TRVLGUIDE

12 Weekends

The trvlguide lead magnet. One drive-to Southwest trip for every month of the year, with the right weekend circled. This is issue zero of the Weekend Window: a preview of what the trvlguide letter does every Sunday, one trip that is perfect right now, with the drive time, the real cost, and the best weekend to go.

THE WEEKEND WINDOW · ISSUE ZERO

First, what this is

Every week, the trvlguide letter picks one drive-to adventure in Arizona and the Southwest and tells you why this weekend, not some weekend, is the one for it. Light changes. Seasons open and close. A canyon that is miserable in July is perfect in April, and a rim that is empty in November shuts its gates on the 30th.

This calendar is that idea, twelve months at a glance. One trip per month, the best weekend circled, the drive timed from Phoenix, and an honest ballpark of what two people will actually spend. Keep it on your fridge. When a month rolls around, you will already know where you are going.

All drive times are from Phoenix. Costs are ballparks for two people: gas, passes, food, and one night in a mid-range room where a night makes sense. Prices move; the shapes of these weekends do not.

JANUARY

Scottsdale, auction week

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the middle weekend of Barrett-Jackson, mid-to-late January.	30 to 45 minutes, across the Valley.	about $120, with auction tickets, parking, and a good lunch.

January is when Scottsdale shows off. Barrett-Jackson takes over WestWorld with a week of collector cars, and the whole city runs on winter sun: 65 degrees, patio lunches, the McDowell Mountains lit pink at 5:30. Go on the middle weekend, when the auction floor is at full roar but the championship Saturday crowds have not peaked yet.

> **Insider detail:** general admission gets you everything except the bidder seats. Arrive before 10 a.m., walk the outdoor lots first while the light is good, and watch the prime-time cars cross the block after dark, when the tent is loudest.

On the site: Arizona in January, and the Scottsdale spring training guide for what comes next.

FEBRUARY

Tucson, the Gem Show and the saguaros

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the first or second weekend of February, mid-run of the Gem, Mineral and Fossil Showcase.	1 hour 45 minutes down I-10.	about $260 with one night in Tucson.

For about two weeks, Tucson becomes the rock capital of the world. Dozens of gem and mineral shows fill hotels, tents, and warehouses across the city, most of them free to wander. Pair one morning of treasure hunting with an afternoon in Saguaro National Park, where the giant cacti stand in long evening light and the desert is at its greenest.

> **Insider detail:** the big main event at the convention center charges admission, but the hotel shows along the I-10 corridor are free, and that is where the dealers with the wildest tables set up. Park once at a park-and-ride and shuttle between them.

On the site: Things to Do in Tucson, and the Tucson and Saguaro weekend guide.

MARCH

Phoenix, spring training and wildflowers

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the middle weekend of March, when the Cactus League is in full swing and the desert blooms.	20 to 45 minutes, depending on the ballpark.	about $90, lawn tickets, parking, and ballpark food included.

March is the month Phoenix was invented for. Ten ballparks sit within an hour of each other, the most compact spring training setup in baseball, and the same weeks bring the wildflower bloom to the desert preserves: brittlebush gold on the hillsides, Mexican poppies along the trails at the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and South Mountain. Morning hike, afternoon game, dinner on a patio. That is the whole itinerary, and it is enough.

> **Insider detail:** lawn seats are the best value in Arizona sports, often under $20, and the outfield grass at Salt River Fields and Camelback Ranch is where locals actually sit. Buy the cheap seat, bring a blanket, and spend the savings on the good seats' food.

On the site: the Scottsdale spring training guide, and Things to Do in Phoenix in March.

APRIL

Sedona, the perfect month

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
any weekend in the middle two weeks of April.	2 hours up I-17.	about $110 for the day trip, gas, a $5 Red Rock Pass, and lunch out. About $300 if you add a night.

April is Sedona's perfect month, and it is not close. The trails are dry, the creeks run full, the cottonwoods along Oak Creek are new green, and the summer heat and monsoon storms are both still months away. Hike early, hide from the midday sun somewhere shaded, and be somewhere high when the light goes red. Sedona runs on two appointments a day: sunrise and sunset.

> **Insider detail:** on shuttle days (Thursday through Sunday), the Cathedral Rock and Soldier Pass trailhead lots are closed to cars. Do not drive there and hope. Ride the free shuttle and let the parking problem be somebody else's.

On the site: 12 Hours in Sedona, the Sedona weekend guide, and the best hikes in Sedona.

MAY

Grand Canyon South Rim, before the world arrives

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the weekend before Memorial Day.	3 hours 30 minutes.	about $290 with one night in Tusayan or in the park, and the $35 vehicle pass.

May is the South Rim's sweet spot. The trails below the rim are warm but not yet dangerous, the days are long, and the summer crowds are still a month away. Walk the Rim Trail at dawn, ride the free shuttle out to Hermits Rest, and hike a mile down Bright Angel or South Kaibab just to feel the canyon change from scenery into a place.

> **Insider detail:** the weekend before Memorial Day gets you May weather without holiday traffic. And the sunrise crowd at Mather Point thins to almost nobody if you walk five minutes east or west along the rim. Same sunrise, no elbows.

On the site: the Grand Canyon South Rim first-timers guide, and Grand Canyon in one day.

JUNE

Flagstaff, the 30-degree escape

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
any June weekend. Pick the one when Phoenix first crosses 110.	2 hours up I-17.	about $200 with one night downtown.

When the Valley bakes, Flagstaff sits at 7,000 feet in the ponderosa pines, about 30 degrees cooler, smelling like rain that has not fallen yet. Days are for the trails under the San Francisco Peaks and the Lowell Observatory telescopes after dark, in the town that became the world's first International Dark Sky City.

> **Insider detail:** downtown Flagstaff on a Friday night in June is one of Arizona's best small-town scenes: galleries open late, every patio full, and nobody checking the temperature because it is 68. Book the room within walking distance and skip the car entirely after dinner.

On the site: the Flagstaff guide, and Things to Do in Flagstaff.

JULY

Route 66, Williams and Seligman

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the middle weekend of July, when monsoon clouds build over the high desert in the afternoons.	about 2 hours 45 minutes to Williams.	about $240 with one night in Williams.

The Route 66 towns sit high, so July works here when the low desert does not. Base in Williams, the last Route 66 town bypassed by I-40: drive through Bearizona in the morning, walk the neon main street at dusk, then take the old road west to Seligman, where the route's revival started, for barbershop stories and pie. Afternoon thunderheads over the plateau are part of the show.

> **Insider detail:** the stretch of original Route 66 between Seligman and Kingman is the real thing, two lanes, Burma-Shave style signs, almost no traffic. Drive it in the morning before the tour buses wake up, and stop at the Hackberry General Store.

On the site: the Route 66 Arizona guide.

AUGUST

Sedona after dark, the Perseids

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the weekend closest to August 12 or 13, the peak of the Perseid meteor shower, and as close to the new moon as the calendar allows.	2 hours.	about $70 for the evening trip, gas, the $12 vehicle fee at Crescent Moon Ranch, and a picnic dinner. Add a night if you do not like the late drive home.

Sedona is a designated Dark Sky Community, and August is its best night month: warm, mostly clear, and the Perseids raining over the red rocks. Spend the hot afternoon in Oak Creek, eat as the light drops, then settle in at Red Rock Crossing, where Cathedral Rock stands over the creek and the Milky Way rises behind it.

> **Insider detail:** give your eyes a full 20 minutes with no phone screen. Most people quit at five and never see the sky actually turn on. The meteors are the headline, but the Milky Way reflected in Oak Creek is the thing you will describe later.

On the site: the Arizona dark skies guide, and the Sedona photography guide.

SEPTEMBER

Page, Antelope Canyon in beam season

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
a mid-to-late September weekend, after the summer crowds thin.	4 hours 30 minutes.	about $330 with two tour tickets and one night in Page.

Antelope Canyon is guided-only, Navajo-led, and there is no walking in on your own; that is the first thing to know. The second is that September is the smart month: the light beams in Upper Antelope still reach the canyon floor around midday, the worst heat and the summer tour crush are gone, and Horseshoe Bend at sunrise is almost civilized.

> **Insider detail:** book the midday tour for the beams in Upper, or the first tour of the day in Lower Antelope for softer light and smaller groups. Either way, book ahead; walk-up spots are a rumor. And see Horseshoe Bend at sunrise, not sunset, for the same view with a tenth of the crowd.

On the site: the Antelope Canyon and Horseshoe Bend guide, and the Antelope photography tips.

OCTOBER

Flagstaff, aspen gold on the Peaks

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the middle weekend of October, most years, when the aspen groves on the San Francisco Peaks peak.	2 hours.	about $180 for the day, gas, scenic gondola tickets, and lunch in town.

Arizona's best fall color is not a rumor; it is a mountainside. The aspens around Arizona Snowbowl and along the Hart Prairie road turn all at once, gold against the dark pines, usually in the middle two weeks of October. Ride the scenic gondola to 11,500 feet in the morning, walk the Aspen Corner groves after lunch, and be back in Phoenix by dinner, or stay and make it a night.

> **Insider detail:** the famous Aspen Corner parking fills by 10 a.m. on peak weekends. Go at 8, or flip the day: gondola in the afternoon light, aspens first thing. And the peak weekend moves by a week or more each year, which is exactly the kind of thing the letter watches for you.

On the site: Things to Do in Flagstaff, and Sedona versus Flagstaff if you are choosing.

NOVEMBER

Grand Canyon North Rim, last call

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the last full weekend before November 30, when the North Rim closes for winter.	about 5 hours 30 minutes, up through Marble Canyon to Jacob Lake.	about $320 with one night in Marble Canyon or at Jacob Lake, and the $35 vehicle pass.

The North Rim is the Grand Canyon's quiet side: a tenth of the visitors, a thousand feet higher, meadows and bison on the drive in. Services run limited after the Dragon Bravo Fire, and the whole rim closes on November 30 until spring. November is the last call, and the rim in late fall, cold bright air, long light, almost nobody there, is the version locals keep for themselves.

> **Insider detail:** check the park's status page the week you go, because the first big snow can close the road early, and fill up on gas at Marble Canyon or Jacob Lake. There is no fuel on the rim itself in the late season, and the nearest help is an hour behind you.

On the site: the Grand Canyon North Rim guide, kept current on the season status.

DECEMBER

Phoenix, the Christmas lights circuit

THE BEST WEEKEND	DRIVE TIME	THE COST FOR TWO
the second weekend of December, when every display is open and the calendar still has room.	across town. The farthest stop is 45 minutes.	about $85, one ticketed night plus dinner out. The rest of the circuit is free to drive.

Phoenix does Christmas in 70 degrees, and December is a whole season here: Las Noches de las Luminarias at the Desert Botanical Garden, thousands of hand-lit candles along the desert trails; ZooLights at the Phoenix Zoo; Christmas at the Princess in Scottsdale; Christmas at Schnepf Farms out in Queen Creek. Pick one ticketed night a weekend and drive the neighborhood displays between them.

> **Insider detail:** Luminarias sells out, every year, and the early December weekends go first. Book that one before anything else, including the hotel if relatives are coming. ZooLights on a Monday or Tuesday is the same five million lights with room to walk.

On the site: the best Christmas lights in Phoenix guide, updated each season.

What happens next

This calendar is the shape of the year. The letter is the shape of the week.

Every Sunday, the Weekend Window lands in your inbox: the one trip from this calendar, or one like it, that is perfect right now, with the drive time, the real cost, and the best weekend to go. Five minutes, free, written by a person who drives these roads with his family and takes the photos himself.

You don't have to have it all figured out, you just have to get started at chasing your dream life.

See you Sunday,

Matt