

12SHORTGRASS.DOC

Our new Arizona travel book said "Sedona offers a love/hate reaction." Lodged there the first morning on a hotel group rate free from group hardships, the sunrise through a picture window lighted slashes cut into red rock cliffs eroded into spires unmatched in the Southwest to score a big one for love.

On a walk after breakfast in 40-degree mountain air, my lungs responded like a ferocious distemper strain some polo ponies brought to the old ranch from Colorado. One attack pitched my head back far enough for my travel hat to fall off and dangle on my back by the chinstrap. The next fit threw the hat back over my head for a blindfold bad enough to return and start over from the hotel.

The spasms hit too severe to gauge my love/hate emotional range. For sure, there wasn't any connection to be shared by other pedestrians. At street crossings, these smooth cheeks jogged in neutral to stay in motion and wait for the light to change while I panted on a bench in gasps and heaves dramatic enough to soundtrack a scene for the "Mad Strangler."

The first three days, my pal spent six hours in art workshop. While she was in class, I explored the town.

One prominent outfit offered trips to old movie sites and views from lookout peaks by brightly painted pink Jeeps. They drew plenty of business with six or eight passengers each packed in 30 vehicles or more to charter on a two-hour turnaround.

The pitch to visit the Indian ruins to sites on private property hit the right chord. The Chevelon Canyon experience had been on private lands the week before. Private property meant the privilege to look at petroglyphs in solitude without the sixth grade from, say, Outlandish, Arizona, or the freshman class from Turnover, Utah swarming all over the site in hiatuses serious enough to alter the dates on the cave walls.

The pink Jeeps stood out so much that the idea was hard to drop. Brochures posted out front of the office omitted prices. Alone, to add reality to my love and hate reactions, I studied menus in restaurant windows to convert refined gold ounces and cut diamond carats into Granny's meatloaf sandwiches and Pedro's onion soup.

At the opening to one side street, (an auxiliary to the Jeep tours) a big sign switched attention to the opportunity to go on a Wild-West adventure and ride with real cowboys. Twice two booted hombres walked around by the

sign and hunkered down to play the cowboy part and bait the tourists.

In a quick pass, I wondered whether those sidewalk waddies wore spurs with rubber rowels on their boot heels to keep from scarring hardwood dance floors. Thirty seconds, however, is enough for overexposure to the dude wrangling dodge if you tried half your life to make a cowhand and the next part, using pen and ink, to change the subject.

On the third lap by the Jeep service, I walked in to face to a row of eight agents seated behind computers. Times and the reservations were easy to understand. The cancellation policy was fair. The difficulty was justifying a two-hour tour at 82 bucks per ticket to ride in the back of a pink Jeep.

The clerk assured that the tour guides were trained anthropologists, that the sites were on private property limited in access. In a quick strike on the keyboard, he said, "I like to bring up the petroglyphs at any chance on my computer. There are humpbacked flute players, horned deer and scared masks in multitudes pecked into the blackened patina."

Sidewalk thrift turned into cave and rock art fever. Credit card mania mixed into fragments to tell my pal the

tour was going to be at 9 a.m. when the light is best on the walls to see humpback flute players' images dating back into time.

The prospect hit such a high that the \$16 price tag on a club sandwich for lunch seemed as reasonable as the merchant's lunch at the Depot Café in San Angelo. Right about then, a little tinge crept back of an all-day Jeep ride sitting on a feed sack-padded bucket off into pastures close to Pietown, New Mexico.

Sixteen-dollar clubs don't go far in Sedona. Small amounts of nourishment can be sucked off the toothpicks if you watch for splinters. Backtracking to "the pink Jeep" took five minutes. Add on 10 to stand in line to cancel our reservations and 30 minutes to walk back to the hotel.

The 30 minutes gave me time to rehearse a story to tell my pal. Condensed and edited, here's what I said: "Babe, guess the good news. By not going on a Jeep ride to the ruins, we saved one hundred and sixty-four dollars to spend exploring on our own!"