

FAMILY TRAVEL

Canyons and craters part of Flagstaff fun

Northern Arizona city offers up many options for visitors

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

A gust of wind and frenzy of snow diminishes my sightline, simultaneously whirling my hair into a tornado of blond. Having neglected to zip up my jacket, it's now a billowing balloon that my tween-daughter Brooklyn deftly dodges, trudging alongside me in search of refuge. "There it is," she shouts, pushing through the unassuming entryway, seething, "I thought Arizona was supposed to be hot!" Dabbing a river of mascara, I'm formulating a calming response when the sunny-toque-wearing gal working the counter at Diablo Burger cheerily chimes, "Oh, not in November; we get all four seasons up here in Flagstaff." Well, that's a hard lesson learned — our mother-daughter road trip is off to an excellent start.

Given its elevation of 2,133 metres on the Colorado Plateau, Flagstaff's rugged, ponderosa forested landscape — and weather — are in stark contrast to sun-kissed Scottsdale, located two hours south. But here's the thing, being different works. And this charming city, rooted in outdoor adventure, has undoubtedly found its niche — you just need to dress for it. So, after warming up and chowing down on "the State's best burgers," we donned our winter wear and set off to discover Flagstaff's melange of out-of-this-world sights, attractions and historical landmarks.

ASTRONOMICAL ADVENTURES

As the world's first designated International Dark Sky City, Flagstaff's stargazing is unparalleled, and the Lowell Observatory takes the top spot for interplanetary exploration. Wealthy businessman-astronomer Percival Lowell of Boston founded the leading astronomical research centre in 1894 to discover extraterrestrial life on Mars. While unsuccessful in its inaugural mission, Lowell Observatory has pioneered research and education, connecting people with space, for more than 125 years. For Brooklyn and I, sighting gas giant Jupiter and four of its 79 moons through Lowell's original 24-inch Clark refractor was truly awe-inspiring, as was learning about how the telescope was instrumental in creating detailed maps of the moon for the Apollo 13 mission. We also gazed at globular star clusters and counted moon craters; however, seeing Saturn shimmer 1.47 billion kilometres away was the ultimate showstopper.

NATIONAL MONUMENTS AND NAVAJO CULTURE

A half-hour north of Flagstaff is Sunset Crater National Monument, the last volcanic eruption of the 1,800-square-mile San Francisco volcanic field. Outfitted in hats and mitts, Brooklyn and I set off on the 1.6-kilometre self-guided Lava Trail for a firsthand look at the catastrophic destruction. We soon discover that the site's rugged terrain was the training ground for astronauts preparing for the Apollo missions in the 1960s. Wearing their cumbersome space suits, the NASA team navigated the lava field's otherworldly rock formations and learned how to pilot the lunar rover. From Sunset Crater, we cruised along the stunning 55-km scenic loop, transitioning from open meadows and pine groves to shimmering juniper grasslands with sweeping views of the Painted Desert to reach the red rock landscape of Wupatki National Monument.

The site's ancient artifacts and architectural remains of a multi-level pueblo dwelling, with a community room and ceremonial ball court, are a remarkable feat of engineering dating back 800 years. With our self-guided tour complete, we continued north to the Cameron Trading Post, overlooking the Little Colorado River Gorge. The century-old site is a vibrant tourist attraction, housing a fine Collector's Gallery and shop with contemporary Native American art, a hotel and a restaurant, where we grabbed a quick lunch of house-made chili and Navajo fry bread.



The author's daughter, Brooklyn, at Wupatki National Monument, where the architectural remains date back 800 years. PHOTOS: MHAIRRI WOODHALL

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN, TED DANSON AND ROUTE 66

Cheers' favourite bartender and Flagstaff native Ted Danson is the official tour guide of the city's Walk This Talk Tour, offering visitors a unique stroll down a portion of America's iconic Route 66. We began at the visitor centre in the Historic Flagstaff Depot, picking up a detailed pamphlet with a toll-free number for listening to Ted's pre-recorded talk. With Brooklyn in tow, I only made the first three of 10 stops, as she was still a bit young for the fact-filled narration and the quaint shops lining Flagstaff's historic downtown caused her significant distraction. Bustling Brightside Bookstore was our favourite find, with its floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with toys, trinkets, treasures and myriad handwritten book recommendations. The eclectic array of giftware and '70s-inspired garments found in the Old Town Shops, and the handmade gourmet caramel apples and confectionaries in The Sweet Shoppe were also very well received.

BLACK BART'S, A LOCAL INSTITUTION

Flagstaff is full of surprises and Black Bart's Steakhouse, Saloon and Musical Revue was a showstopper. We arrived at the unassuming roadhouse restaurant, located in an 11-acre RV park, with zero expectations and left with our hearts

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and bellies full. Named after infamous Wells Fargo stagecoach robber Charles E. Boles — a.k.a. Black Bart — the Flagstaff institution is best known for its steak suppers, quirky Old West décor and songster servers, accompanied by a fast-fingered pianist. In chatting with our waitress, we discovered that most song-slinging staff are students — or graduates — of Northern Arizona University's music and theatre programs. During our hour-long meal, performers regaled us with songs from the '60s and '70s and Broadway, jazz, and Disney classics. Brooklyn was awestruck throughout, making Black Bart's her best Flagstaff experience.

A MOTOR INN RESURGENCE

Flagstaff's roadside inns are a nod to its Route 66 roots, and the newly opened High Country Motor Lodge puts a chic spin on this classic concept. The retro retreat feels contemporary while boasting a well-defined vintage vibe. Our spacious courtyard-facing room came outfitted with two comfy plush queen beds, a thoughtful table and plenty of thoughtful, modern touches, like coat hooks, dimmable lights and USB charging stations. I was also delighted with the pour-over Vietnamese-style coffee pouches and sweetened condensed milk creamer — a deli-

cious in-room amenity. While the outdoor pool wasn't heated and consequently underused, the hot tub and sauna were a perfect way to end a day of outdoor exploration. Pizza and grab-and-go provisions from The General Store also came in handy on the nights we felt like staying in.

Spending three days in Flagstaff left us craving more. We barely touched the region's outdoor recreation and missed winter activities — including its beloved holiday attractions like Little America's light display and North Pole Experience — by about a month. More reason to return, with warmer clothing and a renewed sense of adventure.

For more destination information, visit [@arrivals_travel](mailto:arrivals_travel).



Black Bart's Steakhouse, Saloon and Musical Revue, named after an infamous stagecoach robber, is best known for its delicious steak dinners.

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