

in the region, and sunshine in summer, illuminating a host of activity options including golfing, hiking, kayaking, whitewater rafting, tubing and fishing.

Indeed, the Reno-Tahoe region is a four-season resort boasting more than 300 yearly events, not the least of which is the Reno Rodeo, one of the largest in the western U.S., with 750 professional athletes competing over 10 days in events such as bull riding, team roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing and bronc riding. Visitors can get a taste of the Old West at the event parade and as well as shopping, food, carnival and “mutton bustin’” at the Double R Marketplace.

Dubbed “the biggest little city in the world,” Reno doesn’t come up short

on urban amenities. Besides its hotel-casinos, the city boasts a top flight list of spas, restaurants, coffee shops, brewpubs and music venues. Wine walks and brew bikes add a twist to the nightly entertainment options, while Booze Bus tours permit a drive-free afternoon on the town on Saturdays.

And if you happen to be in town at the start of summer, the Great Eldorado BBQ, Brews and Blues Festival is an event not to be missed. The massive block party features streets lined with food booths and over 50 craft brew vendors, all of them contributing to a lively kick off of the season, complete with a searing non-stop rock and blues music soundtrack.



## Unexpected PHOENIX

BY **FIONA TAPP**

**A**SI DUNK A CHUNK OF artisan bread into the mellow, buttery olive oil, my waitress tells me cheerfully that it was grown, pressed and bottled just outside the city limits and a short drive from downtown, at Queen Creek Olive Mill and Farm. That for me is the essence of Phoenix: artfully blending a friendly, local, small town vibe with all the glitz and glam of city life. It’s a beautiful contradiction; it’s polished and urban, yet gritty and funky. It’s modern and artsy, without pretension.

Roosevelt Row (known as ‘RoRo’ to the locals) embodies the theme perfectly, a funky gentrified neighbourhood of studios, small stage theatres, cafés and unique restaurants that all act as a canvas for a series of interesting and arresting murals; almost every building, sign post and spare wall has been used to transform this part of the city into its own outdoor art gallery. My favourite piece of work covers the entire side of a modern church and features a man’s outstretched arms doubled in shadows. He seems to be saying, “This way!”

Phoenix is an art lover’s dream, with creativity spilling out of hotel lobbies and museums, and further played-out still on countless colourful shop fronts and installations throughout the downtown core.

FOUND:RE Hotel is no exception, exuding the artistic vibe I quickly come to expect in Phoenix. Opened in fall 2016, different pieces of artwork adorn almost every corner of every space throughout the property. Each room’s door number has been specially created by local artisan, Cheryl Marine. All have been crafted

## ST. LOUIS, MO

**WHEN YOU THINK OF ST. LOUIS,** you might think of concrete. Not the stuff of construction, but the famous Ted Drewes’ frozen custard that is so thick it is held upside down before being served, and which is colloquially called a “concrete.” It is only fitting that Ted Drewes has been serving ice cream treats for more than 80 years at a location on another iconic American landmark, Route 66, though the concrete only dates to 1959.

Admittedly Drewes’ delightful concoction ranks behind St. Louis’s more famous contribution to popular culture – Budweiser beer, which has been brewed in the city since 1852 courtesy of the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Co., which can be toured along with Grants Farm, home of the famous Anheuser-Busch Clydesdale horses.

Equally synonymous with St. Louis is the Gateway Arch, humorously called the most recognizable arch in America not associated with a fast food chain. Symbolizing the city’s historic status as “gateway to the West” – in fact, Lewis and Clark started their famous expedition here in 1804 – the Arch is currently undergoing renovation as part of a \$380-million development plan that is now expected to be completed in spring. Those who ascend the Arch on a clear day can see 50 kilometers in any direction, including to the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.



St. Louis Gateway Arch

Of course, St. Louis is also known as one America’s top baseball towns, while also being recognized for its zoo and its legacy as a centre of blues music (hence the name of the local hockey team). It is lesser known for having the second largest Mardi Gras in the U.S., great Italian food (including St. Louis-style pizza) in the Hill area, and the cosmopolitan Loop district. Alas, if you’re interested in seeing the International Bowling Hall of Fame, note that it moved to Arlington, Texas, in 2008. 🍷



with mixed media and exhibit some phrase; mine reads, "A Star Is Born." The FOUND:RE takes its designation as an "art hotel" to heart and even has its own in-house curator, Mike Oleskow, who hand-selects each piece of work on display. He can also arrange tours around the hotel's art collections, as well as provide expert advice on city sights that appeal to the art and culture lover.

As he shows me around, he explains that visitors can experience a totally different stay from one month to the next, and with each change of artwork, the entire interior space is forever being re-imagined and reborn. There's nothing boring or predicatable here; Oleskow has eclectic tastes and showcases a huge variety of contrasting styles and mediums. Sculpture, photography, murals and more traditional fine art all have their place to shine.

This eclectic nature is deeply entrenched in the fabric of Phoenix, and it's something that the city embraces. Even its metro stations are adorned with public art, equivalent to more than \$6 million of city investment. Had I arrived on a different Friday, I might have been able to attend the First Friday Art Walk, which (as you may have guessed) takes place on the first Friday of the month and welcomes street performers, bands, and creators from far and wide to the city's creative district for a self-guided

art walk, located on Roosevelt Row and extending to Grand Avenue.

The timing wasn't right so instead, I make my way down to Desoto Central Market. In this open canteen-style space – which acts as a social hub – you can select a bite to eat from a range of restaurants offering cold press juices, salads, gourmet burgers, Asian steamed buns and more, and fully immerse yourself in the community.

I grab an iced Kombucha and stroll the streets, marvelling at the city's vast collection of food trucks, which feature cool illustrations and quirky names like "Short Leash Hotdogs" and "Mustache Pretzels." I notice how Phoenix feels spacious and never overcrowded; it has all the amenities of a capital city but without the claustrophobia.

With an average of 300 days of sunshine per year, Phoenix earns the title of the "sunniest metropolis" in the U.S., but as I sit around the quirky pool area of the FOUND:RE watching artists, makers and creators sip their cocktails as they discuss their latest work, I come up with another accolade that I think this Arizona capital can claim: "America's coolest city." The sheer fact that Phoenix isn't trying too hard makes it all the more appealing.

This place is youthful, affordable and upbeat; it is everything I hoped for and nothing I expected, and I can't wait to return. ✪

## When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** For more of what the city has to offer in the spirit of creativity, put the **Phoenix Art Museum** on your itinerary. History buffs should enjoy a 90-minute **History and Highlights Tour** courtesy of Phoenix Rising Tours, while active travellers might opt to grab a bike (through a Phoenix bike sharing program) and go about exploring the vibrant murals of **Roosevelt Row** or pay a visit to the **Japanese Friendship Garden** near Hance Park.



Pizzeria Bianco

**WHERE TO DINE:** Lunch at **Desoto Central Market**, a gourmet food hall curated from Chef Stephen Jones that also offers fun themed nights from Drag Queen Bingo to swing dancing. Grab dinner in Historic Heritage Square at one of the James Beard award-winning restaurants, such as **Pizzeria Bianco** (hailed one of the best slices of pizza in the nation) or **Nobuo** at Teeter House. Do yourself a favour and make time for a bite at the quirky gourmet hotdog shop **Short Leash** (try the Sonoran Dog!) and stop for a handcrafted brew at female-owned **Mother Bunch Brewing** – their Mac 'n Cheese sampler has been top rated by Fodor's.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Two options for discerning travellers are: the **FOUND:RE Phoenix**, an art-filled, luxurious-yet-accessible boutique in the downtown area; or **The Camby**, where quirky and sophistication intersect in the Biltmore neighbourhood.