

NORTH AMERICA > UNITED STATES > ARIZONA > PHOENIX



Courtesy Desert Botanical Garden

DESTINATIONS

10 Best Things to Do in Phoenix

The must-see spots in the Valley of the Sun's crown jewel.

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January 4, 2023

The list of best things to do in Phoenix is an expansive one. There's no place quite like this city—a rapidly growing, 517-square-mile sprawl in the middle of the Sonoran Desert with Apache street art, 150-year-old cacti, ultra-fresh [Mexican seafood](#), and giant sunsets. Many people come to the Valley of the Sun for golf, work, nightclubs, or sports, but those who leave the usual bubbles are rewarded. More so than other American cities of similar size (Phoenix has 1.6 million people, making it the fifth-most populous city in the U.S.), you need to know where to look.

On the gastronomic end, Phoenix is an example of a destination that excels when its chefs embrace local producers. Growers benefit from 300-plus days of annual sun to harvest incredible citrus, beans, and squash. The [best restaurants in Phoenix](#) are no joke these days: It's so good that Arizona exports to Italy, fueling incredible tortillas and pizza. The art scene is everywhere, most visibly manifested as murals swirling across downtown facades. Casual galleries and refreshingly original museums—like the Heard and its Native American collection—are ever-evolving and always worth (re)visiting.

And despite the urban sprawl, the wonders of the world's most vibrant desert are never far. Here's where to get started if you really want to taste, see, feel, and experience the best of what the rising city has to offer today.



Courtesy Musical Instrument Museum



This expansive museum in the desert right off of the North Phoenix highway is a paean to world music. Inside the Musical Instrument Museum's tall sandstone walls, 8,000-plus instruments from some 200 countries await, all packed into galleries forking from a central corridor. As you stroll through wearing headphones, you hear the sounds of the instruments you pass. Videos play, too, showing how people play instruments in their countries of origin. Other highlights: The museum has rooms for kids, displays instruments actually played by artists like Johnny Cash, and hosts concerts.

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Courtesy Century Grand



Century Grand uses all kinds of outlandish ingredients in cocktails, like smoked tea and kefir. One cocktail that conjures flavors of a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich comes with a sleeve of Campari cotton candy. Sip thoughtful punch or dig into boozy ice cream. Bartenders use a wide range of spirits, liqueurs, and fortified wines. Flavors are carefully considered and often balanced on a tightrope.

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Eun Kim/Getty



In a famously sprawling city, the 16,000 acres of South Mountain Park allow people to disappear into the natural world. Hiking, running, biking, and even driving, you might see roadrunners and loping coyotes. And oftentimes the trail will bend, and there rises the towers of downtown Phoenix, rising from its bowl of mountains. Keep your eyes peeled for petroglyphs. These are rock carvings etched by ancient desert communities, like the Hohokam. There are hundreds of petroglyphs scattered through the park: spirals, animals, and suns—all incredible to witness and ponder.

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Courtesy Pizzeria Bianco



hard-way methods like blending select local herbs. The rosa, a white pie crowned with pistachios, red onion, rosemary, and Parmigiano Reggiano, is his Mona Lisa. His simple marinara is a dark horse that showcases his technique. Too many people often overlook the pasta specials at the Town & Country location, so be sure to consider them when you make your inevitable pilgrimage.

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Archive Photos/Getty



This central Phoenix museum showcases pieces from Indigenous people all over the world, but with a focus on the American Southwest. The goal: to allow Indigenous people from across time to tell their stories through their own words, art, and artifacts. Founded in 1929, the Heard has earned a global reputation and should be a *must* on any visitor's to-do list. The museum has some 44,000 objects in 12 exhibit galleries, including more than 1,200 Hopi Katsina dolls.

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Courtesy Valley Bar



Raw and grungy with nothing to distract from the flow of canned beers and music, this low-slung underground hall packs 250 people—mostly standing room. The bands that take the minimal stage tend to be local standouts. Many of the people in the crowd know them well, for this is a pillar of Phoenix's homegrown music scene. Come here for sweat and sound. In addition to the music room, Valley Bar has others spreading below the downtown streets. Play billiards in one and eat taquitos or sip a cocktail named after an Arizona politician in another. Don't miss the Rose Room—an intimate half-hidden library stocked with couches and vintage reading material.

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Courtesy Desert Botanical Garden



The Sonoran Desert is often called the world's most vibrant desert, and this garden's 140 acres of wondrous plants show why. Sure, visitors know the Sonoran's wavy-armed signature—the Saguaro cactus—but what about the dozens of other Seussian species: the organ pipe cactus, the barrel, the hedgehog? The house restaurant, Gertrude's, is far better than any botanical garden eatery should be. Gertrude's cooks higher-end seasonal dishes using local ingredients: House cocktails prioritize Arizona spirits, like Tucson whiskey smoked with mesquite and Sedona gin made with foraged juniper.



Courtesy of Resy



his Grand Avenue nook has heart and vibe unlike any other downtown Phoenix restaurant. That's thanks to Rene Andrade, whose Sonoran roots shape an electric menu of Sonoran Mexican specialties, many of them charred on a smoky, giant Santa Maria-style grill in the music-packed room's corner. Bacanora is a cool spot. People drink agave spirits out of bone luges, tuck into Flinstonian steaks ringed with flour tortillas and salsas, and enjoy bracing raw seafood plates like limey shrimp aguachiles. Flavors are huge and



catches. And if you get thirsty, Afro Gallery abuts **Barroo**, a watering hole that pours a dizzying range of tequilas, mezcals, and other Mexican spirits.

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literary zine purveyor. The rigorously curated selection of books alone makes this one of the coolest small bookstores in the country. Try to time your visit with one of many incredible workshops, maybe an open mic session, a Diné creation story, or an author leading a multi-lingual reading. A reading area out back of the shop is little more than a patio, fostering an intimate environment. Owner Chawa Magaña has won a strong following of regulars—he customer base is diverse, with plenty of Latin and Indigenous representation. It's a place where anyone who loves books and has an open mind can feel at home.

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RECOMMENDED

Arizona Biltmore, LXR Hotels & Resorts

The nearly century-old granddaddy of Phoenix resorts.

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