

Trip of Renewal: Sedona



By Ann Cochran

I traveled alone to red rock country in Sedona, Arizona. The drive from the airport took me past places named Horsethief Basin, Big Bug Creek, and Soldier Pass Road, evoking scenes from our national identity and Hollywood Westerns. Arizona's open vistas, buttes and mesas were a stark contrast to the memorials and monuments in my hometown, the nation's capital.

A pioneer of sorts, I journeyed westward to explore my path during one of life's great transitions. In the space of a few months, my two sons had moved forward, my youngest to college; the older one to the altar. Busy with a happy marriage and satisfying work life, it sounds morose to say my boys left me behind. Still, these events were more jarring than expected and I chafed at shifting focus to my life from theirs.

Mii Amo, a sanctuary of a spa that honors Native American traditions in a place they consider their Garden of Eden—and whose name means journey—would be my base of operations. A wind-carved rock formation called Kachina Woman stands on a jutting ledge at the entrance. She looks straight ahead while guarding those below. A Catholic girl turned Methodist woman, I was not remotely into New Age practices, but I sought these unfamiliar tools to mine my emotions.

Beyond the drama of its natural setting in the Boynton Canyon, Sedona is New Age headquarters in part because of its vortices, specific places on earth with an unusual amount of energy that may contribute to physical and spiritual healing. Dreams are said to be more vivid here. All I know is that I slept better than I usually do when I travel.

After a satisfying eight-hour sleep, I opened my casita door. Two items were at my feet: ying and yang-ish. Fresh orange juice on ice in a metal bucket sat next to USA Today. Dedicated to keeping my peace, I enjoyed the juice, threw the paper in the trash, and walked to the spa. Against a cloudless blue sky, the red cliffs were mesmerizing; it was all I could do to get where I was going without tripping.

My first morning began in the womb-like Crystal Grotto. Turning in any direction, chunks of quartz—clear, emerald, sapphire, amethyst—sparkled from lit crevices in the curved wall. A single ray of light extended from the domed ceiling to a copper bowl filled with oil, warming and infusing it with energy for treatments that soothe, pamper, and transform. A barefoot woman in a tunic entered, struck a match to a bundle of white sage, and slowly traced the outline of each person meditating in this space. Silent intentions were dedicated, and we dispersed.

I filled my days with classes in the “movement studios,” stretching toward the sun in yoga and rolling like a ball in Pilates. This trip wasn't about manicures and massages.

Ayurvedic analysis opened my eyes to the ancient healing system from India that connects our bodies to the universe. The therapist, Leslee, said that “everything in our world is either medicine or poison.” There are three types of energies, or doshas; I'm a Pitta. The Sanskrit root means “to shine,” which sounds nice, but its identifying feature is digestion: of food, energy, ideas, and impressions. It fit. I'm always weighing my options. Facing the future without a child in the house, I was churning more than usual.

Beyond a description of character traits, Leslee, who has a master's degree in psychology and training in nutrition and herbal medicine, taught me what to eat and activities to seek out when I am feeling off-kilter. I was having uncharacteristic trouble working on simple projects.

“No wonder. There is a hole in your life,” Leslee explained, “and you are depleted.” Nurturing and protective, she recommended water as a natural tranquilizer and stressed the value of buying organic meat and produce. I looked forward to warm baths in my deep tub at home, and vowed to spend more time in the backyard near our small pond.

Another therapist balanced my chakras, seven energy centers described as spinning disks of color. Chakras are associated with our physical, mental and emotional well being and include the familiar solar plexus and third eye. I am still not clear on what chakras mean or do, but I took it as a positive sign that despite traveling and spending more time alone than I'm comfortable with, my digestive system was in perfect form.



Mii Amo at Enchantment

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY MII AMO, A DESTINATION SPA AT ENCHANTMENT

That evening in the spa café, a long communal table in front of the open kitchen encouraged exchanges between chefs and guests. A perfect Pinot Grigio also broke the ice. Turkey osso buco followed by a tofu-chocolate napoleon filled me up in spite of low calorie counts. The breakfast menu was fat/carb/calorie-low and option-rich, too. Whole wheat, apple, and cottage cheese griddle cakes were as healthfully prepared as the omelet with just-wilted spinach leaves poking out in perfect symmetry. The only thing that didn't work was the dry granola. I was glad I could lose a few pounds while finding my authentic self. I could also learn to cook these dishes; recipes are e-mailed home upon request.

Just as eating more healthfully was not a problem with such delicious choices, some other habits shook off easily in this environment as well. For the most part I kept the TV dark and ignored the siren song of e-mail. However, although I vowed not to add to the heavy load of reading material I dragged with me from home, I bought three books anyway: on color therapy, vortex theory, and meditations on Jesus. Even though I'd chosen the treatments, I feared I'd react with cynicism.

Surprisingly, none of it seemed silly. My favorite affirmation was, "I allow the sweetness of my creativity full expression in my life." What sounds corny at one time (now) can sound perfectly on-target when you need it, in a time of high anxiety.

Nothing was at odds with Christian faith. It blended and complemented my spirituality. My most active chakras, for example, were red, which is related to security and the material world; and violet, the spiritual connection to a higher awareness. The analysis rang true and clicked into place during my astrology reading later that week.

An astrologist created a chart he prepared with birth time and place information I'd e-mailed ahead. He saw my struggle between love of comfort and security versus quest for adventure, change, and meaning. I wondered if it was meaningful that this observation was in sync with my chakra and ayurvedic sessions, or are these standard emotions of a woman in my time and place? He also listed my negative traits: opinionated, bossy, and frightened at the core. Check, check and check.

Even if I wasn't a believer in past life theories, the description of me as a spiritual leader made sense as the root of my strong-willed personality. So did the explanation about why my attempts to help people are not always well received. Despite good intentions, I need to listen more and advise less. Ouch.

My moon is in Cancer, and that usually indicates a loving mother. I had one. She died when I was in my early 20's, adding to my determination to be close to my boys and give them all I've got – just in case.

Freedom emerges all over my chart, but "that's not your word – responsibility is your word," according to the astrologist. I'm a hard-working Virgo ruled by Mercury, the messenger, who wants to know the rules and weigh all the alternatives. He advised me to control my calendar. "You have freedom—but you'd rather be busy." Regrettably true.

His parting words were, "Your dichotomy will always be that you crave security but need stimulation. It is to your benefit that you are willing to take risks and not give up."

I left Arizona with new insights, ready to move forward. Greater awareness of my gifts and limitations strengthened me for the cool winds that will shape a new motherhood role, but never take it away.