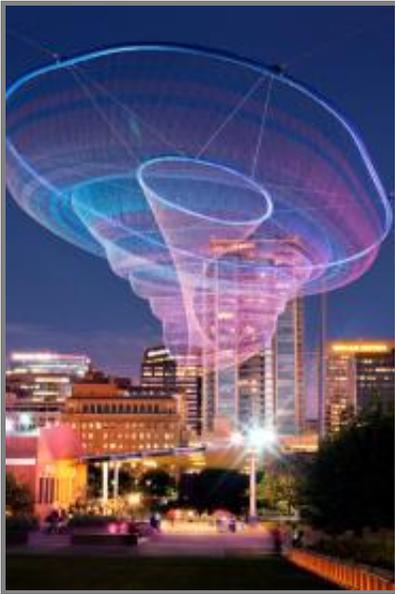


Desert Dreaming

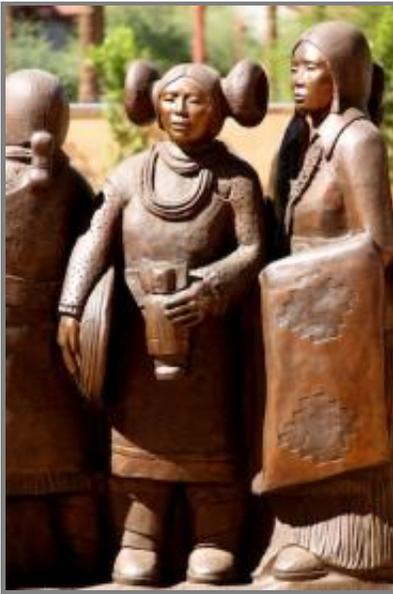


Written by Jeffrey James Keyes | Monday, 14 January 2013



I always had an idea in my mind of what **Phoenix** was: golf courses, conventions, retirement communities, intense heat and soft yellow or salmon-colored polo shirts. I don't know if it was the desert air, sunshine or the proximity to the Grand Canyon but the moment I landed the real Phoenix emerged. America's sixth-largest city opened my eyes and woke a sense of adventure. I checked into the posh **Westin Hotel** in Downtown Phoenix and audibly gasped when I walked into the room. Just beyond the bed and sprawling desk was a floor to ceiling window showcasing flickering lights, public artwork, urban parks and the shadows of mountains in the distance. An enormous sculpture below in the Civic Space Park caught my eye, a cross between a tornado and a jellyfish. I came to realize it's an abstract cactus flower titled *Her secret is patience*, taken from the Ralph Waldo Emerson quote "Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience," created by artist Janet Echelman. Before I could unpack my phone rang and before I knew it I was having cocktails and comfort food nearby at the District American Kitchen & Wine Bar at the **Sheraton Phoenix Downtown**. Two cocktails later and I was shaking hands with the chef and hearing about how most of what I was eating was either grown on the rooftop garden or brought in from local farmers.

The next day I had a spa appointment in Scottsdale in the afternoon but my morning was free, so I woke early and went for a dip in the cool blue waters in the outside pool at the Westin. I was the only one doing laps and felt the sunshine on my back. I was well aware that I was swimming in fresh water in the middle of the desert and wondered what it must have been like to be one of the first people to explore the region. I knew there was a strong Native American presence in the region, but I wanted to know more. Luckily, Deb Krol at the **Heard Museum** was just a quick drive away. Deb treated me to some Indian Fry Bread, tepary bean hummus and offered an assortment of Native American treats in the Heard Café before walking me through the galleries and outdoor courtyards.



Dwight B. and Maie Bartlett Heard opened the museum in 1929 to display their collection of American Indian artifacts and art. I felt a sense of peace and order in the Heard Museum and could have spent all day listening to Deb's stories about her ancestors and contemporaries. It was here that I gained truthful perspective and the insight I had always wanted to hear about the authentic Southwestern Native American experience.



Stories Deb had shared stayed with me as I rested in a tranquil pool outside of the [Spa Avania at Hyatt Regency Scottsdale](#). The beauty of the McDowell Mountain range loomed in the distance and elegant palm trees, wildflowers and cacti made me feel like I was in a modern-day Garden of Eden. I felt strangely connected to a rich sense of complicated history and contemporary paradise all in the same breath. I was in a state of total bliss from the Signature Avania Massage and able to calmly receive the beauty of the landscape around me. My friends were eventually able to bring me back to reality: we had a big night of exploring Phoenix nightlife planned and I needed to leave the spa and come back to 2012.

We met for rum punch at the new hotspot, [The Breadfruit](#), at a quarter to eight and indulged in a Jamaican-inspired rum menu Ernest Hemingway would have written home about. After dinner it was choose your own adventure: karaoke at [Kobalt Bar](#), Bears and Beer at [Pat O's Bunkhouse Saloon](#) or Cowboys and line dancing at the popular [Charlie's Phoenix](#). I was able to check out all three hotspots but left my heart at

Charlie's. With high energy drag performances, the same-sex two steppin' and sexy cowboys tending bar, it's a must while you're in town. The bar was packed so we stepped outside and found a country western wonderland.



Cowboys and bandits of all shapes and sizes sipping beer from pitchers and throwing back down-home cocktails and fruity Jell-O shots while Pussy LeHoot and her friends riled up the crowd. A highlight of the night was when Pussy LeHoot passed a cowboy hat through the audience in attempts to raise funds to help get one of the drag queens back to her hometown in New Mexico so she could make a gig the next evening.

The next morning we checked out of the Westin and left the city lights for a taste of the resort ease. I had to pinch myself as the car pulled up to **The Arizona Biltmore**. Opened in 1929, the “Jewel of the Desert” is infamous for its Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired design at the base of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve. I checked into my room in the Ocatilla before heading out to explore the property. Irving Berlin used to sit by the pool and compose as he took in the view. “White Christmas” was written in one of these relaxed brainstorming sessions. Marilyn Monroe was a regular guest back in the day, as were the Kennedys and almost every presidential family since its opening day. I spent the day pool hopping and pretending I was Jackie O, reading my novel on a comfortable beach chair and occasionally dipping one toe in the water while the kids splashed about in the pool. That night I went to **La Hacienda** at the nearby Fairmont Scottsdale Princess for a few lessons on tequila (served, with an appropriate surprise that used to rattle) and an authentic Mexican dinner prepared by Chef Richard Sandoval, the “father of modern Mexican cuisine.”



I woke at 5 a.m. the next morning—a time my friends know I would prefer to be heading to bed, not rising from it. I jumped to, though, as I had a reservation to take a hot air balloon over the Sonoran Desert. We drove far out of town as the sun was rising and met our handsome pilot from **Hot Air Balloon Expeditions**. Despite the warning to watch out for rattlesnakes as we waited for the balloon to inflate, the opportunity to float above the desert is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take in the land and fully appreciate the expansiveness of it spreading out in every direction.



When we came back down to Earth our pilot popped the cork on a bottle of champagne over a light breakfast, but before we knew it we were off on the next leg of our adventure: the **Musical Instrument Museum**. I ditched my friends and went exploring upstairs in the permanent exhibition of musical instruments from all over the world. I could have spent a week watching the videos and listening to the selections the curators chose to share in each of the galleries. An older gay couple caught me rocking out to some Ghana drumming and joined me in a spontaneous dance to the beat.



Sadly, I only made it halfway around the world by the time I had to go. I was on an arts and culture kick and heard amazing things about the [ASU Gammage](#) in nearby Tempe. Executive Director Colleen Jennings-Roggensack took me on an exciting tour of the 3,000-seat Frank Lloyd Wright designed facility (and let me prance onstage a bit). The Gammage is a daring force of nature in both the Arizona and national theater markets and a leading Broadway tour destination. Colleen spoke to me about pushing the envelope and helping to curate and share stories of diversity and queer theater to her community. We discussed the groundbreaking production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and her desire to work with daring artists like Anne Bogart and Bill T. Jones. I ventured out into Tempe that night, exploring local favorites Rula Bula Irish Pub and the popular Handlebar beer garden before heading back to the Biltmore for a decadent midnight soak in an outdoor hot tub. The next morning would mark my last full day in the Arizona sun and I knew I needed some rest.

I started off the day by heading back into the Sonoran Desert with an off-road Tomcar tour of Fort McDowell's 23,000 private acres with [Green Zebra Adventures](#). I'm a fairly new driver (I am a New Yorker, after all) and speeding through the desert in a brightly colored Zebra-themed ATV Tomcar was just about as thrilling as it gets.



After a long day of desert driving I headed back downtown and cleaned up before meeting openly gay Phoenix Councilman Tom Simplot at [Blue Hound Kitchen and Bar](#) at the Hotel Palomar. Tom arranged for my friends and I to join him for an epic night in his box across the street at the expansive US Airways center. The Palomar was bustling with queens and fabulous women decked out for Madonna's local stop on her MDNA tour, everyone sipping fruity cocktails while guessing whether Madge would sing "Express Yourself" or what "Gang Bang" would look like onstage. Seeing Madonna in a luxury box with a local openly gay politician was the cherry on top of a perfect adventure through Greater Phoenix.



When Madonna disappeared into the night I boarded a plane to head home. When I fumbled for my headphones, Madonna's "I'll Remember" was the first song to play. A huge smile came across my face as I gazed out the window and over the desert below. I fell in love with Phoenix and I will be back.

(Opening photo courtesy Greater Phoenix CVB; All other photos by Jeffrey James Keyes)

[Share](#)