



Scenic Route:
Hopi ruins at
Wupatki National
Monument.

Three Hikes in Three Days

Trekking through volcanoes, vortexes, and alpine forest around Flagstaff, Arizona

BY AMY KLEIN

What goes up must come down. I remind myself of this reality as I hike up Lenox Crater outside Flagstaff, Arizona.

Flagstaff is a heavenly city for those who love hiking, biking, camping, and swimming, too—not to mention clean air, panoramic vistas, and a breathtaking view of the stars. Flagstaff is also an oft-overlooked city for those headed to the majestic Grand Canyon about an hour north. But if you've already seen the canyon, this friendly college town is well worth a trip of its own. The crisp fall air inspired my plan for a bell curve of three hikes in three days, starting

with an easy hike, peaking with a difficult one, and finishing off with a moderate hike before heading home.

Except I forgot one thing: Flagstaff's altitude is 7,000 feet. And this ostensibly "easy" hike straight up Lenox Crater Trail (situated in Sunset Crater National Monument) is suddenly feeling labored. My breathing is heavy and loud, in tune with the *crunch crunch* of my shoes on the slate-colored ash. But I'm motivated to continue because it's pretty cool (no pun intended) to climb a volcano that erupted several hundred thousand years ago. I reach the top after just 30 minutes, and, catching my breath, take in an incredible view of the San Francisco Peaks.

Descending, of course, takes even less time, and when I reach the bottom, I cross the road to climb out on a nearby rock formation that looks like a bleak planet Krypton. I'm tempted to take one of the strange stones as a souvenir but think better of it. I realize this was a good decision when I arrive at the nearby Lava Flow Trail, an easy 1-mile stroll through lava flows and cinder fields. Before me sits a glass box of yellowing letters from people who believed they were cursed by the Hopi ancestors for taking a stone from the sacred ground. I definitely feel their presence a little later at Wupatki National Monument, a series of stunning ruins just a 15-minute drive away.



Getting There US Airways flies nonstop from five Texas cities to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport (PHX; skyharbor.com) or via Phoenix to Flagstaff Pulliam Airport (FLG; flagstaff.com). The drive from Phoenix to Flagstaff is about two hours.



Natural Highs:
(From top) An autumn view from Humphreys Peak and the rich red facade of Sedona's Bell Rock are among Northern Arizona's grandest vistas.

Climbing the stairs to the orange sandstone building of an 800-year-old pueblo, in the past home to Hopi and Zuni peoples, I can easily imagine the bustling life here.

By my second day, I think I've adjusted to the altitude difference. It's a good thing, because the trail to Humphreys Peak, the highest point in Arizona, begins at about 9,300 feet and reaches 12,637 feet. The trail is "only" 4.5 miles, but with a steady incline winding around the volcanic mountain, it takes me three hours of heart-pounding trekking to make it up. The rigorousness of this steady, winding climb sneaks up on me because there are barely any steep parts. The trail is far from monotonous, though, snaking around rock slides and through the alpine forest. As I climb higher, I get to see the ponderosas, aspens, and cork-bark firs from every vantage point—beginning at ground level and winding up above the tree line.

I think maybe I'm hallucinating when I reach the peak and see colored vistas all around me. But it's actually a breathtaking view of the Painted Desert with its lavender, red, orange, and pink

hues. Exhausted from the climb—and taken by the scenery—I'm loath to descend. But I run into a local named Brad who tells me, "Once you've done Humphreys Peak, you can do anything. Anything." I make my way back down the mountain steadily, Brad's words and a good share of endorphins fortifying me. I'm looking forward to tomorrow's moderate hike in Sedona.

With a good night's sleep behind me (plus bragging rights for conquering Humphreys), I'm ready to tackle Red Rock Country, as Sedona is known. The area has four vortexes—energy centers that some claim can affect spiritual and physical healing—that have attracted a significant New Age community to the town. Some believe the vortexes also attract aliens, hence the Ye Olde UFO store. My final hike is up Bell Rock, an aptly named vortex center in the shape of a bell. Scrambling up the layers of smooth red rocks under the hot sunshine, I definitely feel *something*. It may just be the altitude. But then again, maybe it's the knowledge that once I get to the top, I'm going to have to take the long way down—but this time I'm ready for it. ★

DO Spend a half-day at **Sunset Crater National Monument** (nps.gov/sucr) hiking Lenox Crater Trail and Lava Flow Trail, then drive 15 minutes to the 800-year-old pueblo ruins at **Wupatki National Monument** (nps.gov/wupa). **Lowell Observatory** (928-774-3358; lowell.edu) has night hours to see the world's first International Dark City. Prepare well to hike up Humphreys Trail in **Coconino National Forest** (www.fs.fed.us), or take the Scenic Skyride (arizona.snowbowl.com) instead. Sedona (visitsedona.com) is about an hour south of Flagstaff. There you can scale to the top of **Bell Rock** and end the day at **Slide Rock State Park** (azstateparks.com), which offers cold natural pools with jumps, rock slides, and sunning areas.

STAY For a bit of romance within walking distance of downtown Flagstaff, **England House Bed & Breakfast** (877-214-7350; englandhousebandb.com; rates start at \$129; no kids under 12) has antique French furniture and mostly organic breakfasts. For a family-style hotel and breakfast, try **La Quinta** (928-556-8666; lq.com; rates start at \$129; AAA discount available), five minutes from downtown and just off Interstate 17.

EAT **Diablo Burger** (928-774-3274; diabloburger.com) in downtown Flagstaff is "all about local," from the beef raised on nearby ranches to the locally welded copper tables. The more upscale **Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar** (928-213-1021; brixflagstaff.com) has a backyard garden. Try the deconstructed salad Nicoise if it's available.

For additional information on Flagstaff, call (800) 379-0065 or go to flagstaffarizona.org.

For travel information, visit your local AAA branch, call (866) 567-9217, or go to AAA.com/travel.