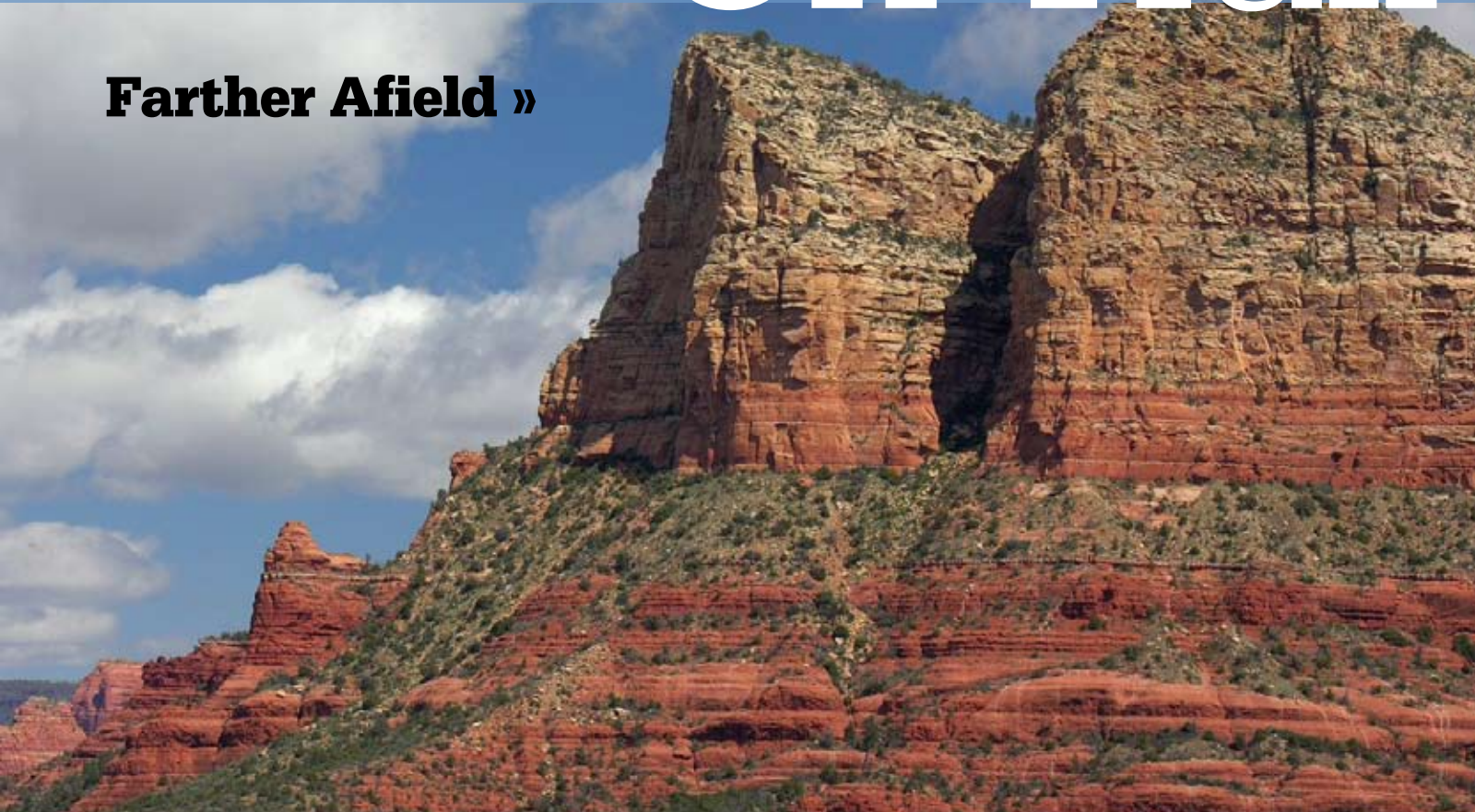


On Trail

Farther Afield »



Sedona, Arizona's red rock country offers some fantastic day hiking and the perfect springtime escape from the cloudy doldrums in the Pacific Northwest.

Photo by Pam Roy

Red Rock, Blue Skies

A springtime escape to Sedona, Arizona, for red rock and vortexes

Standing near the edge of the cliff, I lean out, into the oncoming wind. The wind holds me upright as I lean farther and farther until I am held at nearly a 45-degree angle. The red rock formation I stand on is a huge muffin-like mound of sensuous shapes and multiple hues. A pair of ravens, obsidian wings glistening in the sun, entertain with their aerial antics. The cobalt blue

skies contrast strikingly with the colors in the rock.

I've traveled here, to Sedona, Arizona, to hike, to escape the gray skies of the Pacific Northwest and to experience the mysteries of the vortex sites with three fellow escapees from cold winters. Day one of the trip finds us at a hiking area and vortex site with the decidedly unmystical name of Cow Pies. Yes, Cow Pies.



Pam Roy

Pam is a WTA member from Everett.

Prickly pear cactus, pine and penstemon.**Agave.****Milkvetch.** Photos by Pam Roy

I've been able to convince the group to try a hike much shorter in length than they'd prefer on the recommendation from someone we met in a coffee shop in town.

Getting to the start of the trail was an adventure in itself. The rough, unpaved road up Schnebly Hill could be a challenge for cars with low clearance, especially if muddy. The unmarked trail leads off on the left. The name "Cow Pies" may describe how these rock formations look, although these are by far the most elegant cow pies I've encountered! Early on, we pass a red rock shelf where a huge medicine wheel of dark rock has been assembled by vortex-seekers.

Just under 0.5 miles from trailhead, we reach a second "cow pie" and turn left, leaving the main trail. Walking west on the smoothly contoured slickrock, we eventually cross a land bridge and reach the tallest of the mounds. Wandering across the trail-less slickrock for nearly an hour, we're enthralled by the wind- and water-scoured patterns and depressions in the rock. The highest mound is a mere 1.5 miles from the trailhead, but this short distance turns into an intriguing afternoon of exploration. We become so captivated by the beauty and uplifting energy of this spot that we spend several hours here, sprawled out on the rock, all thoughts of moving on and chalking up more miles replaced by a peaceful, contented enjoyment of the moment. When we look at our watches, we're surprised by the time and backtrack to the junction, continuing up the Mitten Ridge Trail another couple of miles, climbing until there is no longer any sign of a trail, then walking up the red rock ridge for stunning views.

Back in town, we skip the expensive bed-and-breakfasts and hotels in Sedona and opt for a favorite inexpensive roadside motel. I like staying here because it's possible to lay a sleeping bag out on the deck and listen to the coyotes sing at night. My hiking buddies think this behavior is a little extreme.

On day two, we study the maps from the ranger station and decide to piece together several trails to make a loop hike. Starting out at the Soldier Pass trailhead, the scenery is fantastic right off the bat and a person could spend hours taking in all there is to see. In less than a quarter of a mile we come to the Devil's Sinkhole, a deep, square-sided hole. A short walk farther through pinyon pine and twisted juniper trees with shaggy peeling bark brings us to the Seven Sacred Pools. These beautiful, small pools are scoured out of the red rock and hold water through dry periods. This is a turnaround spot for many visitors, and beyond this point we encounter few other hikers. Continuing through open forests, we pass several manzanita bushes or "ladies' legs," as we call them. The sleek, slim trunks lure each of us to run our hands slowly over the smooth bark. In 1.25 miles, at a junction, the trail climbs—steeply at one point—eventually rewarding us with impressive views of the three Soldier Pass arches. The grade lessens as the trail reaches the top of Brins Mesa

and a red rock shelf. From here we follow the trail a short distance to a large red rock turret, which we can't resist climbing. The top makes a great lunch spot with red rock displayed all around. After lunch, we choose to add on a side trip off-trail to the base of Angel Falls. It is well worth the trip. Due to recent rain, the falls packs a powerful, thundering force. Backtracking to our lunch stop, we turn downhill at the junction for a loop back to our starting point through pines, agave and prickly pear cactus, savoring the broad views.

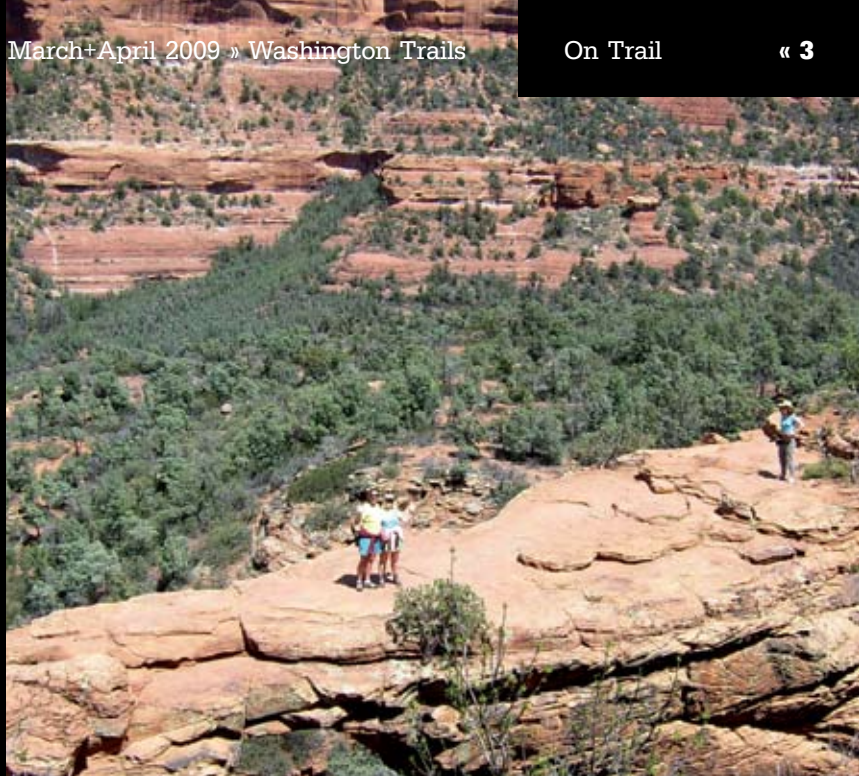
Day three dawns with way too many trail options. With promises of spectacular scenery and Native American ruins, we opt for Lost Canyon. We are not disappointed, and it becomes a favorite hike. Starting at the Brins Mesa West Trailhead, we cross a wash and get immediately into red rock country. A short, but steep climb brings us to a 15-foot-wide ledge. Once on this ledge, we are rewarded with the advertised spectacular views.

Continuing south, the trail stays high, heading for a towering wall of red rock that is the beginning of Lost Canyon. Rounding this wall, we are in a canyon of sheer red walls. Above the trail, the red cliffs are topped with latte-colored rock. Soon we see a cave halfway up the cliff above us. Climbing steeply on a primitive footpath brings us in sight of a ruin inside the cave. We spend some time here, pondering the rigors of life up on the side of steep rock with its excellent views of the surrounding area. Dropping back down to the trail, we continue into a section with sheer drops and are stopped by snow on the trail. Trudging through the snow is unappealing, so we return to the trailhead.

With just one more day, we realize we could have easily spent a couple of weeks exploring all Sedona has to offer. With 80 to 90 trails in the Red Rock Ranger District, Sedona becomes a "must do" trip for me every year. Some favorite trails are Secret Canyon, Bear Sign Trail, the Courthouse Butte Loop, Doe Mountain and Vulte Arch.

A subsequent trip in late March offered the opportunity to view colorful blossoms of wildflowers and cactus. There are opportunities for wildlife viewing in Sedona, although burgeoning development has had an impact. On my first trip to Sedona, we stayed at an upscale bed-and-breakfast, taking advantage of the winter discount. The owners showed us where the javelinas (feral pigs) would come up on the patio to eat the plants at night. On another trip, hiking off Schnebly Hill Road, we discovered fresh cougar tracks crossing our trail when returning to the car.

And the vortexes? They've been described as a swirling center of energy, emanating from the earth that interact with a person's individual energy. Is there anything to that? You'll have to find out for yourself. ♦



Hikers on a redrock ridge near Sedona.

Hiking Sedona

When to Visit

October and April offer good hiking weather. February through March, weather can be variable with average daytime temperatures around 60, nighttime lows in the 30s and the possibility of snow—but much less crowded. Some roads may be closed due to mud.

Fees

A Red Rock Trail Pass is \$5 daily, \$15 weekly. Purchase from Gateway Information Centers, Forest Service ranger stations, and many grocery and convenience stores in town.

Contacts

Red Rock Ranger Station: (928) 282-4119
Sedona-Oak Creek Chamber of Commerce (800) 288-7336

Trails

Lost Canyon: 4.4 miles round trip, rated moderate

Access: Drive Dry Creek Road 5.2 miles to FS 152. Turn right and follow 7.7 miles to Brins Mesa West parking lot.

Brins Mesa, Soldier Pass Loop: 8-10 miles with side-trip to Angel Falls, rated moderate.

Access: see above

Cow Pies/Mitten Ridge: 3 miles round trip to Cow Pies, rated easy. 5 miles round trip to Mitten Ridge, moderate.

Access: From Sedona "Y" (junction of 89A and 179), drive south 0.3 miles to Schnebly Hill Road. Turn left and follow Schnebly Hill Road 3.8 miles to unmarked trail on the left.

Resources

Sedona Hikes by Richard and Sherry Mangum

Sedona Vortex Maps: www.sedona.net/webpage.php/swmc/webpagesandarticles/sedonavortexmap