
The Telegraph

Hiking Northern Arizona

By Peggy Newland - Columnist | Jan 12, 2026



Part of the Schnebly Hill Formation in Sedona, Ariz. Courtesy photo/BRIAN GOETZ

I'm looking for elusive light along the canyons and down the valleys in Northern Arizona during early winter, and the rewards are everywhere. The sun, low in the sky, slants its rays over shale and sandstone, as dark storm clouds add shaded dimension to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. This is a beauty zone of traveling off-season out west: no crowds, no bus tours, empty trails, National Park lodging, and buttes that rise over cliffs, offering views down to undulating red rock canyons. The solo echo of a raven calls out as the sun sets shadows on fire.

Walking back in twilight to the Maswik Lodge, I spy some mule deer munching on ponderosa pine near my room. They stare over at me, nonplussed. The wind picks up, but the stars come out in Dark Sky country, so I sit at the lit firepit in an Adirondack chair and look upward at constellations and heavy sets of stars.

Northern Arizona is filled with Dark Sky Communities focused on bringing stars and peaceful darkness to landscapes, cities, and protected places. Without light pollution, a person can feel part of the galaxy. It does the heart good to slow down and look up.

That night, my husband, Brian, and I hike, with head lamps on, over to Harvey House Cafe in the Bright Angel Lodge. We dine on ribs, baked potatoes, and baked beans, with pie for dessert. Log columns and colorful mosaics decorate booths and in the colorful lobby, there are tons of photos of adventurers hiking and exploring this vast canyon world, with many from the early 1930s. My mother, June, came to the Grand Canyon in 1956 and got a job as a chamber maid in various lodges here on her way across the country, riding a three-speed bicycle from New York City to California. Although her photo is not on the wall of Bright Angel Lodge, her spirit is in the landscape surrounding me.

The second day, we hike on Bright Angel Trail and bring tons of water and snacks. On our own for much of the time, we follow the edge of an inner canyon, ducking through rock tunnels, twisting past sculptural pinion pine and juniper. Each switchback offers views of rock layers, multi-colored sandstone and limestone showing off geological history of ancient seas, deserts, coastal plains.



A section of the 13-mile Rim Trail. Telegraph photo by PEGGY NEWLAND

“How many dinosaurs roamed around here?” I wonder as we hike deeper down into the tight crevices under the cliff lines. The various strata seem alive with stories, tilting up at us, vertically folding over us. The sound of water dripping down ledges and canyon breeze through arched pine adds a natural symphony.

We hike down four miles and find the “best picnic spot ever” above the Havasupai Gardens. Views to the North Rim, down to a lush green plateau, and river below, and with walls of rock surrounding us, this is magical land covered in beams of light.

And then we have to hike back up.

We take our time, resting against the ledges and slabs, staying well hydrated on our almost private trail up the climbing paths inside the Grand Canyon. Canyon wrens serenade us, and the zip of pinion blue jay entertains as we hoof it up, mule-like, to the rim a couple of hours later.

We treat ourselves to dinner that night at El Tovar. A classically elegant lodge on the edge of canyon, this is the dining room you want to be at for sunset. We get a window seat, and barely remember to eat. Built with native stone and pine, with soaring windows, and multi-level fireplace nooks, we spend time gazing outside as the canyon fills and empties of light and the table fills with courses of beet root tartare, crispy fried pork belly with cherry chipotle BBQ sauce, steelhead trout with citrus agave glaze, blue corn, and cactus caviar, and elk cutlets in blackberry demi sauce. We split a gigantic chocolate chip skillet cookie with salted caramel for dessert.



The Grand Canyon as seen from the Bright Angel Trail. Courtesy photo/BRIAN GOETZ

Leaving early the next morning allows us to take our time on the road to Flagstaff. We stop at the Cameron Trading Post to peruse turquoise, Native American fine art, Apache baskets, Navajo pottery, woven rugs. We try some Navajo tacos and love the fry bread topped with spiced ground beef, beans and green chile. Then we explore the rock walls of 800-year-old Pueblos at the Wupatki National Monument before a downpour sends us running.

Torrential rain greets us in Flagstaff but we are warmed and laughing at Americana Motor Hotel, a funkster/disco themed motel that offers cocktails at check-in, disco balls in bedrooms, and is quirky in the best sense. After dancing to a couple of 1960s songs in our disco room, we dine at Fat Olives for wood fired pizza and beer.

Flagstaff is the world's first international Dark Sky city. Although that night, we could sit in lawn chairs listening to more classic 1960s rock by the pool, we choose to visit the Lowell Observatory for nighttime celestial viewing with long range telescopes. Amazing science museum as well, explaining the cosmos, discoveries of planets like Pluto in 1938, and the history of lunar exploration. We luck out with a break in storms, and the sky is open with stars.

After a quick breakfast at The Toasted Owl in historic Flagstaff, we drive in more rain but find rainbows on a damp hike in Oak Creek Canyon. Red Rock Secret Mountain Wilderness in Coconino National Forest is a gem of river crossings and canyon walled outcroppings. Makeshift waterfalls rush down ledges and add echoes to the canyons. It is like finding a secret trail in the rain.

Entering Sedona is like coming upon cathedral after cathedral of red rock. Islands of diamond/dazzled rock lit up by sun on rain covered slabs is a wonderland. We pull over near Schnebley Hill Vista Overlook just stare at the beauty in all directions. We will be here for three days of hiking and have a full agenda for boots on trails daily, but first we have to check in to Mountain Modern Sedona. Our room has a gas fireplace, garden patio, and is an elevated basecamp for soaked hikers ready for a good meal.

We find Tortas de Fuego for authentic Mexican food and a very comfortable, local vibe. The salsa is spicy, the burritos are huge, and margaritas are excellent.

The next three days are intermittently rainy and sunny, and it's an ideal situation for coming upon more secret waterfalls, diamond covered red rock slick with fresh storm water, and most especially, no crowds. We hike without abandon and find perpetual parking in a landscape known for crowding, traffic, and parking issues. It's a nirvana time to visit in the early winter. Courthouse Butte, Lower Chimney Rock, Bell Rock, Pyramid Trail, Airport Mesa, Teacup Trail, Devil's Bridge, Fay Canyon—we zip and weave on trails between storms and are rewarded with rushing streams, rainbows on sandstone, diamonds on buttes, mudstones glistening in shine, sinkholes filling and becoming reflecting pools. Pinion pine and desert lavender, sweet and spicy brittlebush and mesquite, resinous creosote scent our hikes each day. We sleep like children at night. Packing daily snacks and water for hiking, we also discover some unique spots for breakfast and lunch like Mesa Grill by Airport Mesa, the Coffee Pot for classic breakfast, the Den at Mountain Modern for early bites, Wildcraft Kitchen for healthy pick-me-ups, and dinner extraordinaire at 89 Agave in Uptown. The prickly cactus margarita at 89 Agave begs you to order another.

Because this is Sedona, I had to come for a bit of spirituality. I went to a Sound Healing at Down Dog Sedona and basically fell asleep to vibrations of sound bowls and tried sunrise yoga (but got chased inside by a morning storm) with Aumbase Sedona. Sedona is one of those places that imprints itself on your memory. A landscape I need to return to as I feel I barely hit the surface for adventures, natural wellness. My only spa experience was mindfulness in the mountains daily, being soaked by passing storms, and perhaps that is exactly what mindfulness needs to be. A perfect moment of place.

Go to Northern Arizona in the early winter or late fall and find all that's golden and calm in the deserts. The light there lingers.

Maswik Lodge – www.grandcanyonlodges.com. 928-638-2631. 202 Village Loop Drive. South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, AZ. Comfortable rooms close to all hiking and dining areas.

Americana Motor Hotel – www.americanamotorhotel.com. 928-833-3060. 2650 Route 66. Flagstaff, AZ. Retro/funkster zone lodging right on Route 66 and close to Flagstaff downtown. Outdoor heated pool and lawn games.

Mountain Modern Resort Sedona – www.mountainmodernsedona.com. 928-282-1414. 95 Arroyo Pinon Drive, Sedona, AZ. Modern basecamp for all things Sedona. Suites and studios come with gas fireplaces and garden patios.