

TRAVEL & explore

Sedona's new-age vortexes, aura readings, spiritual offerings

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SEDONA - Jamie Jones didn't know a thing about me before she psychically sized me up.

Not my name, occupation, family background or the fact that I think most New Age stuff is hokey.

Yet within minutes of analyzing the colors of my aura from an instant photograph she took of my face, she had me pegged.

"You're the cruise director in your life," she said, pointing to the broad band of yellow across the center of the photo and a chunk of red in the lower corner.

I love to take charge and meticulously organize and plan things, even vacations, and am always on the go, go, go, the co-owner of the Center for New Age said. My college friends called me Julie McCoy of "Love Boat" television fame.

Jones also called me an old soul with a spiritual side, given the swath of lavender and white above the orange band. But she worried that those qualities are trumped by the hyperactivity and suggested more yoga or meditation, even if it's just a guided-meditation CD from Target.

I was less of a skeptic after the 20-minute, \$50 session and still find myself recalling her advice to slow down at least once a day.

Sedona is a mecca for those seeking spiritual renewal and healing. For some visitors, that's accomplished with a hike among the red rocks, a relaxation day by the pool or a prayer at the serene Chapel of the Holy Cross.

For those seeking a more metaphysical connection, there are spiritual healers and counselors, psychics, astrologers, tarot-card readers, vortex-to-guides and more. New Age businesses fill the tourist-brochure racks in Sedona like theme parks do in Florida.

Here's a first-timer's guide to the spiritual side of Sedona, on a budget.

Amitabha Stupa

As we embarked on the muddy red-dirt road leading to the stupa, my traveling companion (Mom) urged me to turn my phone off because it "might mess up the feelings we are supposed to get."

A stupa is a Buddhist shrine said to be a beacon of compassion. Amitabha is the Buddha of infinite light who purifies the delusion and suffering of attachment.

This one is privately owned and sits behind a neighborhood in the shadow of Chimney Rock in west Sedona.

We had the place to ourselves in January and took our time walking clockwise three times around the stupa while making personal prayers, one of the recommendations on how to get the most out of the visit.

The setting was peaceful, the views stunning, a perfect start to a day of reflection and a highlight of the overnight trip.

We made our financial offering - also recommended - and headed back to the car.

New Age ideas

A spiritual trip to Sedona wouldn't be complete without trying at least one of the New Age offerings.

My first stop was the purple-and-gold-painted Center for the New Age, across the street from Tlaquepaque, the popular shopping and dining complex.

It's touristy, for sure, but I was impressed that there wasn't a hard sell for any of the services, despite a binder full of them and a monthly calendar of activities without a blank spot. Jones, the woman who read my aura, barely lifted her head from her curtained-off reading room when I asked our colleagues about options.

Jones didn't hawk either of her books after our session nor suggest I buy the book she recommended for me ("Messages From Your Angel," by Doreen Virtue) at her store.

For other options, check Sedona's tourism website - visitsedona.com - read through a stack of brochures and consult the Sedona Metaphysical Spiritual Association, sedonaspirtual.com. There are also lengthy discussions on the topic at TripAdvisor.com's Sedona forum.

Visit a vortex

I didn't really know what a vortex was, and I probably still don't get it, so I picked up Jones' simple guide, "Sedona's Best Vortex Guidebook."

A vortex is a place said to have strong energy and healing powers. There are no signs or markers pointing to a vortex. It's just a feeling. You visit recommended sites and soak in the supposed energy.

We picked Cathedral Rock and Airport Mesa, both in west Sedona, where we were staying. I'd pick Cathedral Rock if you will be there for only one day. Ask the parking attendant for directions to Buddha Beach, a relatively short, creek-side hike away. I didn't see dead people or find my calling there, but I enjoyed every second of the calm. Don't miss the photo op at Red Rock Crossing, accessible by a sidewalk near the parking-lot entrance.

Airport Mesa is said to be best around sunset, but that didn't work into our plans. So we made a brief stop on the way out of town. I didn't think compared with the views and serenity at Cathedral Rock, but that perception is probably colored by the quick visit and the fact that I backed my car into a tree on the way out of the parking lot.

Elote Cafe

Be prepared to wait for a table at this no-reservations, dinner-only foodie favorite.

Unless you arrive just before closing during the week. We stopped on the way in from Phoenix, arriving around 8:30 p.m., and were seated right at a communal table.

We shared guacamole, quesadilla de costilla and smoked-chicken enchiladas. Two tips: Skip the guacamole appetizer because you get some with the quesadilla, and don't pass up the quesadilla, featuring braised beef short ribs and Mexican cheese. At about half the price (\$11.50) of the enchiladas, a bargain.

The restaurant is operated by Jeff Smedstad, former owner of Los Sombreros in Scottsdale. Pick up a copy of the restaurant's cookbook on the way out.

Cucina Rustica

Ask for a seat on the patio and linger over a glass of wine, antipasti and the fettuccine primavera al pesto. In west Sedona, check out its sister Ita restaurant, Dahl & Deluca.

Hampton Inn Sedona

This hotel gets positive reviews on TripAdvisor.com, and the chain is known for its free hot breakfast, a budget traveler's must. The staff was friendly and generous with directions, recommendations and a late checkout. The breakfast was a big disappointment, though, with cold, overcooked sausage. Rooms start at about \$100 a night.

Hilton Sedona Resort

The Hilton, one of the first resorts you encounter on the way into Sedona, is an upscale hotel with generous-size rooms, a nice pool, activities and friendly staff. It's a family favorite, with microwaves and a mini refrigerator in the room. The Hilton has restaurants on-site and is within walking distance of Tequa Plaza, a shopping and dining center that houses Cucina Rustica.