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just back from



Arizona

Stuck on Scottsdale

Tim Chester, Senior Editor

● I had been warned about the jumping cholla. My guide, Phil, stopped early in our bike tour of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve in Scottsdale to point out this beautiful but diabolical cactus. Its spiky spines will stick to anything, he said. You need a comb to remove them, he added, peeling a sharp specimen from his own arm like it was no big deal. *I'm outdoorsy*, I thought. *I'll be fine.*

Sure enough, a couple miles down the winding trails, I stood on one. As Phil patiently

combed out the needles that had jabbed me through my sneakers, I realized how far we were from my home in Los Angeles.

Here, our only companions were the saguaro sentries and prickly pears waving their barbed hands as we passed. Phil, who works for Arizona Outback Adventures, introduced us to many of the desert's secrets. He pointed out things that hurt, like that cholla, which can kill small animals; and things that heal, too, such as the pungent leaves of a creosote

bush, which have better antimicrobial properties than aloe. We saw evidence of thousands of years of history: improbably balanced boulders; indentations in stones that marked the cooking bowls of civilizations long gone.

You can explore this landscape by foot, wheel, or hoof, but it takes only a few turns to lose sight of other humans. As we barreled down single-track paths, navigating rocks and stretches of sand, I avoided impaling myself on more cactus—but the desert had me hooked.