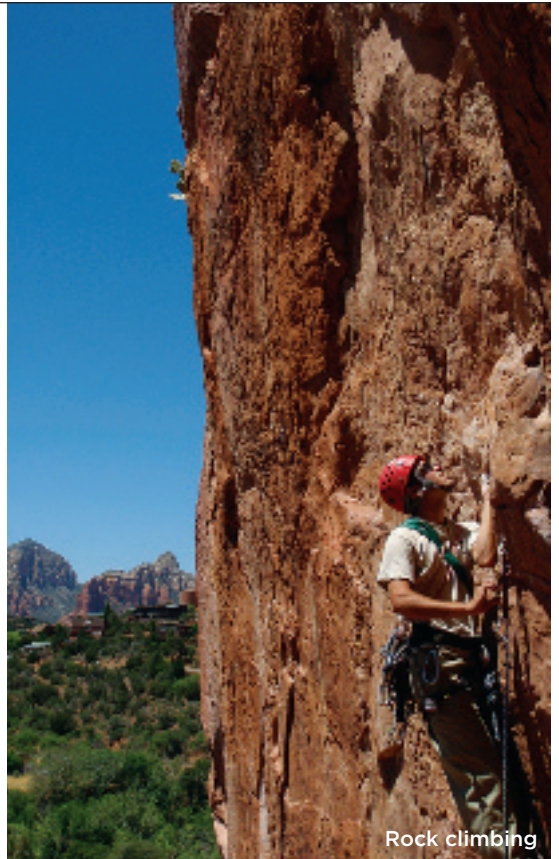


Sedona Adventure Sports

CHEAPER THAN NEW ZEALAND AND MORE ELYSIAN THAN ELOY, SEDONA IS A CUSHY LAUNCHPAD FOR SOFT ADVENTURE SPORTS. WELL, SOFT-ISH.



Rock climbing



Tandem freefall,
Red Rock Skydiving



Hot air ballooning

SEDONA IS 10,500 FEET BELOW - WRINKLED, BEIGE and reddish, like satellite photos of Mars. Karl Priggee is trying to distract us from the fact that we're in a seatless biplane that feels as aerodynamic as a tin can and that, even more worrisome, we won't be landing in said plane but falling out of it face first.

He's not doing badly, actually, pointing out Tuzigoot, Cathedral Rock and snow-capped Mount Humphreys, crisp against the horizon. But then, inevitably, he straps me to him, tightens my couldn't-be-tighter goggles and opens the plane door.

My mind fast-forwards through the choreography of arm movements and back arches I'm supposed to do when he shoulder-taps me in midair. The reassurance that this is Karl's 4,068th jump acts as a mental buffer between me and the ground, and I don't feel fear but rather determination and...

"Feet out!" Karl shouts.

I swing my feet onto the step outside the plane.

And look way, way down.

This is a big deal.

Then, before I know what's happening, the air is roaring around us, and the thoughts rush past as fast as the freefall: Wow, you really can appreciate scenery while hurtling toward it - mountains, fields, blue sky, oh my God we're falling toward the ground, this isn't natural, no, it's OK, there's a parachute and an experienced skydiver on your back, enjoy the experience, this is so fun, are you kidding the ground is coming closer, no it's fine, this is great!

With a jerk, the chute opens, and suddenly: pure silence. Karl loosens three of the straps that fasten us together (um, is this wise?) and I experience the strange sensation of floating/flying/falling above the world, mixed with awe and triumph and an ardent wish I had taken Dramamine beforehand.

And then we land - alight, really, it's so soft - and I have just skydived in Sedona.

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Great Escapes Sedona



Rappelling



Mountain biking

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Turns out, this spa-loving, tree-hugging town is a mecca for adventure sport beginners. In just a few days, you can cross hot air ballooning, skydiving, rock climbing, ATVing and mountain biking off your bucket list, no prior experience required. The fact that these high-octane activities are backdropped by breathtaking scenery, and that you can ease your muscles between adventures with spa treatments and surprisingly delicious local wines, makes you wonder why you'd ever venture further.

Hot Air Ballooning

If the idea of jumping out of a plane is jarring, ease into it by first floating in a balloon. These gentle giants lift you into the sky so smoothly it's like rising to the surface of a pool. Red Rock Balloon Adventures takes about 18 passengers at a time, regaling them with cheeky humor, ballooning lore and sightseeing commentary.

Unlike other methods of aviation, hot air balloons can only move with wind currents, which means there's no turbulence. "We're traveling at about 16 mph," the pilot assures us, though it feels like we're stock-still. We top out at 4,000 feet, where it's cold and quiet – save for occasional bursts of fire – and Sedona sleeps far below in the lavender morning light.

Everyone agrees the highlight of the trip is flying low, buzzing Sedona's mansions so closely we ask the owners if they can spare hot coffee. Even the acrophobe in our group feels at ease, and those of us who relish altitude have fun and are now prepped for something more challenging. Which isn't hard to find.

Rock Climbing

Rock jocks are an optimistic group, as evidenced by their utter faith in the beginner's ability to support their body weight with a toehold in a pockmark of a boulder. But there's no arguing with them because they're so often right.

Garrett Bennett named his company CenterFocus after a climbing expedition in Europe, when it crystallized in his mind how much the body can achieve while totally focused. He informs us that Sedona's signature sandstone, though scenic, is typically not ideal for rock climbing because of its tendency to, you know, disintegrate. However, he's taking us to sturdy routes suitable for rank beginners, which many of us are.

We hike just east of Oak Creek to climb easy and moderate routes on Timmy's Rock, then venture uphill to scale a bicep-burn-

Guidebook

er dubbed (in classic rock climbing nomenclature) Pink Hot Tub.

Garrett and his sinewy assistants give us hold-by-hold instructions while belaying us with ropes, ensuring we don't fall and lowering us down when we reach the top – or our limit. The strategy and willpower required, plus the satisfaction of achieving each hold, give us all a climber's high. That night, even as my aching arms limply shampoo my hair, I vow to take up the sport.

ATVing

The main difference between Sedona's Jeep tours and an ATV tour? Control. That and freedom from tour guides' recycled jokes. Arizona ATV Adventures puts you in the driver's seat, with the throttle at your fingertips, Sedona's vermilion horizon as your backdrop, and random cows mooing in protest as you thunder past in a cloud of rusty dust.

Former ski and boat trip guide Charles Lutz turned to ATV tours after prolonged drought left nothing to slalom or float on, and he knows these west Sedona back roads backward and forward. Even for this ATV virgin, the driving was easy and fun, with just enough fear-factor adrenaline to spice things up.

Mountain Biking

If none of the above floats your boat, hop in the saddle of a two-wheeler to explore Sedona's russet rockscape, which rivals Utah's Moab as a mountain biking destination. Swing by Bike & Bean in the Village of Oak Creek to pick up a cuppa Joe, a rental bike, expert tips on trails, or a guide. With 200 miles of singletrack to choose from, the staff can personalize your trip – from Mountain Biking 101 to a technical, multi-hour crash course.

Dining

In a town cluttered with default Mexican restaurants, Elote Café – the latest venture for former Los Sombrosos chef Jeff Smedstad – is a destination restaurant. The fish tacos were the most flavorful I've

had in the state. My dining companion barely touched his lamb adobo when the meat fainted off the bone. And the not-too-sweet blood orange margarita went down as smoothly and vibrantly as a sunset.

Unlike newcomer Elote, Heartline Café has been satisfying Sedonans for 18 years. It's tempting to keep munching on the fresh, lightly limy sweet potato chips and call them a meal. But then you'd miss the local trout, with its rich crust of pecans,

breadcrumbs and Dijon.

Sadly, due to a decline in the local rattlesnake population, Cowboy Café has substituted python for its signature appetizer. But a day in which you can skydive and eat python (not to mention prickly pear fries and juicy, flavorful elk) is a day worth writing home about.

Steady your nerves and steel yourself for your next adventure with a tour of the wineries around Cornville. Page Springs Vineyards and Cellars' fruity, nuanced reds will banish all doubts about Arizona wine, and the entertaining ladies at Alcantara Vineyards and Oak Creek Vineyards and Winery make the tasty wines even more memorable. Need a designated driver? Touch the Southwest arranges personalized tours.

— Keridwen Cornelius can be reached at kcornelius@citieswestpub.com.

PM



Enchantment Resort

Elevation

4,500 to 5,500 feet

Activities

- **Red Rock Balloon Adventures:** 105 Canyon Diablo Road, 800-258-3754, redrockballoons.com
- **Red Rock Skydiving:** 1003 W. Mingus Ave., Cottonwood, 928-649-8899, redrockskydiving.com
- **CenterFocus Experiences:** 617 Elk Ridge Drive, Camp Verde, 928-301-3211, thecenterfocus.com
- **Arizona ATV Adventures:** 1185 W. Highway 89A, Sedona, 800-242-6335, azatvfun.com
- **Sedona Bike & Bean:** 6020 Highway 179, 928-284-0210, bike-bean.com
- **Touch the Southwest:** 2401 W. Coronado Ave., Flagstaff, 928-213-9085, touchthesouthwest.com

Accommodations

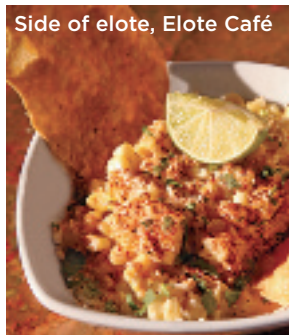
- **Amara Hotel, Restaurant & Spa:** 100 Amara Lane, Sedona, 928-282-4828, amararesort.com
- **Enchantment Resort:** 525 Boynton Canyon Road, Sedona, 928-282-2900, enchantmentresort.com

Dining

- **Elote Café:** 771 Highway 179, Sedona, 928-203-0105, elotecafe.com
- **Heartline Café:** 1600 & 1610 W. Highway 89A, Sedona, 928-282-0785, heartlinecafe.com
- **Cowboy Club:** 241 N. Highway 89A, Sedona, 928-282-4200, cowboyclub.com
- **Alcantara Vineyards:** 3445 S. Grapevine Way, Verde Valley, 928-649-8463, alcantaravineyard.com
- **Page Springs Vineyards and Cellars:** 1500 N. Page Springs Road, Cornville, 928-639-3004, pagespringscellars.com
- **Oak Creek Vineyards & Winery:** 1555 N. Page Springs Road, Cornville, 928-649-0290, oakcreekvineyards.net

Information

- **Sedona Tourism Bureau:** 331 Forest Road, Sedona, 800-288-7336, visitsedona.com



Side of elote, Elote Café