of Phoenix, and the surrounding towns of Cottonwood, Jerome and Prescott.

Just under two hours east of the Coachella Valley on Interstate 10, I am passing the giant ‘Welcome to Arizona’ sign and see my first saguaro cactus, an icon of the Southwest! I fuel up in the small crossroads town of Quartzsite, known for its wintertime gem and mineral shows, and continue east for another 20 miles or so and exit on Route 60, two lanes of pure desert road bliss. There aren’t many services for the next hour as you pass small farm towns with some great ‘50s era signage and abandoned motels. Leaving the cactus behind, the road heads into the mountains. The town of Yarnell has some cool galleries and antique shops, and I can’t resist the turn-off to Skull Valley, a small ranch community with a classic gas station general store vibe. It is just 15 minutes from my first stop for the night in Prescott. The proper pronunciation is Presskit!

Prescott was, on more than one occasion, the territorial capital of Arizona in the late 1800s. On one side of the downtown square, Whiskey Row is just that: a whole block of saloons. It was the red-light district until 1956, and The Palace Saloon is one of the oldest in Arizona. Checking into the Hassayampa Inn, built in the 1920s, the lobby is stunning with its stained glass doors and hand painted ceilings. There is a great coffee bar and lounge on the ground floor, and dinner at The Peacock Dining room features local Arizona beef. I ordered the red chili rubbed New York strip – it was fantastic! There is a friendly ghost by the name of Faith that haunts the hotel, but I did not see her during my stay.



Make sure to check out the Sharlot Hall museum for the town’s history, and the Smoki Museum, full of Native American artifacts.

Climbing to over 5,000 feet among the pine trees, my next stop is Jerome, about an hour from Prescott. Jerome was a mining town built on one of the richest copper deposits ever found. Side note: The star on the Arizona Flag is copper, not gold. This living ghost town (not so much anymore) is built on the side of the mountain and, in the 1920s, had more than 10,000 residents. Now, it is a great road trip stop full of unique shops and galleries, and some really cool restaurants like the Haunted Hamburger with its epic deck and view of the Verde Valley below. Stop at the Mine Café for early breakfast, and the Spirit Room for drinks and live music.

Now, in case you are wondering, what’s with the ghosts? Well, the Jerome Grand Hotel is supposedly one of the most haunted places in all of Arizona. The hotel was the town’s main hospital back in the day, so that itself makes for a good ghost story. I did not stay here, but friends have said it’s best to make a reservation far in advance if you wanna bump into some ghosts. It’s a quite popular and has a great view to boot! Here, visit the Gold King mine museum and Jerome state park, and more Arizona wineries.

Five miles to the bottom of the hill is the town of Cottonwood, where I stay for the next couple of days. Located along the Verde River in the heart of the Verde Valley, the wine district is basically an old-school main street about eight blocks long, and full of great tasting rooms and restaurants. There are several to check out on foot. I love Burning Tree Cellars’ dark pinot noir called The Poet, and Merkin Vineyards Osteria is a farm-to-table restaurant owned by Maynard James Keenan (I have toured with one of his bands, A Perfect Circle). He sure knows what he is doing with wine and food! The Tavern Hotel is pretty new to town and has 41 rooms and two penthouses. If you know me by now then you know what a hotel snob I can be. I chose to stay in the two-bedroom penthouse, with a huge outdoor patio located over Bocce restaurant (excellent wood fired pizza pie).

Sedona is only a half-hour to the north, and you can hike and explore the resort town with beautiful red rock formations. Pro tip: I prefer to stay in Cottonwood over Sedona. There’s better food, less tourists and lower prices. Page Springs Road loop is where you can visit wineries like Page Springs Cellars, Javelina Leap and a couple others. The Verde Canyon Railroad takes a four-hour train ride through the valley. There is camping and small cabins at Dead Horse Ranch State Park, fishing and kayaking on the river, and ancient Native American ruins at national monuments like Tuzigoot and Montezuma Castle. Historic Clarkdale has some new tasting rooms and a copper museum, and it seems to be growing.

The food scene alone is worth it to stay in Cottonwood and Jerome. You get a real sense of proud Arizona establishments, and I like that. The coolest part about this trip was seeing these old towns getting another chance with city folk moving in, and setting up shops and galleries. It’s happening all across America, so go and check ‘em out. After all, they’re just a road trip away! 🍷

Follow Rick Marino’s travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @rickmarinotravels. You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.