

SEDONA RED:

A Journey to Colors You Can't See

By Bryan Shelmon

Did you know that there are colors that exist in the world that you can't see? Join me as I embark on a road trip from Phoenix to Sedona to find the beauty of Sedona Red, and discover that sight is only one way to experience a destination.

"I bet you a can of Coca-Cola that Sedona Red becomes your favorite color!" My cousin sang out boastfully as he danced around his living room in Phoenix, clearly more excited than I was as I told him about my family's upcoming road trip, which was to begin in the morning. My cousin was born and raised in Phoenix, and accustomed to the red haze mirage cast across the Arizona desert all year round. I figured that Sedona Red would be just another one of the many new shades I'd seen since I touched down on this thirsty terrain.

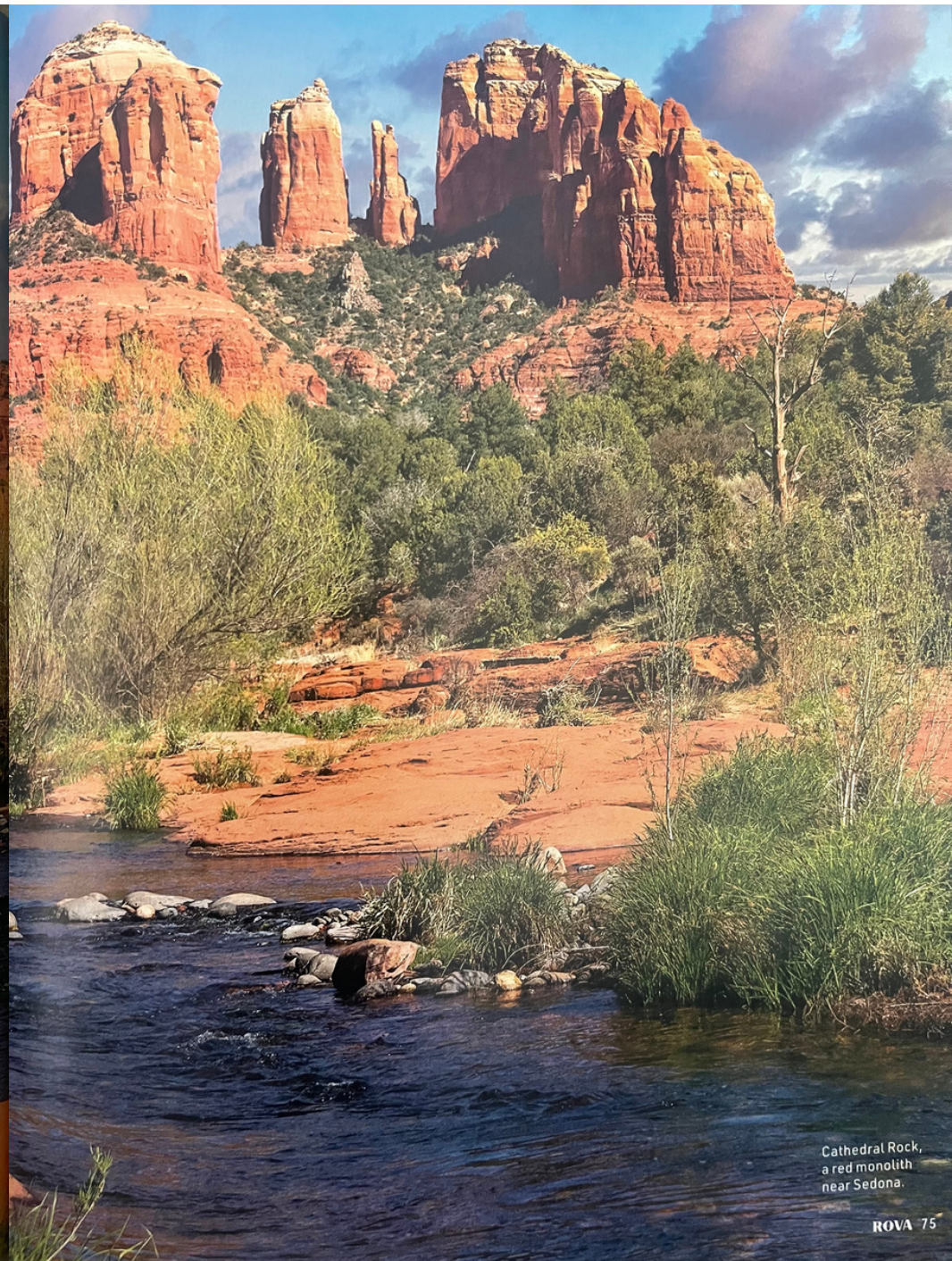
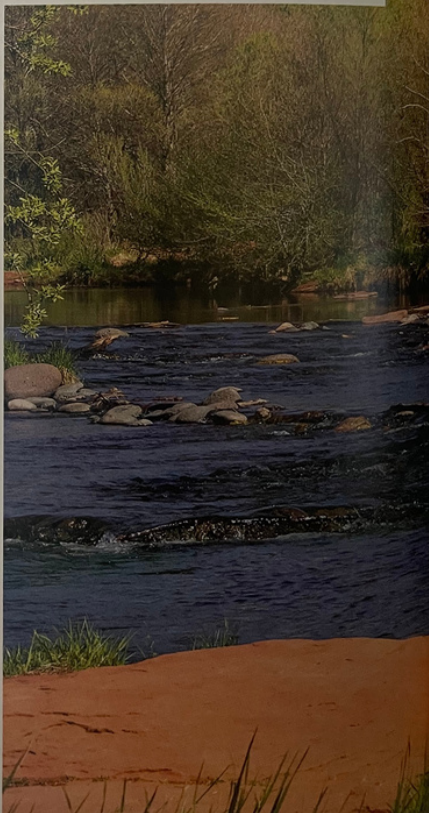
My preference was always green. My suburban Detroit upbringing was full of thick, grassy lawns, primped hedges between the neighbors' houses, and leaves that turned a different shade of this verdant color every season. So, to me, dethroning green for Sedona Red as my favorite color was like saying that these foreign desert lands were more beautiful than my hometown's lush, green spaces.

"Deal!" I cheerfully shook his hand in agreement to the bet. That

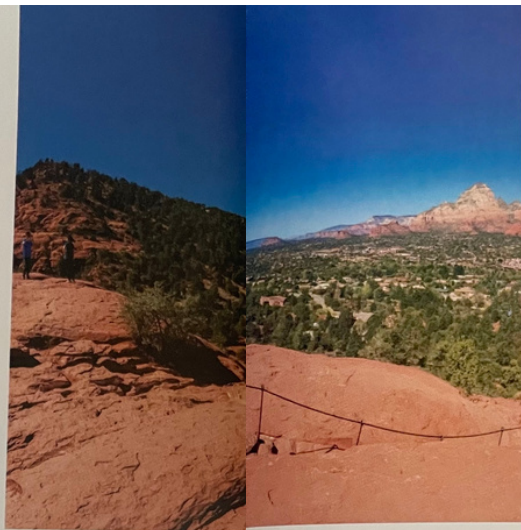
night, I plotted out my mission for the next day's road trip. First, I would find this color that I had never seen before, and then prove that green would forever be the superior color in the spectrum. I shut my eyes and dreamed of the first fizzy sip from the cold, refreshing Coke.

The sound of my hotel room door opening nearly knocked the taste right out of my mouth. It was 8 a.m., and I sat up, confused about how the sound of my dad entering the room had been more effective at waking me up than the two previous alarms I'd slept through. I'm known in my family for being the last-minute packer, so my clothes were still strewn around the room, evidence of my attempts to find the perfect explorer outfit the night before. I leaped out of bed with determination; today was the day to find this elusive color. I shoved my crumpled clothes into my bag and sat on it to get the zip shut, then raced out the door with seconds to spare for "roll call."

Nobody seemed dressed for the occasion. My dad was in his navy corduroy pants and leather business-casual shoes, which were



Cathedral Rock, a red monolith near Sedona.



more functional for the two-hour drive than for hiking we'd be doing once we arrived. My sister sat sleepily in the van beside me, dressed in athletic sweatpants and furry slip-ons to relax her feet from her gymnastics competition last night—the event that had brought us to the West Coast in the first place. The faint aroma of Gucci Black cologne mixed with Irish Spring coming from the passenger seat reminded me that my uncle was also squeezing into our rental van to embark on the road trip from Phoenix to Sedona.

My mom rounded out the five-person convoy. In my weary morning state, her crimson T-shirt appeared like a distant relative to Sedona Red. It wasn't too far off from the burgundy silhouette of Camelback Mountain, which we could see while pulling out onto Interstate 17 from our hotel parking lot. But it was just the start of the journey, so I had all day to find the true shade. I had no idea what was to come, but I knew that somewhere along the way, I'd find Sedona Red.

Urban streets quickly transformed into infinite roads, the buildings swapped out for rugged, amber-toned cliffs lining

the highway on either side. The morning sun's golden glow covered the barren landscape like a filter, coloring the multistory rock structures a beautiful shade of cinnabar red. I noticed rust-tinted gravel on the side of the highway while counting the endless painted lines speeding past my window. I gazed up to the vermilion-lined clouds that softened the intense desert sunlight every couple of minutes as they rolled by. But Sedona Red was nowhere to be found. Perhaps it was lurking somewhere in the mountaintops, waiting for me to ascend to the summit.

After a while, we slowed down, creeping into the shadow of something looming over our path. As if assuming that the green highway signs directing us towards 89A South were somehow incorrect, the voice of the sweet British lady on the GPS chimed in to advise us that the multilane highway was becoming a dauntingly narrow, two-lane strip winding around the approaching cliffsides that towered over Oak Creek Canyon.

"Slow down!" "You're too close to the edge!" "A truck is coming!" My nervous mom made my dad

just as nervous as he jerked his way around invisible oncoming traffic and bends in the road. Our road trip became a tiptoe creep winding along the cliffside followed by sporadic jolts of the accelerator.

In my own nervousness, induced by my mom's screams, I felt a moment of serenity as we rounded the last corner to Mogollon Rim. We were met with views overlooking Oak Creek Canyon, the cliffs displaying a beautiful gradient of chili red at the bottom to Indian at their tips as they rose above the lush, emerald green Coconino National Forest. I couldn't help but wonder which one of these natural masterpieces carved out over centuries was lucky enough to be painted with Sedona Red, but I didn't feel its presence. I realized that it must be on exhibit elsewhere in Sedona.

Two hours later, we were just outside of Sedona. My family stirred restlessly in the van, trying to regain composure after the pulse-racing drive around the cliffs. My constant "Are we there yet?" inquiries were finally answered as we pulled up to the trailhead of the Airport Mesa Trail.

"Can't we just drive to the top?" My suburban laziness has taught me how to strategically avoid anything too physically demanding. But if I was to finally see Sedona Red, undoubtedly the best chance was at the famous viewpoint that provides views overlooking Sedona itself. The moment the crisp, white soles of my new Nike high-top basketball sneakers hit the burnt orange gravel, and sweltering temperatures surpassing 90°F punished me for putting on a stiff new pair of Levi 501 selvedge denim jeans, I realized that I, too, was part of the crowd that was unprepared for the hike.

Step by step, we made it to the end of Airport Mesa Trail. We peered over the large, reddish-orange rock edge to views of giant, ribbed, ruby-colored sandstone cliffs towering over the larger-than-average city of Sedona below. A dry breeze kissed my sweat-drenched cheek, delivering fragrances of metal and dry soil.

My enjoyment of the view was dampened as I attempted to wipe the dust from my mouth, having panted halfway up the hike. I leaned against a nearby rock for a breather, and its dust lingered on

me. Despite the ochre cliffs, the copper-colored stains on my clothes and the unforgiving carmine-colored dust on my formerly white shoes, my hunt for a color supposedly more beautiful than any I had seen so far was not yet over.

After the hike, we finally trotted into Sedona like a group of adventurous cowboys, dusty from the Wild West trails. My sense of urgency kicked in as I realized that the trip was winding down, and I still hadn't seen Sedona Red. As we strolled around the Original Uptown Mall Plaza, I ducked into Sedona Wonder Gallery and Gifts, searching for local artwork that would finally reveal the elusive color—no luck. Next, we maneuvered through the Oak Creek Marketplace into shops like The Hangin Tree; I was hoping that I might find a souvenir T-shirt reading, "I've seen Sedona Red," but it didn't exist.

We loaded back into the car and started the return journey to Phoenix just as the sky erupted into hues of Persian red, setting the rocky cliffsides ablaze in a fiery red tone, which would soon be overtaken by the shadows of the night. My eyes drifted closed as I reminisced on our adventure, and

contemplated how I might have overlooked what I'd been searching for all day.

How did I miss Sedona Red? Throughout the road trip, I had taken mental note of all the brilliant hues of red pulsating throughout Sedona's famous red-rock landscape, but I had seemingly missed the most beautiful shade of them all. And suddenly, I realized that maybe what I was really looking for wasn't a color that you can see. Sedona Red is a sensation—something that I'd certainly felt all day in this desert oasis, immersed in the color and vibrancy of Sedona and its surrounds.

A smile formed across my face as I finally nodded off to sleep, wheels rumbling on the highway beneath me. It looked like I wouldn't get to enjoy that can of Coca-Cola after all... **R**

Bryan Shelmon is a travel writer from Detroit who has traveled across the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Southeast Asia. While traveling, he enjoys immersing himself in the local culture and creating art inspired by new destinations. Find him online at BryanShelmon.com.

Top left: Oak Creek Canyon's walls show red gradients between lush greenery.

Top middle: The red-rock peak of Airport Mesa.

Top right: A scarlet sunset over Sedona from Airport Mesa.