

TRAVEL

MORE TO PHOENIX THAN GREAT WEATHER

By Mansoor Ladha

Phoenix, Arizona, needs no introduction, especially to snowbird Albertans, fleeing from harsh winters at home. It's their second home – home away from home.

Phoenix has more to offer than just the climate. U.S.'s fifth most populous city will dazzle you with serene desert gardens, one-of-a-kind museums, award-winning dining and more. The city's perfect year-round weather and several impeccably designed championship courses have made Phoenix one of the world's top golf destinations.

Escaping from Calgary's constant barrage of -20 weather in January, it was like being on a different planet as we exited the airport's terminal building. Hoping to experience better days, almost three-hour wait before departure was of no real concern to Albertans on a full Air Canada flight.

We escaped to the stunning desert retreat of the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch and immersed ourselves in enjoying the oasis-like hotel's luxurious services. The resort's open-air lobby restaurant and bar and its Spa Avania were the perfect locations to unwind. A nice cold beer in the lobby, followed by blissful treatments at Spa Avania's amenities which included 19 treatment rooms, mineral pool, relaxation areas, steam room and sauna, rejuvenated and awoke our sensibilities.

The biggest surprise awaited us when we were hosted to the resort's famous "Wine Me, Dine Me" culinary dinner. The culinary journey began with Chef Juan and his staff prepared delicious dishes with fresh authentic Southwestern flavours right in front of us. Chef Juan prepared a four-course menu for us, complete with tequila and wine pairings. Prehistoric

For someone like me whose cooking skills are limited to boiled eggs only, this treatment was like royalty. The chef served us with scallops with lemon honey dressing as starters, followed by salad of baby romaine cucumber with goat cheese. The entrée was pan seared halibut with dry cilantro and lemon pepper seasoning and jalapeno puree, followed by dessert of white chocolate caramel popcorn moose with an almond cake with raspberry



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MANSOOR LADHA

Chef Juan pairs wine to go with the meal served during "Wine Me, Dine Me" session with travel writer Mansoor and his wife, Anaar.

sauce.

"Wine Me, Dine Me" – a popular event among visitors and local residents — is a complete wonderful, fun experience where the diners can smell and taste food that makes southwest cuisine so unique and memorable.

This outstanding resort also takes pride in showcasing cultures of Arizona's 20 Southwestern Native American tribes. "We invite guests of our resort to immerse themselves in this rich history and take advantage of the many cultural opportunities available both onsite and in the surrounding area," explains Ann Lane, the resort's Senior Director of Advertising and Public Relations.

In collaboration with native artists and educators, the resort has sited the Native American Learning Centre close to its concierge desk. The learning centre has been designed to educate guests and visitors on

native history, culture and teachings.

During our stay, we were fortunate to be entertained by native American dancers with performances which included hoop dancing, known as the "dance of life," preceded by a show of rare birds — all organized courtesy of the hotel.

The resort presents a sentimental touch in its activities by offering a romantic waterway of Venice aboard a beautiful handcrafted Italian gondola boats steering through the lovely waterways of the resort.

A touch of class is added as the classically trained gondoliers sing an Italian serenade as you cruise through one of the three romantic routes on the resort's seven-acre lake.

Another resort of note we attended was the Scottsdale Resort at McCormick Ranch which had undergone a \$10 million renovation programme in its 326 guest rooms, pool

areas, restaurants and meeting rooms. We were hosted VIP-style in their poolside cabana, complete with a dedicated server and complimentary drinks and lunch.

Like many other resorts in Arizona, both these properties provide facilities for a destination wedding. An Indian wedding, complete with a decorated stage, traditional ceremonies and chanting priests, was in progress at the Scottsdale Resort during our stay.

When we ventured outside the resort areas, we were astonished at the number and scope of monuments and military cenotaphs portraying the American historical timeline.

At the Wesley Bolin Memorial Plaza, visitors have the opportunity to see and learn about memorials dedicated to World War I Veterans, Korean War, Vietnam War, Arizona War Heroes, Arizona Pioneer Women and several other important shrines dedicated to America's glorious history.

Phoenix's oldest residential block is depicted by Heritage Square, featuring 10 fully-restored buildings giving visitors a peak into Victorian life. The Rosson House, a 1895 house museum, offers visitors a picture of what life was like for some of the first settlers of Phoenix.

Due to its urban location, a very convenient destination for travelers staying in the Phoenix area is Papago Park, a hilly, desert park covering 1500 acres and known for its distinctive red sandstone geological formations. The park, which is easily accessible from the cities of Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe and Scottsdale, is one of the most visited attractions in the area making it a popular destination for both residents and vacationers.

Later on, we were fortunate to be invited to Phoenix's best kept secret, Pizzeria Bianco, dubbed one of the best pizzerias in the

nation. I was honoured to be included among a long list of pizzeria fans who frequented Phoenix's gem including Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Seinfeld and Jimmy Fallon.

Located in a former 1929 red brick machine shop with a faded sign that simply says Pizzeria Bianco, it has a few outdoor and indoor tables and a large wood-burning oven on the side. The pizzeria has gained so much popularity that nightly waits can routinely exceed two and even three hours.

We celebrated our last evening in Phoenix by having dinner at Marcellino Ristorante, a prominent Italian eatery operated by a husband-and-wife team – chef Marcellino Verzino and his wife, Sima. While the chef is busy whipping delicious Italian cuisine using fresh seasonal ingredients to a packed dining room, Sema, the lead singer with three-person band, entertains diners.

Chef Marcellino doesn't consider kitchen as his only domain. He is passionate about creating a complete dining experience for his guests. He has tastefully undertaken the restaurant's interior design as well as patio, creating an ambiance that welcomes guests as if they were walking into his home.

"Everything we propose is based on Italian life, from my cuisine to the European service, the music and of course the ambiance," explained Chef Marcellino. "each reservation is taken with respect to quality time to enjoy it all.

Dining with family and friends is a joyful experience. Your meal and conversation is a scared part of Italian lifestyle and my wife Sema and I strive it will always be here."

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based travel writer, journalist and author of Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing east Africa for the West and Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims.



Phoenix has become a favourite wedding destination as shown by this Indian wedding party with groom and his family as they prepare to enter the traditional ceremony area.