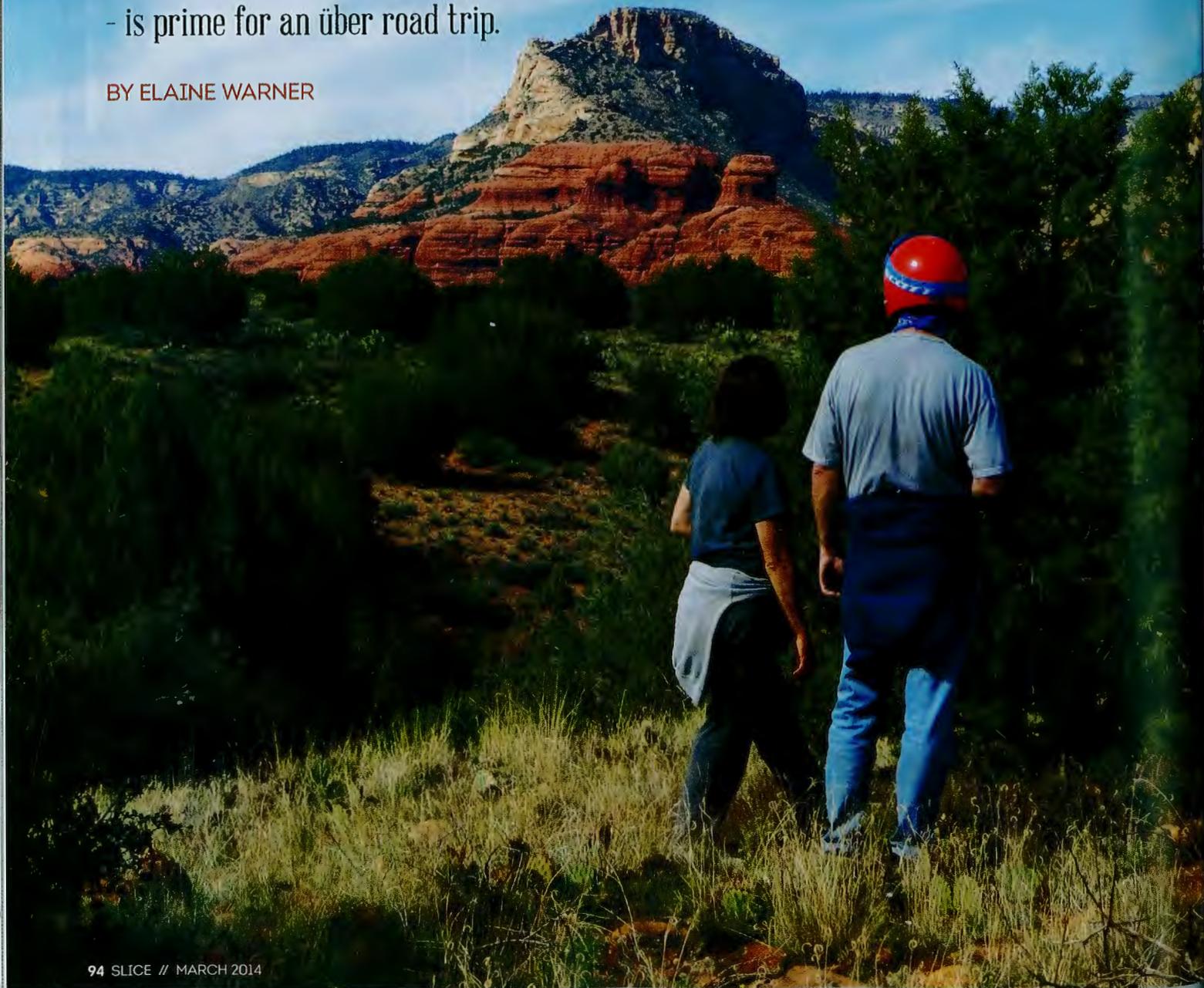


Go West!

The drive from Cottonwood to Flagstaff, Arizona, takes just over an hour. My husband and I did it in four days. We were busy every minute and had to skip several promising sites. This stretch of highway - and the surrounding area - is prime for an über road trip.

BY ELAINE WARNER



VERDE VALLEY How the West Was Wine

THE TOWN OF COTTONWOOD is the queen city of the Verde Valley in central Arizona. Located on one of three good places to cross the Verde River, it became popular as a camping spot for travelers west. Permanent white settlement began in the 1870s.

Old Town Cottonwood is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and, although the city has moved and modernized to the south, it's the historic downtown that makes it worth visiting. Main Street is lined with interesting little shops, great places to eat and several wine tasting rooms. No painted ponies or buffalo here; local art icons are painted wine barrels – appropriate since the area has an increasingly popular wine trail.

I'll be honest. Setting a glass of wine in front of me is like putting a Monet in front of a monkey. That said, Jack and I had a great time touring and tasting at a variety of wineries.

On the banks of the Verde River, Alcantara specializes in Rhone, Bordeaux and Italian-style wines. It's the largest producer of estate wines in central Arizona. Zinfandel vines grow at Javelina Leap Vineyard in nearby Cornville. Bold reds are their specialty. Their cheese, deli and fruit presentations are works of art – a lunch stop here is a great idea. Down the road, Deb Wahl's Oak Creek Vineyards and Winery grows Chardonnay, Fume Blanc, Merlot, Syrah and Zinfandel grapes. She also produces two port wines. Small bites are available and her wine and chocolate pairings are particularly irresistible. Also in the neighborhood, Page Springs Cellars produces Rhone-style wines and tasty plates, and boasts a beautiful deck overlooking Oak Creek.

Back in historic Old Town, we visited Burning Tree Cellars, Arizona Stronghold Tasting Room and Pillsbury Wine Company. All have award-winning wines but by the time we got here, I had to stop sampling!

In the Neighborhood

USE COTTONWOOD AS A BASE TO EXPLORE: Early Native American sites at Montezuma Castle, ancient Sinagua dwellings built into a sheer cliff; Montezuma Well, a circular sinkhole with brilliant blue spring-fed water and an early 12th century Hohokam house; and Tuzigoot, remains of a Sinagua village built between 1125 and 1400.



Painted barrel on the Verde Valley Wine Trail

PLEASURES AND PRIORITIES

THE TAVERN HOTEL – a chic boutique hotel in the heart of Old Town.

NIC'S ITALIAN STEAK AND CRAB HOUSE – chef/co-owner Michelle Jurisin's Italian heritage and East coast background bring authenticity and diversity to the menu.

SCHOOLHOUSE RESTAURANT – Chef/owner Christopher Dobrowolski tweaks old favorites with creative twists in a historic 1906 schoolhouse.

CREMA CAFÉ – self-described as a craft kitchen with espresso, bar and creamery. We were so impressed with breakfast we came back for lunch!



Crema Café: great breakfasts, salads, sandwiches and more



12th century Sinagua ruins at Montezuma Castle

Jerome, a former ghost town clinging to the side of a steep hill, is now a thriving art colony. For background start at the Jerome State Historic Park museum in the mansion of one of the town's copper mining moguls, James S. Douglas. Visit Bitter Creek and Caduceus tasting rooms – Bitter Creek has a spectacular view – and art galleries. Don't miss Nellie Bly, the world's largest kaleidoscope store.

Verde Canyon Railroad offers a four-hour trip to enjoy the view along the upper Verde River – spectacular scenery, wildlife and ancient ruins.

Red Rocks Rock

SEDONA AND VICINITY IS FAMOUS for its colorful geology – thank you, iron oxide. Jack and I got up close and personal and even ate a little rust – I mean dust – on a tour with Arizona ATV Adventure Tours. Training, gloves, goggles, helmets and bandanas are supplied on these great half-day tours. Just remember two things – go before you go and don't wear white pants!

Sedona itself is noted as a celebrity hangout with upscale shopping and fine dining – and for the metaphysically minded, its energy vortices. To get acquainted with the area, you can't beat Sedona Trolley City and Scenic Tours. Their two different fully-narrated, 55-minute tours take you through south Sedona with a stop at the stunning Chapel of the Holy Cross or out of town into the rocks and trees of Coconino National Forest. We took them both!

Heading north from Sedona, we entered one of the state's most beautiful spots, Oak Creek Canyon. Photos don't do the canyon justice – deep shadows from the forest and towering cliffs make photography challenging. We picnicked at one of the many areas along the creek, serenaded by the splashing water, chattering squirrels and chirping of

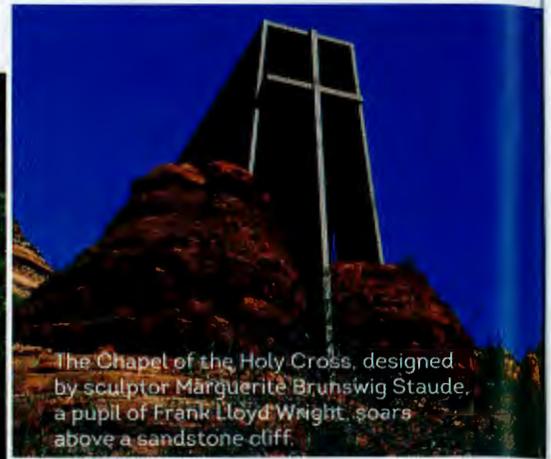


Sedona ATV Adventure Tours takes guests off-road for scenic views of Sedona's famous red rocks.

unseen birds. A cozy, century-old cabin deep in the canyon was our home for the night. It, along with newer buildings, is part of Butterfly Garden Inn, accommodations now owned by Nicole and Frank Garrison. The cabin was delightful; the breakfast basket beautiful and tasty. But it was chatting with Nicole and hearing the story of how this Florida family came to the canyon that made the stay extra-special.

What's in a Name?

BACK IN THE 1800S, emigrants headed to California came through the area on a trail called the Beale Road. On July 4, 1876, a party from Boston camped here and, to celebrate the nation's centennial, stripped a tall pine

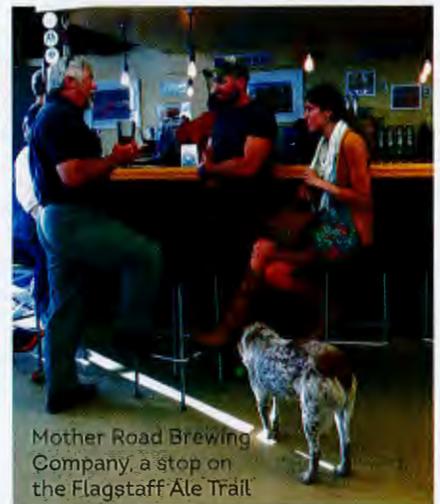


The Chapel of the Holy Cross, designed by sculptor Marguerite Bruhswig Staude, a pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright, soars above a sandstone cliff.

tree in order to fly an American flag. The settlement that grew up on the spot was called Flagstaff. Later travelers came through town on Route 66 and today's visitors can still find icons of the Mother Road.

We traveled a different path through town – the Flagstaff Ale Trail. Armed with our Passport (check flagstaffaletrail.com) we walked the one-mile, downtown route, stopping at six different brew pubs. And we found a fantastic pizza place, Pizzicletta. Owner/chef Caleb Schiff combines his love of Italy, bicycling and his fantastic Neapolitan pizza oven into a big experience in a tiny eatery.

There is lots to explore here but we were short on time, so we settled for the Lowell Observatory, marveling at the 138-year-old Clark telescope and finding an Oklahoma connection with astronaut Thomas Stafford and the Apollo missions. We also squeezed in a visit to the outstanding Museum of Northern Arizona, whose extensive holdings include wonderful collections of Native American basketry, pottery and jewelry.



Mother Road Brewing Company, a stop on the Flagstaff Ale Trail

◊ A quick stop at Northern Arizona University for fun photos of 20-foot-tall mascot Louis the lumberjack set us to singing "I'm a Lumberjack and I'm okay!" as we headed down the highway. ◊