

SCOTTSDALE: A DESERT UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Scottsdale sits amid one of the most scenic and bewitching playgrounds on Earth. Though it's renowned for a remarkable collection of elite resorts, exquisite shops and galleries, sumptuous restaurants and uber-hip nightclubs, Scottsdale is also the beating heart of the Sonoran Desert – the lushest, most biologically diverse of North America's deserts. Two snowmelt-fed rivers, the Salt River and Verde River, and a ring of sparkling lakes border the community; all of which make for cherished destinations.

That's the secret side of this city which residents treasure. For decades, everything in Scottsdale has been prioritized around quality of life. That means an abundance of open space, uninterrupted vistas and boundless recreational opportunities, all exist within a 20-minute (or less) drive from the city's center. For outdoor enthusiasts – and the kid inside all of us – this is a sunny slice of paradise.

FAST FACTS

- The city's elevation rises by nearly 4,000 feet from south to north.
- 43 percent of Scottsdale's land area is dedicated as Open Spaces.
- There are 41 parks in the city, totaling 975 acres.
- Indian Bend Wash Greenbelt crosses 11 miles through the heart of Scottsdale and offers an unexpected oasis of parks, paths, lakes and golf courses.
- Scottsdale offers 384 miles of bike lanes, bike paths, bike routes and paved shoulders, and 105 miles of paved pathways.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE

Visitors to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve will discover a land of soaring mountains, boulder-crowned mesas, storm-carved arroyos and saguaro cacti as tall as office buildings. When development began to gnaw at the flanks of the mighty McDowell Mountains in North Scottsdale, a group of passionate volunteers swooped into action. Not content to simply establish a few isolated parks, they rescued virtually the entire desert. The Preserve was established in 1995 and thanks to the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy and concentrated efforts of the community, a full one-third of Scottsdale remains pristine, public open space.

- The Preserve encompasses 30,580 acres and continues to expand.
- 28 percent of Scottsdale's total land mass is made up of Preserve land.
- It is the largest urban preserve in North America and the fourth largest in the world.
- The Preserve offers 225 miles of shared-use trails, departing from eight trailheads.
- Between 750,000 – 1 million people visit the Preserve each year.
- 650 volunteers maintain the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.
- The McDowell Sonoran Conservancy was established in 1991 and offers myriad programs – many free – including lectures and hikes.
- The Preserve connects with the 21,099-acre McDowell Mountain Regional Park, with more than 50 miles of trails and three campgrounds, creating an expansive corridor for backcountry exploration and a perfect place to experience the desert at night.

PINNACLE PEAK PARK

Toward the northernmost end of Scottsdale, carefully preserved open space surrounds notable landmarks, such as the distinctive needle-like point of Pinnacle Peak. A city park was created to protect the stony summit and a wide, smooth path winds through the surrounding boulder fields. Pinnacle Peak Park features a moderate, 3.5-mile out-and-back trail through the pristine Sonoran Desert, where the chance to see roadrunners, wild hares and diverse flora awaits.

- The Park totals 150 acres.
- At its highest point, the trail reaches 2,889 feet, for a cumulative elevation gain of 1,300 feet.
- There are three designated areas for experienced rock climbers, with a variety of routes and skill levels.
- More than 240,000 people visit each year.
- The Park offers a variety of free programming, including Full Moon Hikes and Astronomy Evenings throughout the year, as well as Guided Nature Tours and Geology Tours during the cooler months.

TONTO NATIONAL FOREST

Surrounding Scottsdale to the north and east – and touching the towns of Cave Creek and Fountain Hills – in the greater Scottsdale area is Tonto National Forest, where the landscape ranges from saguaro cacti-dotted desert, to pine forested mountains below the Mogollon Rim. The Forest borders the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, connects to McDowell Mountain Regional Park and envelops a portion of the Verde River and lower Salt River. Tonto's range in altitude and variety in vegetation offer outstanding recreational opportunities throughout the year, whether it's lake beaches or cool pine forest.

- Tonto National Forest extends over nearly 3 million acres and offers more than 900 miles of trails.
- Ranking as the fifth largest forest in the nation, it is also the second most-visited National Forest in the U.S., drawing close to 6 million visitors each year.

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- Tonto was established in 1905 to protect the Salt and Verde rivers' watersheds and it contains six lakes: Bartlett, Horseshoe, Saguaro, Canyon, Apache, and Roosevelt. The Forest yields an average of 350,000 acre-feet of water annually.
- Fish and wildlife are prevalent in the Forest, where more than 400 vertebrate species – including 21 listed among state and federal Threatened and Endangered Species – are represented.
- The Forest has a rich history of producing silver, gold, copper, zinc, and many other metals and minerals that spans more than 150 years.

HOW TO EXPERIENCE THE DESERT

SOFT ADVENTURE

- **FLOAT** down the calm waters of the lower Salt River on a guided kayak tour with [Arizona Outback Adventures](#) or cruise the serene Saguaro Lake with [Desert Belle Cruises](#).
- **SADDLE UP** for a tranquil trail ride at [MacDonald's Ranch](#), [Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch](#) or [Fort McDowell Adventures](#).
- **SOAR** over the Sonoran Desert with unobstructed views of its wild landscape in a hot air balloon with [Hot Air Expeditions](#) or [Rainbow Ryders](#).
- **RIDE** through the rugged terrain and pick up desert facts along the way on a Hummer Tour with [Stellar Adventures](#).
- **WANDER** the cacti- and succulent-lined trails at [Desert Botanical Garden](#).

HIGH-OCTANE ADVENTURE

- **CLIMB** to the top with the rock climbing pros at [360 Adventures](#), scrambling to high lonely perches and reveling in once-in-a-lifetime views in no time.
- **ROPE** a steer, herd cattle and saddle a noble steed at the all-inclusive camp at [Arizona Cowboy College](#).
- **ZOOM** through rocky streambeds and across winding trails on an ATV or in a zippy Tomcar with [Green Zebra Adventures](#).
- **SUMMIT** the skyline-defining Camelback Mountain, where the great humped spine of granite and sandstone rises above Scottsdale, and rewards anyone who makes the challenging ascent with breathtaking panoramas.
- **PEDAL** through the McDowell Sonoran Preserve's natural beauty on a mountain bike with [Wild Bunch Desert Guides](#).

For more quick facts and recommendations for ways to get out and see the desert, check out the [Hiking, Biking & Trail Guide](#).

