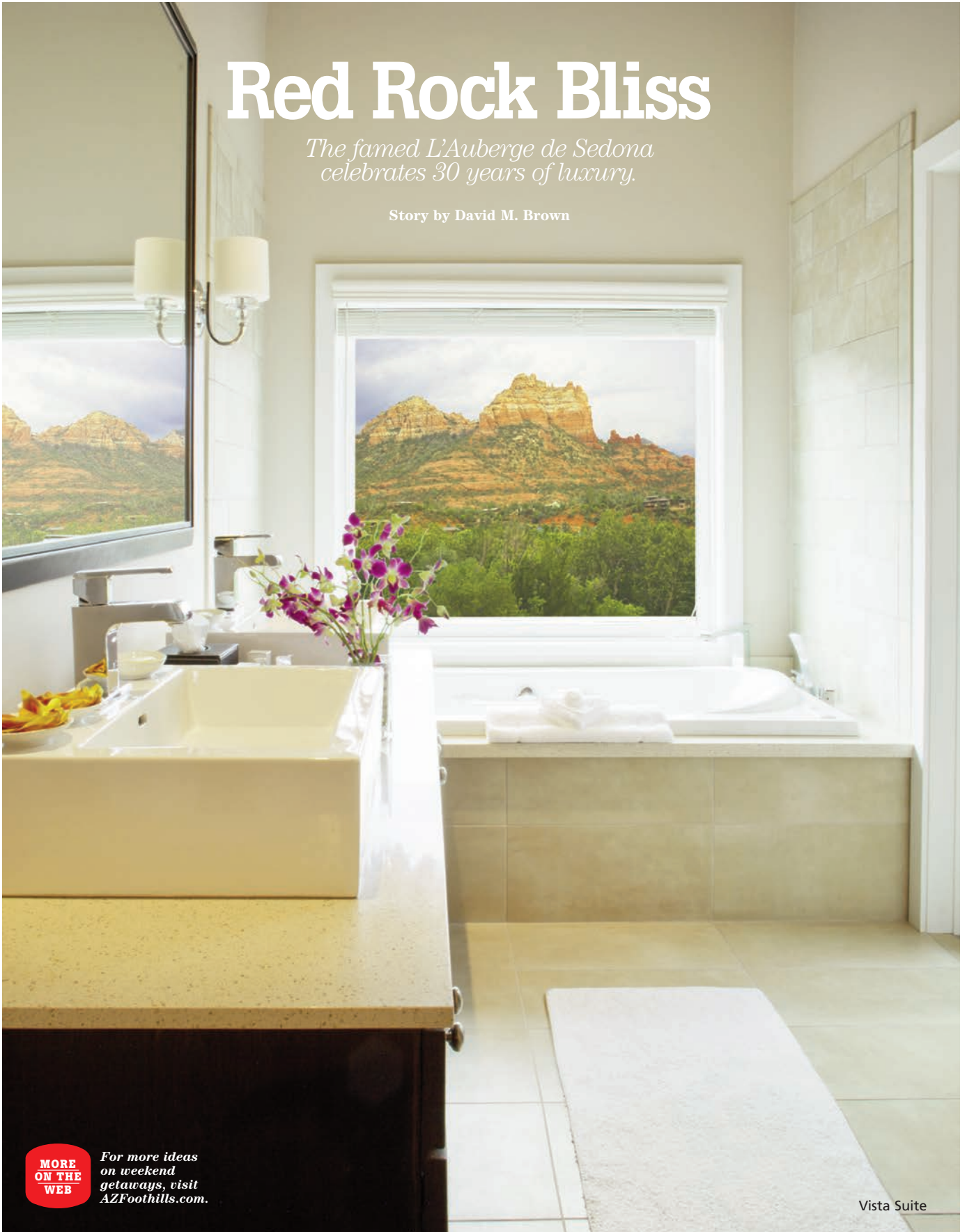


Red Rock Bliss

The famed L'Auberge de Sedona celebrates 30 years of luxury.

Story by David M. Brown



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Vista Suite

WHEN WE CHECKED IN at L'Auberge de Sedona, Beau Franklin, the guest services specialist who greeted us to the multi-award-winning inn, spa and AAA Four Diamond restaurant, mentioned on our welcome tour that just today he had seen his first bald eagle along Oak Creek and that if we were waterside by 8 in the morning, we could feed the ducks, mostly mallards, which swell the area in early winter with color, swimming and song. Blue herons also delight restaurant guests and like to visit the inn's koi ponds, he added.

The superb riparian resort celebrates its 30th anniversary this year in Oak Creek Canyon and the Coconino National Forest, beneath the world-famous red rocks and amidst Sedona's much-discussed spiritual, or energy, vortexes. L'Auberge de Sedona is an 11-acre getaway to get back to yourself. Breathe in the color, hear the babbling water, listen to the life in the leaves. Renew synesthetically here.

Recently called one of the "Most Beautiful Places in America" by Good Morning America, L'Auberge opened quietly in 1984 with a lodge, a few creekside cottages and the start-up restaurant—an upscale drive-up-from-the-Valley dining experience and stay-over rather than the world-famous destination resort it has become.

A picturesque two-hour drive from Phoenix and just off State Route 89-A on L'Auberge Lane, the luxury retreat includes 87 Lodge and Creek House rooms and Creekside, Gardenside and the new Vista and Spa cottages and suites. A \$25-million multi-phase renovation, "Project Elevation," completed in 2011, also added a creekside lobby, a creek-view Veranda Bar and a heated salt-water pool maintained at 84 degrees. An adjacent heated spa was also part of the project.

The original lodge also incorporates space for small-to-medium group events, and the campus offers outdoor expansive reception areas like waterside and hillside lawns for weddings, proposals,

anniversaries, re-vows and similar life-affirming events. "L'Auberge de Sedona is a romantic setting not found anywhere else in Arizona, offering exceptional service, rejuvenating spa treatments and unique dining experiences at our award-winning L'Auberge Restaurant on Oak Creek," says Jesse Alexander, the resort's general manager.

"Our dedicated staff takes the time to delight each guest, and passion is the main ingredient to all of our culinary offerings. We have provided the romantic setting among the Sedona's renowned Red Rock region for 30 years, and that ultimate luxury experience is what our guests come here for."

Views, Re-News, Star Food and Stars

Our room, one of the new Vista Cottages, adds dramatic verticality to a resort that established its reputation as a creekside lodge. Our king bed was

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plush, we had a gas fireplace in the lounge area and an open-roofed cedar shower beckoned us, although because of winter, we uncourageously declined, despite the opportunity to shower with the stars. Our cottage, finished quietly in cream, sage and camel neutrals, included a deep-soaking Jacuzzi tub, offering picture-window views of the rocks: bliss, indeed, in any season.

Elevated 100 feet or so above the creek floor and the central L'Auberge campus, our balcony looked toward the world-famous rocks and above the sycamores, cottonwoods, Arizona ashes and firs. The extraordinary views included landmarks like Thumb Butte & The Bench, Camel Head and everyone's favorite, Snoopy Rock, featuring Charles Schultz' supine canine, legs up and Woodstock propped playfully on his chin. Incidentally, dogs, as a pack, give the inn a paws up: We

met a variety, including a Golden Retriever and a French bulldog, both waggly enjoying their stays.

Throughout the day, light and cloud shadows etch changing views of the stone, whose anciently deposited iron imparts the signature vermilion pigment. Every minute is a new moment. This is spectacle, for sure, of the highest order, and, at L'Auberge, the amenities of a multi-award-winning resort are always available when breathless wonder gives way to the need for other pleasures.

For many guests, a customized massage is one of these well-earned indulgences, and the redesigned 5,000-sq.-ft. Spa at L'Auberge has a variety of pampering energy-based treatments, each infused with oils and other natural ingredients. Our masseuse for the stress-relieving body-centric Swedish massage, Renata Strzalka, was graciously receptive of our input and extremely effective, working, in particular, our lower backs and upper leg muscles.

Treatments in the spa's four rooms also focus on skin renewal, like the Organic Facial, with plant and marine extracts, spirulina and kombucha, and hydrating elements like goji berry, white and green teas and aloe. Specialized massages are available for couples, mothers-to-be and those guests wishing, for instance, to add stretching to a session. Just ask.

Based on weather conditions and property events, creekside cabana massages can also be scheduled, adding splashing creek waters to the tactile experience. Request, as well, treatments in your room or cottage.

Executive Chef Rochelle Daniel bases her seasonally changing breakfast, lunch and dinner selections on as many locally grown ingredients as possible.



L'Auberge de Sedona
www.lauberge.com



CREEKSIDE FEAST: "I ask my sources to send me whatever is in peak season and create dishes from what I receive that day," says Chef Rochelle Daniel.

For instance, one of the dinner entrées we shared was a superb Colorado lamb chop, with white bean purée, baby carrots and a preserved Meyer lemon gremolata. "I ask my sources to send me whatever is in peak season and create dishes from what I receive that day," says Daniel, a graduate of the Scottsdale Culinary Institute and a protégé of Chef Matt Carter, who established Zinc Bistro as one of the Valley's most innovative kitchens. "This allows me to be creative with the challenge all while using the best techniques and finesse and keeping the integrity of the ingredient," she adds. The restaurant also offers a Chefs Six-Course Tasting Menu and will customize menus with advanced consultation.

We preceded our meal with glasses of pinot noir from the Veranda Bar, enjoyed on the creekside patio by a soothing fire table and listening to the creekwater. There, waiting for our seating, we chatted with a Glendale couple who were planning their son's and future daughter-in-law's wedding for Labor Day weekend. They liked the intimacy of the waterside setting, its subdued appropriateness for beginning a life together.

After dinner, we wrapped ourselves up in warm jackets and sauntered up

to the rooftop parking deck to enjoy a guided astronomy session with local stargazer, Dennis Young. He packs up his customized telescopes into his truck, unloads them at L'Auberge and offers up to two hours of Carl Saganish wonder each night. At 4,500 feet, and with minimal artificial light, Sedona is an excellent viewing platform. He has taken many fine images here during the years, including a particularly dramatic one of the Comet Hale/Bopp flashing between moonlit rock monuments.

A combination of singles, couples and families with children looked as deep into the skies as 7,000 light years, noted the stars of Orion, saw several satellites and, a special galactic treat, viewed Jupiter and four of the moons. Don't forget this on your L'Auberge itinerary.

Onsite, guests can also enjoy the fitness center by the new pool; yoga classes; nature/fitness hikes and bird-watching along the creek; a Sedona geology and history lecture; wine classes led by the inn's sommelier; and photography tips from local experts. Off campus, you can take a fly fishing excursion; horseback ride or see a cattle on drive; visit a Hopi Indian village; or take a jeep tour or a helicopter or hot

air balloon ride.

L'Auberge: Picture of Perfection

Regarding photography, stop by the Sedona Motion Picture Museum, a few minutes from L'Auberge in uptown, amidst the many restaurants, art galleries and crafts shops you can leisurely visit.

Here, in what once was the town movie theater, you understand how popular the L'Auberge environs have been with movie-makers, as far back as "Riders of the Purple Sage" (1931) through classics like "Broken Arrow" (1951) and "Apache" (1954) to contemporary films and commercials. Elvis even stopped in for "Stay Away Joe" (1968), in which he played Navajo rodeo rider Joe Lightcloud, who returns to the reservation in a white Cadillac convertible he uses to drive cattle.

The gregarious museum manager, a former airlines flight attendant, told us how Sedona's Bob Bradshaw, who worked with many of the producers and directors on these films, applied for money from an area bank to start his photography business more than a 60 years ago, when the area specialized in apple orchards, not premium destinations such as L'Auberge de Sedona. "They declined the loan," she told us, with a picturesque smile and chuckle. "There's just no future for that sort of thing up here," they told him. ■

A BIG 3-OH! AT L'AUBERGE

For its 30th anniversary, L'Auberge de Sedona is celebrating with Love Series packages and L'Apothecary at the spa, explains Meghan Rudolph, the inn's event and e-marketing manager.

Debuting appropriately for Valentine's Day, the Love Series packages are based on couples' relationship levels: Maiden Voyage, Proposal, Honeymoon, Babymoon and Re-connect. Cozy up by wood-burning fireplaces; reconnect at an intimate brunch; enjoy off-property winery adventures; unwind with an outdoor massage; or relax together in an outdoor open-roof cedar shower.

The L'Apothecary at the spa is for guests and Sedona visitors to enjoy a cornucopia of healing botanicals and fragrant herbs and flowers.