

sun travel Edited by LISA MINOT & HEATHER LOWRIE See more at thescottishsun.co.uk



YOU'D be forgiven for dismissing a desert as uninviting. Dry. Desolate. Dangerous.

But after spending 10 days in Arizona, nothing could be further from the truth.

The harsh alien landscapes are homes to some of the coolest towns and cities of the US.

From the baking heat of the Sonoran Desert to the snow-capped mountains surrounding Flagstaff – there is more to the Grand Canyon State than the eponymous gorge alone.

With daily direct flights to Phoenix exploring the south west has never been easier. After landing my trip began two hours south in Tucson, a short hop by US standards, checking into the Leo Kent hotel.

One of the city's charms is its size. With a population of around one million in the wider area, it's compact without feeling small. There are parks, mountains and that sprawling Sonoran Desert.

There is nature, there is history but one of the city's real draws is the food.

A perfect stop off

Road signs boast of Tucson being home to the best Mexican food in the US – in fact it was named an UNESCO City of Gastronomy in 2015 and after a couple of days exploring it was easy to see why.

From the simple market fare of Seis' Mexican breakfasts (try the chilaquiles), the birthplace of the chimichanga (a deep-fried burrito) at El Charro Cafe, or the mesquite smoked adventures of Tito Pepe. There is something for every budget and every taste.

From rich culinary traditions to a rich history. Tucson is one of the oldest cities in the US and has been inhabited for around 4,000 years.

It boasts the picturesque Mission San Xavier Del Bac, church, the Presidio – once the heart of the city – and the Hotel Congress where infamous John Dillinger was captured. Try breakfast here at the hotel's Cup Cafe.

For drink aficionados there are a host of breweries, or if you're looking for something a little harder than Whiskey Del Bac is a perfect stop off.

Founder Stephen Paul followed

his wife's suggestion of taking inspiration from the desert and inspired by Scottish distillers, he set up following single malt making rules but introduced mesquite – a desert wood – to add his own unique twist.

And boy does it work. The distillery offer guided tours, tastings and daily happy hours – complete with their own range of delicious cocktails.

But to make the most of it leave the motor at your hotel!

Where Tucson is bathed in history, Scottsdale is its glitzy modern neighbour. Founded in



the 20th century the free and easy nature of the Sonoran desert is switched out for a super stylish slick playground.

There are hotels for every budget, and an array of luxury pads to really help you relax and soak up the sunshine. I was lucky enough to stay at three – Mountain Shadows Resort, the Fairmont Princess and the historic Valley Ho, designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Scottsdale makes exploring the state easy, from hiking trails to quad bike riding and, despite being in the midst of the desert, a definite highlight was kayaking on the Lower Salt River with Cliff Creek Outfitters.

Wild horses, hummingbirds, turtles and huge trout and bass punctuated the trip, with expert advice from the guides.

As I floated ranchers took their horses for a paddle. It was like drifting through a wild west montage.

For nature lovers the sprawling Desert Botanical Gardens is the perfect place to find out more about the local flora.

Foodies are spoilt for choice here too, with a mix of high end options, fast food favourites such as In-N-Out, and cult spots like the Thumb, offering up some of the best BBQ this side of Texas.

A short hop from Mountain Shadows is the Fat Ox – one of the city's best restaurants with choice cuts of steak, fresh seafood and an extensive wine list. A must visit.

At The Ends, owner Tommy Plato told me how it was

inspired by the travels and passions of celeb chef Anthony Bourdain.

Driving from Scottsdale to Flagstaff was a definite highlight. Flag, as locals call it, is a mountain town two hours north of the Phoenix and a detour via Sedona, with its martian like landscapes en route is a must.

As I climbed into my hire car I was basking in 27C heat, but just as I approached Sedona the heavens opened and as my car wound through the valley the rain began to turn to snow!

Snow, in the desert? Well, not quite. Arizona is vast and technically now I was some 4,350ft above sea level – making the snow storm barely surprising.

The snow made for a magical winter wonderland scene arriving into the compact college town. But it was May!

After a quick refuel I checked in to the Embassy Suites by Hilton where I'd been afforded a spacious suite before heading out

to take in some of the sights.

Flag is blessed with a number of breweries and brew pubs offering up IPAs, pale ales and a variety of beers from around the world.

I settled in at the Historic Brewing Co's Barrel House where I enjoyed a few Salt River beers – a mix of lager, lime and sea salt – along with buffalo wings and pickles, while Tucson bluegrass duo Miss Lana Rebel

and Kevin Michael Mayfield provided the perfect soundtrack.

Flagstaff is also a perfect stopping off point on an Arizona roadtrip as its situated on the old Route 66, and is also a great base to head north to one of the most iconic sights in the US, the Grand Canyon.

I had hoped to witness its majesty and wonder from above in a helicopter tour. But it turned out a fear of heights, a mild deep crevasse and a potentially lethal flying machine bobbing on the wind above do not mix.

The feeling of dread began as I neared the national park, spotting helicopters slowly taking off jittering in the wind. So, instead I opted to cautiously inch my

way along the canyon top trail – and even, after many deep breaths and much self deprecation, began to enjoy it.

Thankfully, the path offers stunning views and the snow crested canyon was a magnificent sight.

Anxiety calmed, it was back to Flagstaff to relax with a beer or two and a night gazing at the stars at the town Observatory before my Arizonan adventure came to an end.

I'd found there's a lot more to Arizona than canyons, cocktails and cacti.

And despite the dangers, and the heat, of the desert – after 10 days exploring, I'm sold.

WILL METCALFE



GO: ARIZONA

GETTING THERE: Return flights from Glasgow to Phoenix Sky Harbour via London Heathrow from £634PP with American Airlines. See AA.com.

STAYING THERE: Rooms at the 4* Leo Kent Hotel, Tucson, from £176 per night. See marriott.com. Rates at the 4* Mountain Shadows Resort Scottsdale from £250 a night. See mountainshadows.com. For the best rates at 5* Hotel Valley Ho see hotelvalleyho.com. for prices at the Fairmont Princess Scottsdale see scottsdaleprincess.com. And rooms at Embassy Suites by Hilton in Flagstaff from £134 a night. See hilton.com.

MORE INFO: For more on visiting the state see visitarizona.com. And all you need to sort a trip to Tucson see visittucson.org. For more info on Scottsdale log on to experiencescottsdale.com and for Flagstaff visit flagstaffarizona.org.

