UFO UpDates Mailing List

Of Spirits And Wider Reality In Sedona

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Of spirits and wider reality in Arizona

By Leo W. Banks, Globe Correspondent, 02/07/99

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SEDONA, Ariz. - The UFO gift shop, Starport Sedona, is buzzing this morning. Over here is a conversation between two middle-aged women, each detailing her own tale of abduction by space aliens. Over there is a silver-haired fellow, apparently of considerable means, studying a wall map pinned with the latest UFO sightings.

Down on Main Street, leaflets posted everywhere tout come-ons from psychics, pyramid builders, angels, and a bearded fellow named Joa, who promises to read your soul for $1.25 a minute.

"We live in the land of the woo-woos," said Thom Stanley, editor of Sedona Excentric, a monthly publication that pokes fun at things New Age. "We started this newspaper because we'd go into restaurants and bars and everybody was talking about crystal crunchers. But nobody was writing about them."

Before 1989, Sedona could not have supported a publication like Stanley's. Then, the town was little more than a pretty village in central Arizona's red rock country, a gas and gift stop populated by well-off retirees and artists.

Now, it's a six-stoplight tourist mecca that attracts 4 million visitors a year, many drawn by a belief in the concept of a vortex, a place in the Earth said to emit healing energy. New Agers say that four such vortexes exist in the area, and that they make it easier for humans to communicate with spirits, to get in touch with dead relatives, or to find their own past lives.

But Sedona's crystal revolution hasn't been all insight and

inner peace. Some of those who have hung out spiritual shingles are on the distant fringe of reality. Robert Shapiro, who describes himself as a trance channeler, teaches expanded perception, and claims to have instructed a young woman how to become invisible so she could visit her lover in prison.

This summer, visitors might have attended a seminar by Gabriel of Sedona. If you can understand the topics covered, you probably did not need to attend. They included: planetary divine administration, complementary relationships among ascending sons and daughters, ascension science and inter-universal physics, and the repercussions of the Lucifer Rebellion. The seminar closed with a chat by the Bright and Morning Star of Salvington, head administrator of our universe.

Many locals are not enamored of the reputation Sedona has earned, and they see other down sides to Sedona's popularity.

"The only vortex I ever felt was all the money being sucked out of my wallet," says painter Rand Carlson, who lived in Sedona for two years before returning to Tucson.

Spiritual living is costly. Because the rents paid by shop owners are so high, the price of goods is high as well. Even food shopping is affected. Some residents, including the retired writer Alan Caillou, drive to a neighboring town for groceries.

"You can't buy a sweater in Sedona for less than $150," Caillou said. "I drive to the Wal-Mart in Cottonwood and get a sweatshirt for $30.

Sedona's economy is either Mercedes rich or back-breakingly poor. High housing costs force workers to live elsewhere. Waitresses, maids, and store clerks, whose standard wage is around $7 an hour, cannot afford to buy or rent here. They live in apartments and trailers in Cottonwood, 18 miles from Sedona, and Cornville, 12 miles away.

The Chamber of Commerce president, Frank Miller, says that growth - a modest 2 to 3 percent a year - would run higher, except that the US Forest Service controls much of the land surrounding Sedona.

Even so, development is a divisive issue, and it is not the construction of homes on acre lots that causes the upset. It is the boom in time-sharing apartments, in which buyers purchase one week a year for the privilege of living among the red rocks.

"Time shares are freaking everybody out," Stanley said. "Instead of one home and two cars on the lot, you've got 150 people and 150 cars."

And traffic. Although refugees from such cities as Los Angeles and Boston chuckle at the grousing about congestion, longtime Sedonans are horrified by it. The joke here is that old people have to shop one side of Highway 89 one day, and the other side the next because the traffic is so bad they can't get across.

Blaming the New Agers for Sedona's problems happens in part because they are a handy scapegoat, and because the two have been inextricably tied. The publicity the town receives, in travel magazines and on television, invariably portrays it as a Shangri-la for the soul.

The CBS News program "48 Hours" aired a segment on Sedona in which fairies were discovered inside buildings. Producers also found a real estate agent who checks to make sure that the aura of a home matches that of the buyer.

Such publicity brings visitors who buy the pitch. The chamber, which used to ignore the New Age influence, has given in to it and now trumpets "mystical Sedona" on its Web site. Even Gabriel of Sedona, who runs a compound populated by followers who think he's god, is a dues-paying member of the Chamber.

"People who snickered at the vortexes are now painting their Jeeps in dazzling colors," said a resident, Jim Bishop. "I think more people are selling the New Age here than living it, to be honest."

Those who do live it are raising angry hackles. The Forest

Service in particular isn't thrilled by the unauthorized use of its land for religious ceremonies.

An example is the construction of medicine wheels on federal property. These large circles of loosely stacked rocks are considered symbols of the Earth's energy and a focal point for meditation and prayer. But the Forest Service says that disturbing natural features of the landscape is illegal and constitutes vandalism.

The latest craze is burying crystal at prehistoric rock art sites, or leaving blue cornmeal as an offering to the Earth - both illegal if the site is designated an archeological dig.

"A lot of them don't follow leave-no-trace practices," said Bill Stafford, a Forest official in Sedona. "But that's everybody, not just New Agers. We have worse problems with litter and people driving helter-skelter with four-by-fours."

Pete A. Sanders Jr., an informal spokesman for spiritual Sedona, believes in vortex power, based on his studies of physics while a student at MIT, from which he graduated in 1972. He has taught medicine wheel etiquette to New Age pilgrims, and he recommends that rather than disturb the landscape, they build wheels in their minds.

Sanders says he's troubled by New Agers out to make a buck, and those who "enslave people as devotees." But he also believes that elements within the Forest Service and the town at large are prejudiced against New Agers.

"I don't support all the things people here believe," said Sanders, author of four books, including "You Are Psychic." "But I allow people to have their own beliefs. People come here on spiritual pilgimages the same way they go to Mecca or Lourdes."

But others are bothered by the use of Native American ceremonies by New Age adherents. Medicine wheels are not a product of Navajo or Hopi cultures, and the sweat lodges that operate in Sedona are not run by legitimate medicine men. What happens at these rituals often has only passing connection to any real tribal custom.

Margo Running, a masseuse and teacher in training whose former husband was a Lakota Sioux, has tried to raise awareness and respect among tour operators, spiritual guides and schoolchildren.

In tribal cultures, the needs of the medicine man were met by those he helped. But in Sedona, Running says, money is the new buffalo robe.

"We took your land, killed your culture, and cut off your hair, and now we want your spirituality, too," Running said. "To most Indians, this town is a joke. It's a matter of showing respect."

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