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Arcosanti: A 'City' Grows Green in the Arizona Desert

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Since Arcosanti is a working city, not a top-service resort, visitors are left to their own devices for amusement. The most obvious distractions are the hour-long tour (did that), the bakery (ate my treat) and the gallery (browsed the bells and even rang some). The cafe serves three meals a day and on occasion exhibits works by residents (coveted the coffee table made of a metal [Marlboro](#) sign). After that, it was up to me -- though I was taking suggestions.

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Guests keep their carbon footprints small at Arcosanti, an urban laboratory in Arizona best explored without a car. (By Chris Ohlinger)

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One came from Clifford Hersted, the resident anthropologist and best petroglyph spotter around. During his 15 years at Arcosanti, he has found hundreds of these artifacts scrawled on nearby rock faces and has identified stone walls built by prehistoric Indians around A.D. 1300.

We set off on foot on a hot Sunday morning, with Cliff dressed head to toe in desert hues. Our group included Colleen of Michigan, who made bells; Alessandro, an Italian photographer; and Peter, a Wisconsin chef who the previous night had allowed me to play sous-chef. (If you want to help out, just speak up; the residents are grateful for an extra hand.) Like ducklings in an ill-formed row, we followed Cliff, who carried a big stick to shoo rattlesnakes.

Cliff hypothesized that Indians once hunted pronghorn antelope here. Stacked boulders zigzagging up the mesa, he explained, were placed by the Sinagua to channel the animals into the "kill zone." (The antelopes can run as fast as 60 mph, but they don't jump.)

"It took a lot of labor to build these walls," he said. "It would take a lot of Arcosanti workshopers."

Earlier, Cliff had told us that it takes a while to train your eye to differentiate man-made constructions from natural ones. Even on alert, I completely missed the petroglyphs at my right elbow: figures of hunters with some meat on their bones, and antelopes that showed no fear of becoming dinner.

"I don't know if they charmed them or drugged them," he

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said. "But their tails are down, so they aren't stressed. This is real storytelling."

After our trek back, it was time to do what I had not done in two days: drive.

Before setting off for Phoenix, I attached a small Soleri bell to my rearview mirror. The bronze ornament chimed sweetly all the way back to the highway, but then started to swing dangerously toward my head. At that point, I had to take it down and tuck it away.

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