trvlguide

THE SEDONA PLAN

One perfect day in Sedona, timed to the light, plus the second day if you've got it. Print it, fold it into your pocket, and go.



Cathedral Rock at last light, the view this whole day is timed around.

9 STOPS
7:00 A.M. – 9:30 P.M.

1 RULE
FOLLOW THE LIGHT

~$17–25
PASSES & PARKING, PER CAR

2 DAYS
THE SWEET SPOT

START HERE

PICTURE IT FIRST

It's 7 a.m. and you're standing on a saddle of red rock between two stone spires, coffee still warm in your hand, the whole Verde Valley spread out below in blue shadow, and there's nobody else up here. By sunset you'll be watching those same rocks go ember-orange. By dark, the Milky Way will be standing over the creek you hiked past at dawn.

None of it requires a tour, a ticket lottery, or a small fortune. It just requires a sequence. This is the sequence.

THE ONE RULE

Sedona runs on two appointments a day: sunrise and sunset, when the sandstone does the thing that brought everyone here. A good Sedona day isn't a list of places, it's a sequence. Hike early, hide from the midday sun somewhere cool and shaded, and be standing somewhere high when the light goes red. Keep the order and the day works.

7:00 CATHEDRAL ROCK
9:00 BREAKFAST
10:30 THE CHAPEL
12:30 LUNCH
2:00 TLAQUEPAQUE
4:00 OAK CREEK COFFEE
6:00 SUNSET, AIRPORT MESA
7:30 DINNER
9:30 STARGAZING

WHEN TO GO

Spring (March–May) and fall (September–November) are the sweet seasons: warm days, cool mornings, the full trail menu. They're also the busiest; book lodging and dinner early.

Summer is monsoon season: hike at dawn, swim at midday, and expect a dramatic afternoon thunderstorm some days. Temperatures regularly pass 100°F. Check the forecast before you go.

Winter is the quiet season, cold mornings (often near freezing at dawn), empty trails, and light photographers love. Layers are the whole trick.

THE DAY, HOUR BY HOUR: MORNING

HIKE EARLY, WHILE THE LOT IS A RUMOR



The Cathedral Rock saddle, a natural balcony between the spires. Earn it before breakfast.

7:00 AM

CATHEDRAL ROCK*: Back O' Beyond Road*

The cathedral at opening time. The trail is short, about a mile and a half round trip, but honest: the upper section is a scramble where hands are not optional. What you earn is the saddle, a natural balcony between the spires with the whole Verde Valley below. Go now, while the lot is a rumor and the famous photo ledge has no queue. Carry more water than a short hike deserves.

9:00 AM

BREAKFAST AT COFFEE POT RESTAURANT*: West Sedona*

A West Sedona institution named for the Coffee Pot Rock it sits beneath, famous for its omelette selection. Order big; lunch is hours away. Refill the coffee and watch the light climb the red wall outside.

10:30 AM

CHAPEL OF THE HOLY CROSS*: Chapel Road, off SR 179*

Sedona's most quietly astonishing building, completed in 1956 and rising straight out of a red rock spur. Entry is free; come before the midday tour groups, when the interior is at its most still.

12:30 PM

LUNCH AT THE HUDSON*: Hillside Sedona, off SR 89A*

A polished, unpretentious American kitchen with a patio pointed at the rocks. Linger on purpose. The heat peaks while you eat, the trailheads empty out, and your afternoon is still entirely ahead.

THE DAY, HOUR BY HOUR: AFTERNOON & EVENING

HIDE AT NOON. BE HIGH AT SUNSET.

2:00 PM

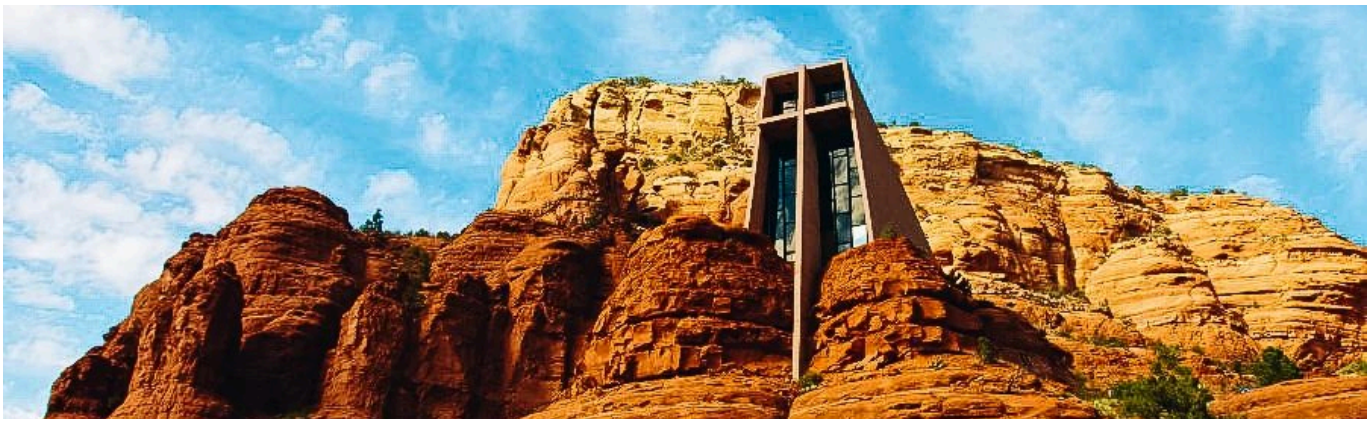
TLAQUEPAQUE ARTS & SHOPPING VILLAGE*: SR 179, by Oak Creek*

The bright hours belong in the shade: a Spanish-style village of galleries and courtyards under the sycamores. Native American jewelry, glass, bronze, and at least one painting you'll wish you could afford.

4:00 PM

COFFEE AT INDIAN GARDENS CAFÉ & MARKET*: Oak Creek Canyon, SR 89A*

Drive north as the road slips into the canyon and the temperature drops. Espresso on a garden patio under the cliffs, a breather in the day. The drive back into town, formations lit ahead of you, is one of the great short drives in Arizona.



The Chapel of the Holy Cross (1956), go before the midday tour groups, when the interior is at its most still.

6:00 PM

SUNSET AT AIRPORT MESA*: Airport Road, West Sedona*

The best seat for sunset: Coffee Pot Rock, Chimney Rock, and the long red escarpment going ember-orange while the valley falls into blue shadow. Arrive at least 45 minutes before sunset. The small lot fills. Bring a layer, and stay 20 minutes past sunset for the afterglow.

7:30 PM

DINNER AT ELOTE CAFÉ*: Arabella Hotel, SR 179*

A hard table to get in Sedona, Mexican flavors through a Southwestern lens, starting with the namesake fire-roasted elote. Book ahead; in season, everyone in town has the same idea.

9:30 PM

STARGAZING AT RED ROCK CROSSING*: Crescent Moon Ranch*

Sedona is an International Dark Sky Community, and on a clear, moonless night the Milky Way stands over Cathedral Rock, reflected in Oak Creek, the same silhouette you climbed at dawn, in completely different light. Give your eyes 20 minutes to adjust.

GOT MORE TIME?

IF YOU HAVE A SECOND DAY

One day works. Two days is the sweet spot: here's the shape of day two:

- **Sunrise, part two:** Doe Mountain, on the west side, a short climb to a flat mesa top where the whole valley lights up in the other direction. Easier than Cathedral Rock, nearly as grand.
- **Morning:** the West Fork of Oak Creek Canyon, a canyon walk many people call the prettiest in Arizona, all shade, creek crossings, and canyon walls. It charges its own trailhead fee (not covered by the Red Rock Pass) and the lot fills early on weekends; go on a weekday if you can.
- **Midday:** the Verde Valley loop, the Page Springs fish hatchery, the old-west storefronts of Old Town Cottonwood, and the lagoons of Dead Horse Ranch State Park. It's the valley floor Sedona floats above, and almost nobody on the red rocks ever sees it.
- **Late afternoon:** back in town for the galleries you skipped, then a second sunset, this time from Red Rock Crossing, with Cathedral Rock across the creek doing the reflecting.
- **In summer, swap the midday** for Slide Rock State Park: a natural rock waterslide in Oak Creek, and the most fun you can have escaping the heat. Vehicle entry is $30 (May–September) or $20 (October–April), and it is *not* covered by the Red Rock Pass.



Tlaquepaque, where the bright hours belong: shade, courtyards, and galleries.

THE BUDGET VERSION OF THIS EXACT DAY

The day above is already cheaper than it looks. Strip it down and it barely costs anything:

- Cathedral Rock at dawn: a $5 Red Rock Pass (or free on the shuttle).
- The Chapel: free.
- Breakfast and lunch: picnic instead, groceries in West Sedona, eaten at Red Rock Crossing ($12/vehicle) with Cathedral Rock across the water.
- Tlaquepaque: free to wander; the art is only expensive if you fall in love.
- Sunset at Airport Mesa: free. Stargazing: free, and Sedona's dark-sky status means it's some of the best in the country.

Total damage for the core day: about $17–25 in passes and parking for a carload, plus food. The expensive version of Sedona exists, but the simple version, the rocks, the light, the creek, the stars, is nearly free. The best seat in Sedona was never the pricey one.

READ THIS BEFORE YOU GO

PARKING & PASSES DECIDE THE DAY

WHERE TO PARK

- **The free Sedona Shuttle** runs Thursday–Sunday, roughly 7:00 a.m.–5:30 p.m., to the busiest trailheads. On shuttle days, the **Cathedral Rock and Soldier Pass trailhead lots are closed to cars**. Don't drive there and hope. Park at a shuttle lot and ride.
- **The Chapel's** upper lot is tiny. Go before 10 a.m., or take the shuttle/cart from the lower lot. The short walk up is half the experience anyway.
- **Airport Mesa's** viewpoint lot fills well before sunset in season. Early is the whole strategy.
- **Red Rock Crossing / Crescent Moon** charges $12 per vehicle.

THE PASS RULES

- Most trailhead parking needs a **Red Rock Pass: $5/day, $15/week, $20/year** (an America the Beautiful pass also works).
- The Red Rock Pass does **not** cover Slide Rock State Park or Red Rock State Park (state vehicle fees: Slide Rock is $30/vehicle May–September, $20 October–April), or the West Fork trailhead, which charges its own fee.
- On shuttle days, the shuttle removes the parking question at the busiest trailheads entirely, the easiest option.
- Some sites (like the Palatki heritage site) are reservation-only through Recreation.gov; check before you build them into a day.

THE MISTAKES EVERYONE MAKES

1. **Driving to the Cathedral Rock lot on a shuttle day.** It's closed to cars Thursday–Sunday. Ride the shuttle; it's free and it drops you at the trailhead.
2. **Hiking at noon.** In Sedona the midday hours are for lunch patios, galleries, and creek shade. The locals aren't being lazy, they're waiting for the light, and you should too.
3. **Arriving at Airport Mesa at sunset.** The lot fills 45+ minutes ahead in season. The afterglow crowd is standing in a full lot because the smart crowd got there at golden hour.
4. **Trying to book Elote the day of.** In season it books out. Reserve dinner before you reserve anything else, even before the hotel, if you have to choose.
5. **Leaving the jeep tour to chance.** The famous pink-jeep tours book out two to three weeks ahead in spring and fall. If it's on your list, it's the first reservation you make.
6. **Under-packing water.** A mile and a half in desert sun is not a mile and a half anywhere else. One liter per person per hour on trail is the honest rule.

THE PRACTICAL KIT

PACK RIGHT, SLEEP RIGHT

WHAT TO PACK

- ☐ More water than feels reasonable, plus electrolytes in summer
- ☐ Shoes with real grip, the Cathedral Rock scramble is not a flip-flop errand
- ☐ A layer for sunrise and sunset, even in summer (desert evenings drop fast)
- ☐ Sunscreen and a hat you can hike in
- ☐ A headlamp or phone light for the walk back from stargazing
- ☐ A small tripod or just a patient hand, the afterglow is the photo
- ☐ The Red Rock Pass (or America the Beautiful pass) on the dash

WHERE TO STAY

Sleep in town and the whole day works on foot-and-short-drive logistics.

- **Uptown**: walking distance to dinner and the tour pickups.
- **West Sedona**: quieter, often better value, closest to the west-side trailheads (and to this plan's breakfast and sunset).
- **Village of Oak Creek**: wakes up at the foot of Bell Rock; closest to Red Rock Crossing.

Pick the base that matches your first and last stops. For this itinerary: West Sedona or Uptown.

WHERE TO EAT: THE SHORT LIST

- **Breakfast:** Coffee Pot Restaurant, West Sedona.
- **Lunch:** The Hudson, Hillside Sedona, patio, shade, no hurry.
- **Coffee:** Indian Gardens Café & Market, Oak Creek Canyon.
- **Dinner:** Elote Café, reserve it before you reserve anything else.

We don't print menu prices here. They change, and we'd rather send you to the view than to an outdated number. Expect standard Sedona sit-down prices at the lunch and dinner picks.

THE SOUNDTRACK

The Sound of Sedona: our Spotify playlist of desert Americana, worn-in folk, and long ambient stretches for the drive up Oak Creek Canyon. It's embedded in the full guide at trvlguide.com; play it loudest between stops.



9:30 p.m., the same silhouette you climbed at dawn, in completely different light.

KEEP GOING

WANT THE LONG VERSION?

This plan is the one-pager. The full story, every stop, the photos, and the weekend version, lives at trvlguide:

12 Hours in Sedona
https://trvlguide.com/12-hours-in-sedona

The 25 best things to do in Sedona, ranked
https://trvlguide.com/things-to-do-in-sedona

The best hikes in Sedona
https://trvlguide.com/best-hikes-in-sedona

Best time to visit Sedona
https://trvlguide.com/best-time-to-visit-sedona

ONE DAY WORKS.
TWO DAYS IS THE SWEET SPOT.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to get started at chasing your dream life. Here's your chance to adventure.

Every week, the trvlguide newsletter brings one trip like this to your inbox, a real place, fully planned, priced honestly, and written so you can picture yourself standing in it. That could be you. It starts with a plan like this one.

The Sedona Plan, a free guide from trvlguide. Prices, hours, shuttle schedules, and pass rules change; check the official sources before you go. Safe travels.