

Sedona: Eat, Pray, Hike

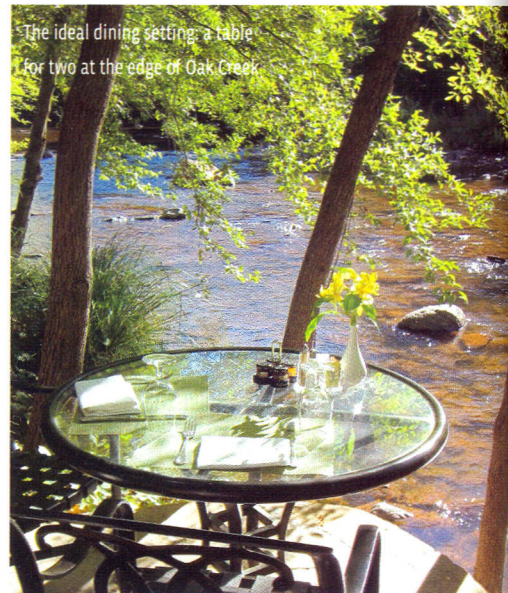
In Sedona, Arizona, I'm sitting in a comfy chair watching the water in Oak Creek bubble over the boulders in its path. I came to the water's edge to watch the early morning duck feeding, but after the mallards waddled back into the river, I stayed. The peace of this space coupled with the dappled sunlight filtered through overhanging trees has warmed the air and the sound of the flowing river is hypnotic.

We chose L'Auberge de Sedona because it offers the best of both worlds — views of the renowned red rock formations and the tranquility of the flowing river. The hotel's 87 rooms and suites benefited from a \$25 million renovation last year. Now, rustic exteriors give way to modern amenities, imported bed linens, fireplaces, indoor and outdoor showers, and great beds that induce sound sleep and sweet

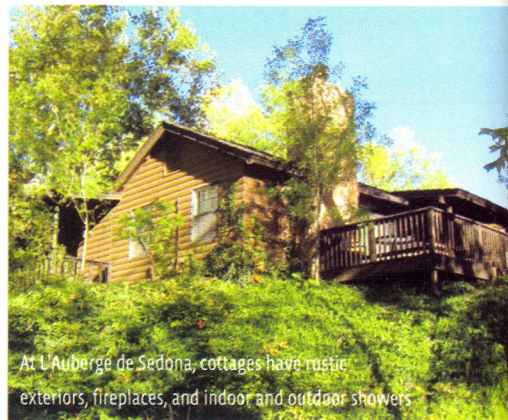
dreams. The upgrade also includes the addition of a new pool and full-service spa.

Two Frenchmen opened a restaurant on this spot 25 years ago and then built a few cabins for guests who found they just couldn't leave after dinner. Today, good food continues to be a source of pride. While waterfowl are splash-landing a few feet away, I'm enjoying freshly-baked scones and muffins with copious cups of tea.

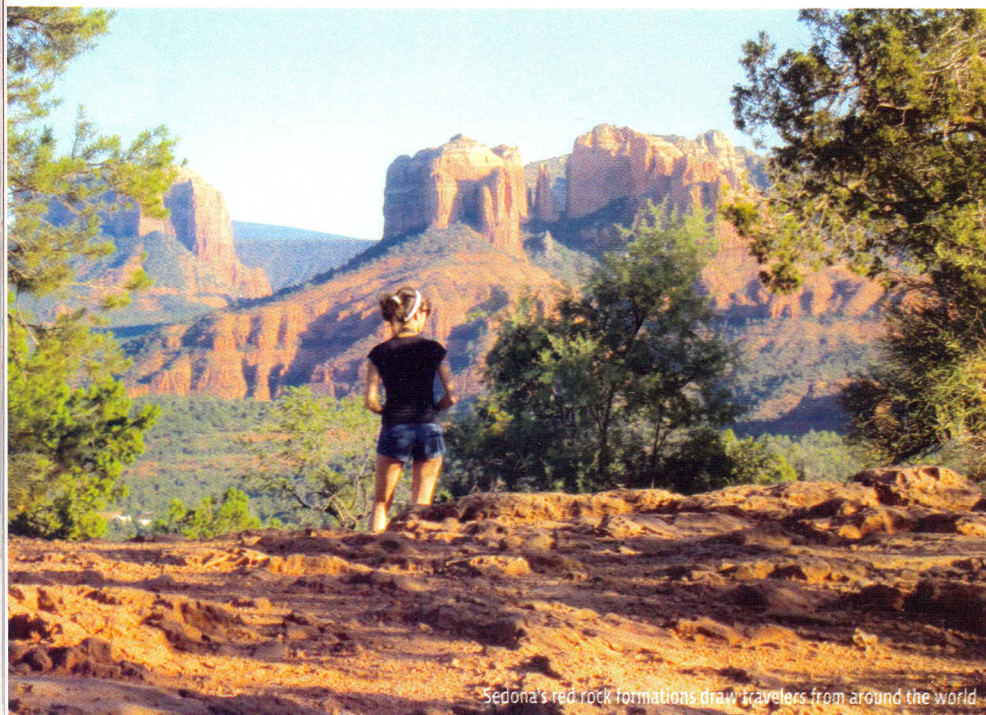
Travelers come to Sedona from all over the world to experience the "high vibe" of the four vortexes in the area. Some people find the energy affects their prayers; others meditate and many practice yoga. Apparently, my therapy is to sit. The sun is working wonders on my uptight muscles; the breeze is clearing my head; and the sight and sound of



The ideal dining setting: a table for two at the edge of Oak Creek



At L'Auberge de Sedona, cottages have rustic exteriors, fireplaces, and indoor and outdoor showers



Sedona's red rock formations draw travelers from around the world

the bubbling river has caused my breathing to be deeper and slower.

Last night we lingered over dinner on the restaurant terrace just a dozen yards from here, and I am still savoring the memory of my heirloom tomato appetizer with Fossil Creek goat cheese, basil-mint pesto, olive oil, and arugula. Chef David Schmidt customized my Chilean sea bass main course and served it with king trumpet mushrooms and asparagus risotto. My husband's savory caramelli included silky ravioli flavored with a hint of >>

<< cinnamon and filled with butternut squash. Roasted root vegetables, escarole, and caramelized parsnip fonduta complemented the pasta.

In addition to recalling our delicious creekside cuisine, I'm also re-living yesterday's beautiful hike through shady Oak Creek Canyon, where we walked among trees covered in red, orange, and yellow leaves, and crossed the meandering creek 13 times.

We had the good fortune to be guided by Greg Stevenson, founder — with his wife Gracie — of The Hike House. Greg selected the 6.4-mile West Fork Trail for us by using his Sedona Trail Finder — a high-definition, interactive program that helps hikers find the perfect trail for their ability and circumstances.

Open for just over a year, The Hike House is the focal point of

Late afternoon light causes Sedona's rock formations to glow



Sedona's active day-hike scene. The store sells a complete line of hiking apparel, footwear, and accessories; provides private hiking guides; and offers a free group hike/clinic every Tuesday.

In addition, visitors and locals alike use the free-of-charge Sedona Trail Finder to choose among the area's 200 trails. They also take advantage of the pre-hike breakfast station and the make-your-own trail mix bar at The Hike House Energy Café. My mouth waters when I think about the oatmeal chocolate chip Red Rock Trail Cookies.

While I could stay in my comfy chair in this ethereal setting all day, I will eventually leave because Gracie promised to help me choose a new pair of hiking shoes from among their extensive offerings — and because I really want another Red Rock Trail Cookie. (www.lauberge.com, www.thehikehouse.com) ELIZABETH HANSEN

Sedona Snowmance

While I enjoyed Sedona's autumn colors, many travelers prefer to visit during the winter. Flagstaff's Arizona Snowbowl is about 45 minutes north of Sedona, so guests can ski during the day and sip "seasonal hot beverages" by a cozy fire at L'Auberge at night. From December 15 through March 15, 2012, the inn's "Snowmance" package includes:

- Accommodations in a newly designed guest room or cottage
- Two adult ski lift tickets to Flagstaff Snowbowl (per day)
- \$75 food and beverage or spa credit (per day)

Rates start at \$265 per night for guest rooms and \$320 per night for the cottages. Minimum two-night stay. Seven day advance booking required.



Water crossings are part of the fun of hiking the West Fork Trail in Oak Creek Canyon