

A Tale of Two Phoenix Resorts: Whether you head north or south, you'll find top-notch recreation and relaxation.

By Suzanne Wright

Phoenix, the nation's fifth largest city, has 310 sunny days a year, offers more than 200 golf courses and is known as the North America's spa capital. You could spend a lifetime exploring its many opulent resorts. These are two of my favorites.

Four Seasons Resorts Scottsdale at Troon North.

The grounds of the award-winning Four Seasons, located north of the city in the foothills of Pinnacle Peak, looks like a movie set with hundreds of three-armed saguaro cacti dotting the dramatic landscape.

After a \$15 million renovation, the resort looks more splendid than ever. As I walk through the lobby, I admire the local and indigenous Western art. I dine al fresco at Talavera, the resort's signature resort named for the hand painted Mexican pottery that decorates the interior. Meal highlights include a spring pea soup, bone-in short rib with chipotle and honey and puckery margaritas. There are 210 rooms arranged in casitas; mine overlooks the pool and boasts a kiva fireplace, ideal for the chill of the Sonoran Desert's night air.

I arise the following morning to join a guided desert preserve hike at Pinnacle Peak Park, adjacent to the resort. We climb past native flora, fauna and the occasional lizard and gain breathtaking views of the surrounding valley and the million dollar homes. I reward my exertions with the healing hiker massage at the resort, mountain arnica and sage oils easing any inflammation or soreness, purifying and uplifting my muscles.

Thus, I smell great when I arrive at Troon North, the flagship property of the famed golf course developer, where I have a 90-minute personalized club fitting at the Callaway Performance Center. Using the same technology pros Phil Mickelson, Ernie Els and Annika Sorenson, my club head speed, ball speed, launch angle and spin rate are analyzed and I get instant feedback on every swing. Recommendations are made; I fall in love with a Big Bertha.

I'm not quite ready for 18 holes at the top-ranked Monument or Pinnacle courses, but I enjoy the singular views of peaks, arroyos, rock outcroppings and cacti.

Sheraton Wild Horse Pass.

Starwood may manage this resort, south of the city in Chandler, but Pima and Maricopa tribal elders approve of everything, from the authentic architecture and décor, to the restaurant menus and spa treatments.

Wild Horse is stunningly located, ringed by the Estrella and south Mountain ranges and located on the Gila River Reservation, the largest in the area. More than 1,500 mustangs roam the land which boasts agave, desert willows, cottonwoods and creosote bushes. There are 500 rooms; my bottom-floor suite opens onto a patio and features a fireplace.

Cultural Concierge Ginger Sunbird Martin was born and raised on the reservation. She provides property tours that highlight the history of the tribes that have inhabited this area of central Arizona for 2,300 years.

At the 17,500 square foot Aji (the Pima word for “sanctuary”) Spa treatments are based on legends and lore. Spiritual counselor Belen Stoneman takes me into the womb-like roundhouse for a guided meditation. Lying on a blanket on the ground, her soothing voice (“let Mother Earth take your worries”) clears my mind of anxieties. During the 80-minute Blue Coyote Wrap, azulene mud is applied to my skin before I crawl into a steam capsule to release toxins. Following a shower, I am massaged with sage and cedar oil.

I feel renewed for dinner at Kai (“seed), the resort’s Mobil Four Star and AAA Five Diamond restaurant. Many of the vegetables and the olive oil come from the reservation’s community farms. The meal is a one-of-a-kind experience and the service is warm and knowledgeable without being pretentious. There’s a delicious, butterscotch-colored mesquite bean martini, butter-braised lobster with avocado mousse, dry aged filet mignon with Cabrales queso crumbles and Mexican chocolate soufflé with mole and wattleseed anglaise.

The next morning, I begin my exploration of the Whirlwind Golf Club with breakfast at the Sivlik Grill (huevos on fry bread with beef, green chilies and cheddar cheese). The two Gary Panks-designed courses, Devil’s Claw and Cattail, are uncommonly beautiful—a bit of a distraction as I try to follow along with the golf yoga (which uses the cart and clubs) to limber me up. Aussie native Jay Ewing of Bird Golf Academy, introduces me to the concept of golf psychology. He’s nailed me: I’m a “driver” personality and he gives me pointers to focus my game and improve my swing.

My budding game many lack focus, but the setting has made an indelible impact.