

## In Sedona, a Psychic and a Skeptic Walk Into a Vortex

On a trip to the Arizona town a writer tries to understand her mystically inclined mother's beliefs with the help of crystals, meditation and visits to the area's supposed celestial portals.



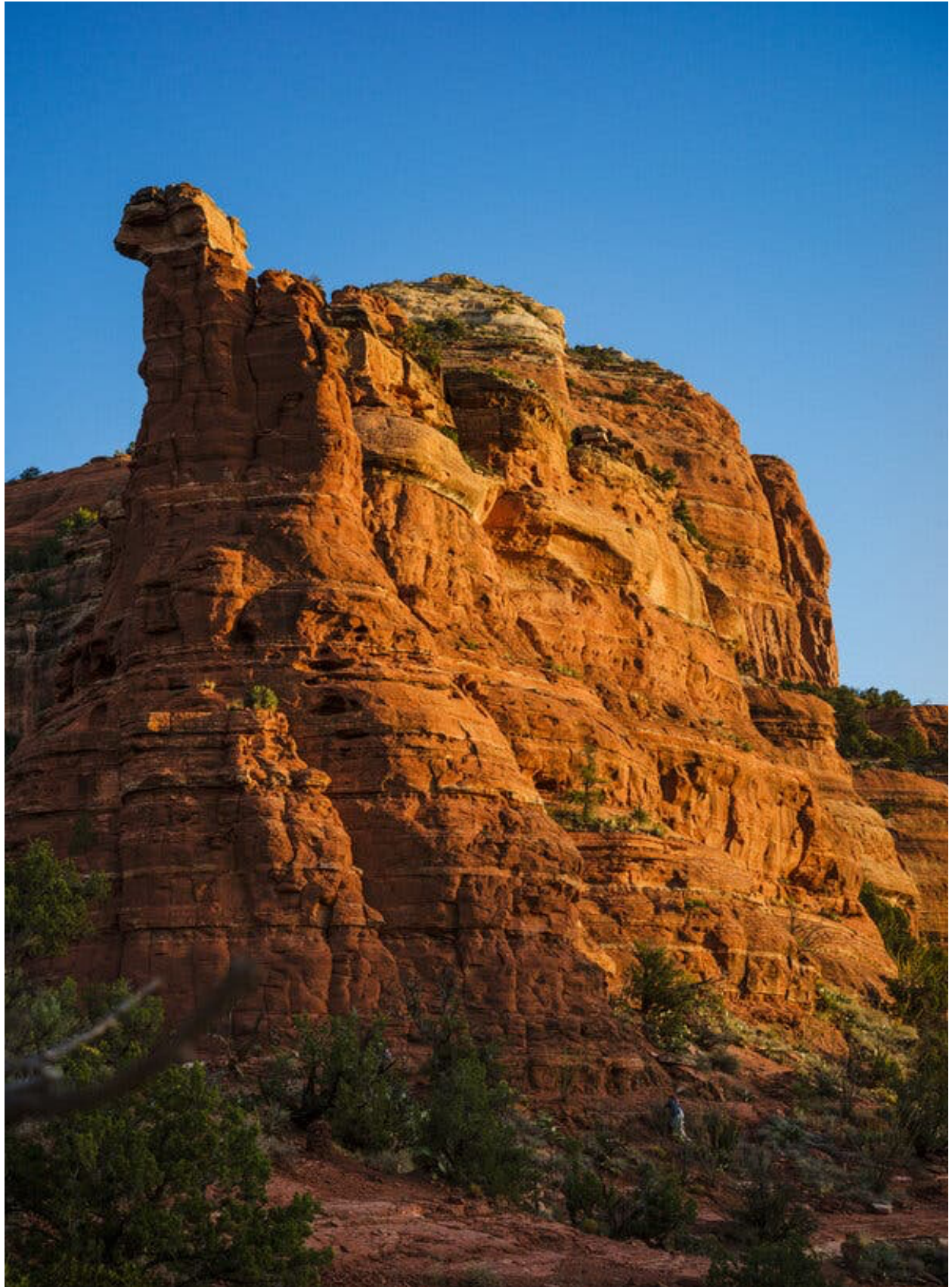
**By Erin Vivid Riley**

**Photographs by Nate Abbott**

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On a clear spring day, my mother and I hiked an unmarked spur trail to Subway Cave, in Boynton Canyon, near Sedona, Ariz. As we scrambled up a cliff to the cave's opening, we heard a little boy ask his father, "Do you think moons could be spaceships? We're always finding more of them." I turned to my mom, who looked at me with wide eyes. "That kid gets it," she said, impressed.

I didn't need to ask what she meant. An hour earlier, we had meditated in the shadow of a rock formation called Kachina Woman, a sacred Hopi site and the supposed location of a vortex, a place where energy flows into or out of the earth. These and other attractions draw millions of visitors to Sedona each year. There, my mother had talked about how these areas aren't just about the transfer of energy. They are also points of contact where the mother ship will beam the enlightened up to an interplanetary dimension.





The Kachina Woman rock formation is a sacred Hopi site and the supposed location of a vortex, a place where energy flows into or out of the earth.

She said that if we were to time it just right, they — as in our otherworldly spirit guides — would come for her. Sitting in the cool dirt, I felt my breath catch in my throat. Swirling centers of energy I could handle, but actual celestial portals? All I could think to say was, “Can you not leave me yet?”

A few years ago, my mother’s regimen of yoga and meditation morphed into more mystical pursuits. These included learning about mediumship, the practice of fostering communication between spirits and living beings, and becoming a practitioner of past-life regression, a form of hypnotherapy that purports to connect people to their previous lives so that they may better understand their current one.

I’ve always had a practical outlook on mindfulness, more concerned with its productive benefits, such as better focus or sleep, than a search for greater meaning. But I tried to remain open at first, asking about her chat groups, visiting her at a retreat and agreeing to her offer to guide me on a regression, which was unsuccessful.

It soon became hard to hide my concerns, though. My questioning resulted in a disconnect — one in which she felt judged for her beliefs and I felt excluded from her inner world.



*The Chapel of the Holy Cross was built among the red rocks of Sedona in the 1950s.*

In an effort to better understand her, I planned a week in Sedona together, a dream trip of hers since this spiritual time began. Over the course of our stay, we visited a healer, crystal shops, several vortexes and the [Center for the New Age](#), a one-stop shop offering everything from aura readings to chakra realignments. We sat, meditated and regressed — or, at least, I tried to. I thought that if I couldn't gain access to my past lives at the epicenter of woo-wooness, I most likely never would.

So I gave it my best shot.



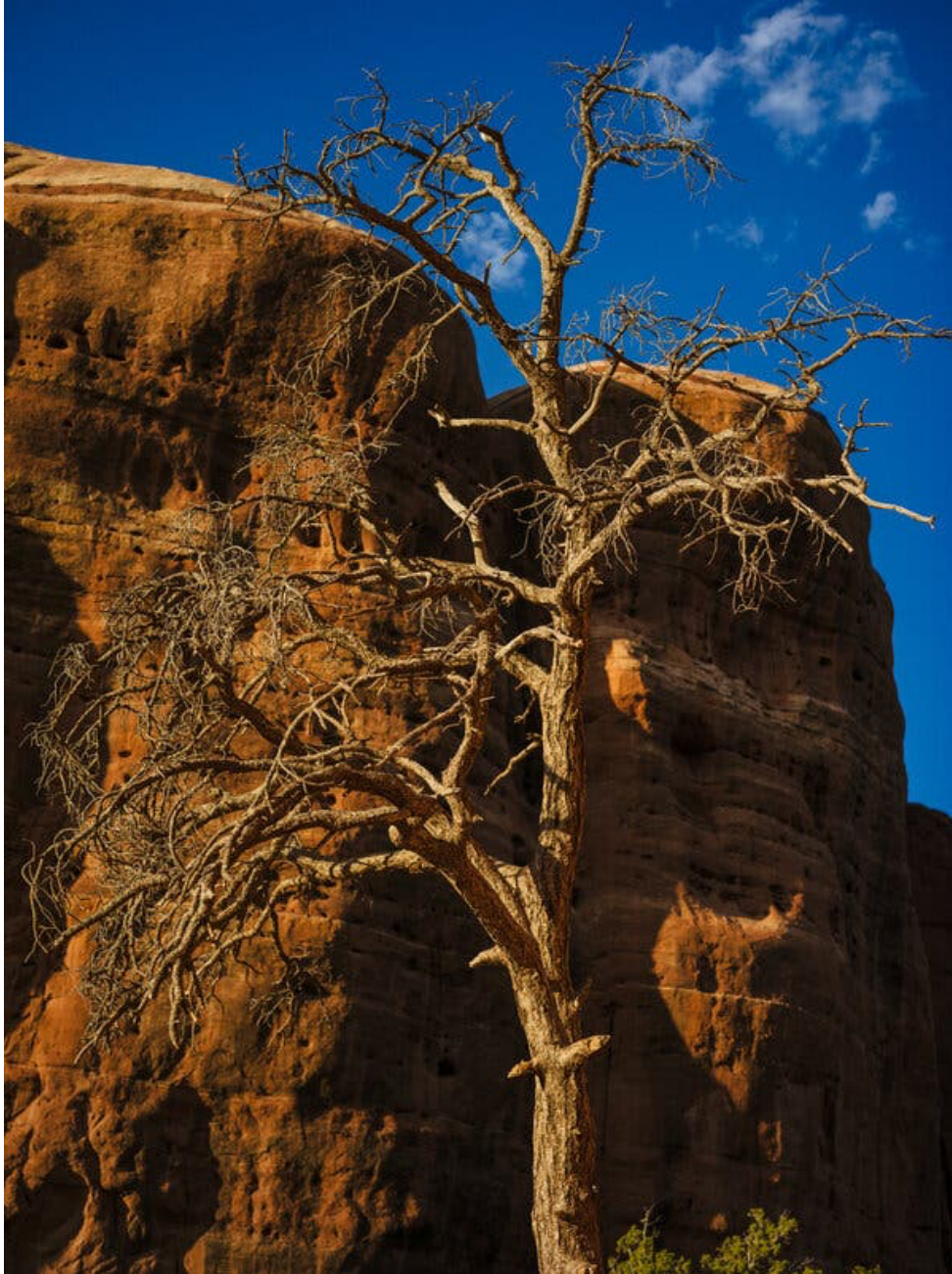
The Boynton Canyon Vista trail takes you to the site of a supposed vortex.



## **The New Age capital**

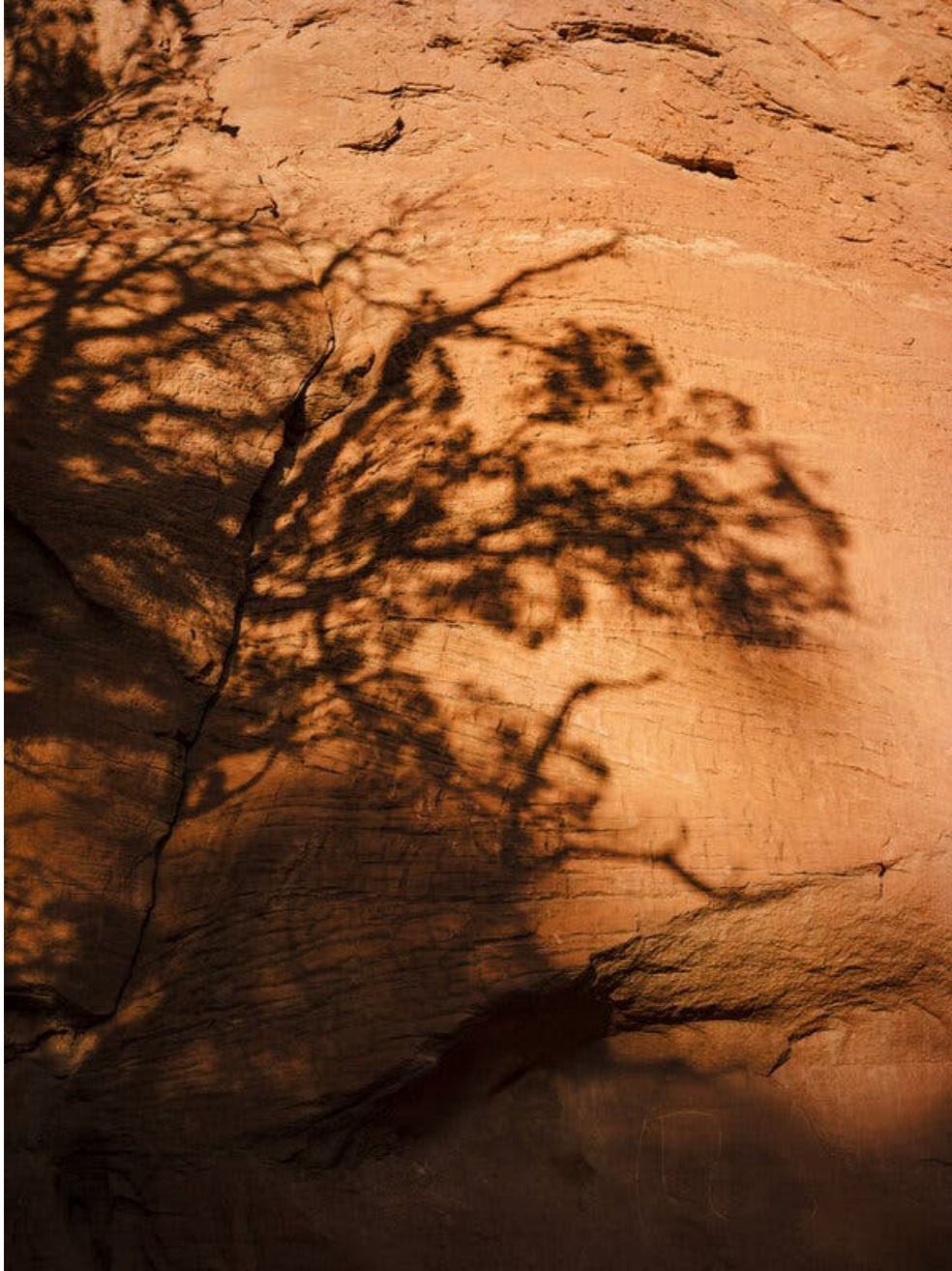
The spiritual history of central Arizona's Verde Valley begins with the Ancestral Puebloans, whose presence in the Sedona area can be traced to as early as 1500 B.C. The communities lived across the Southwest but traveled to the area for sacred observances. Today, members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation visit a tributary of the Verde River, Oak Creek, to perform ceremonies every year.

How Sedona got its more recent New Age reputation is debated. Some [say](#) it started with a real estate agent named Mary Lou Keller, who founded the city's first center of mysticism in the late 1950s. Ms. Keller proclaimed the area a spiritual hub which attracted practitioners of the metaphysical and religious New Thought movement that originated in the 19th century — and prospective home buyers.



Cathedral Rock is one of the most photographed formations in Sedona.





*The sun casts shadows onto Cathedral Rock's surface.*

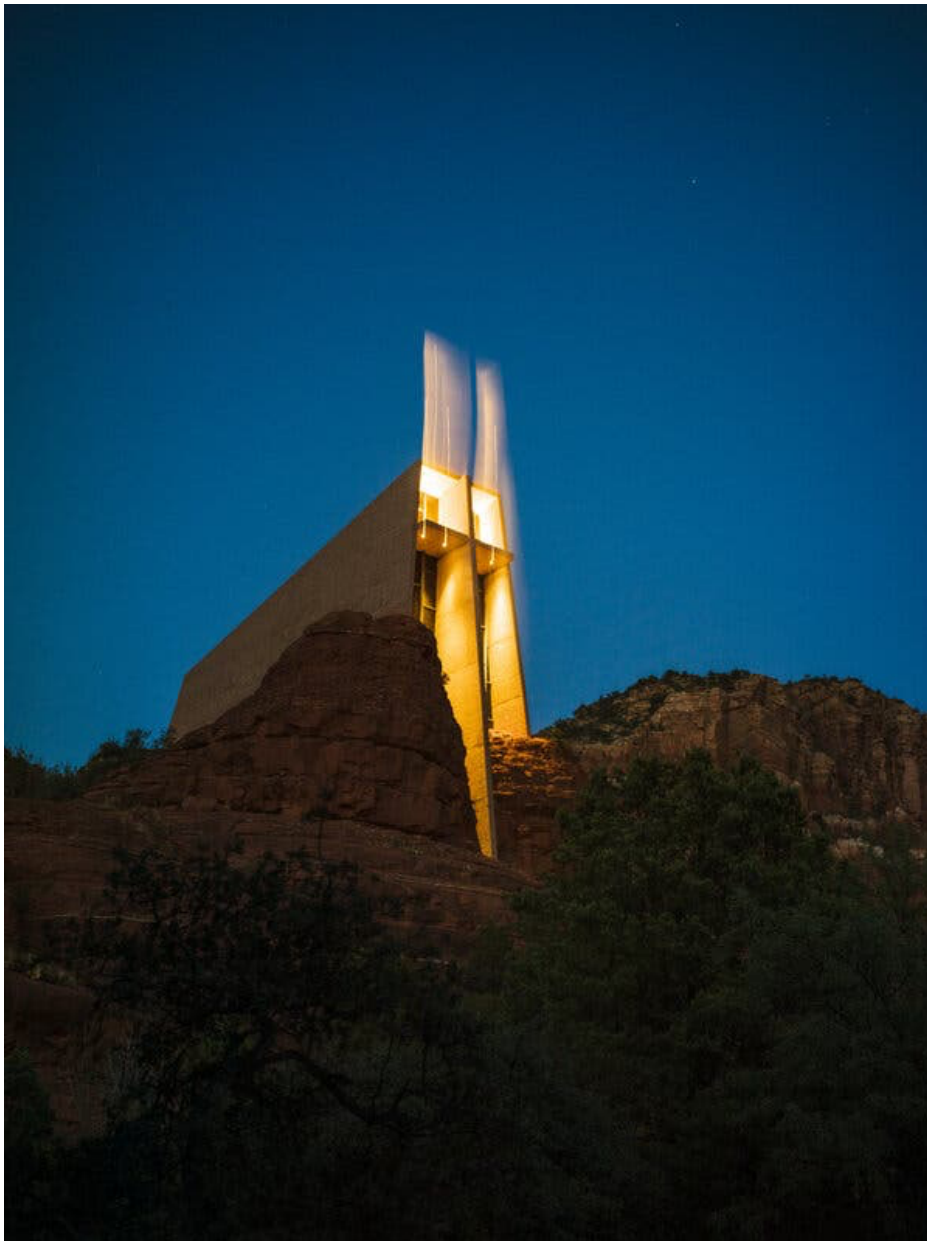
Others [believe](#) it began in the 1980s with Page Bryant, a psychic who saw Sedona's portals in a vision, and is often credited with coming up with the "vortex" label.

Many [recall](#) the Harmonic Convergence of 1987, when 5,000 people gathered in the city to meditate.

Today, Sedona, a city of fewer than 10,000 people, receives more than three million visits a year, around a quarter of which can be attributed to travelers interested in

having a spiritual experience, according to the tourism board. More than 100 businesses — crystal shops, psychic mediums, theology bookshops and vortex-tour operators — cater to the demand.

Depending on your choice of guidebook, there are four to nine vortexes dotted in and around the red-rock city. Each is classified as either an upflow, or electric, vortex that elevates and rejuvenates, or an inflow, or magnetic, vortex that produces grounding energy. Upflow vortexes tend to be atop mountains or mesas, while inflow ones are often in valleys or canyons.

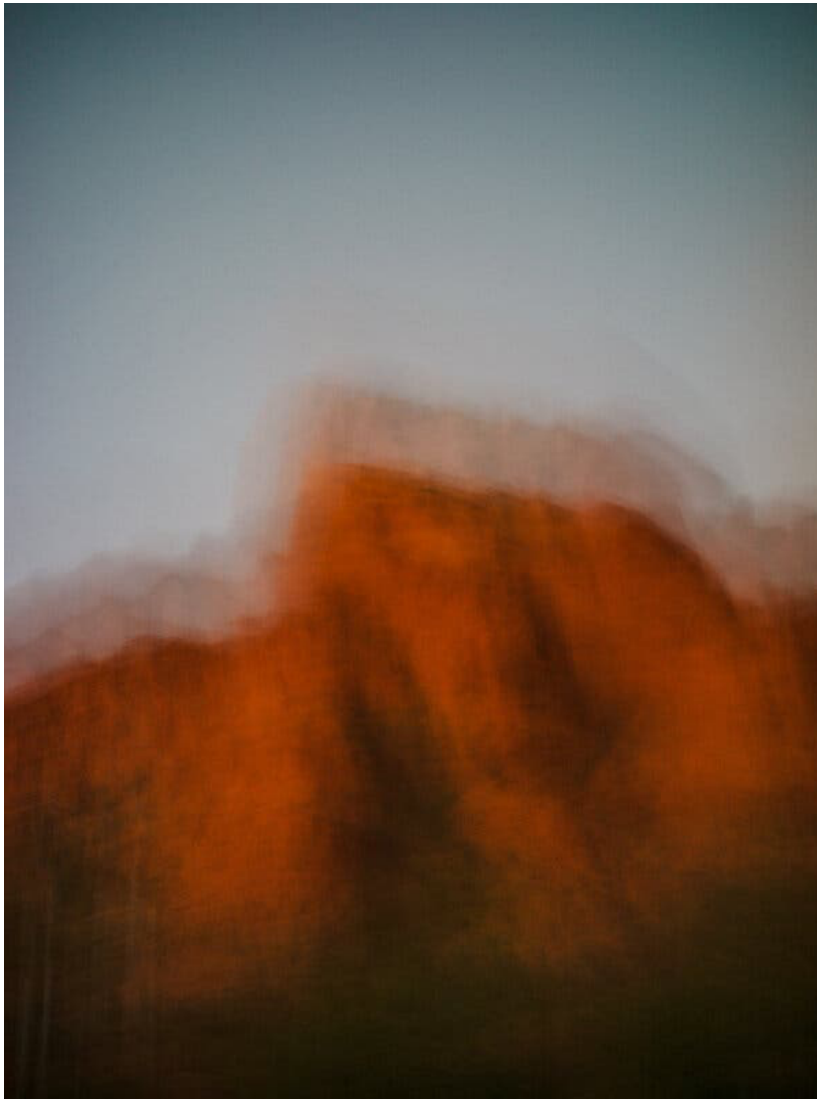


*Sunlight reflecting off the Chapel of the Holy Cross, its location has been identified as one of up to nine general energy areas in Sedona.*



While the label often leads seekers to think vortexes are precise points that can be found on a map, the term is more symbolic than literal, said Pete Sanders, an M.I.T.-trained biochemist who runs workshops on vortexes. In his guidebook “Scientific Vortex Information,” he directs readers to eight general energy areas, including the vista from the [Chapel of the Holy Cross](#) and the [Boynton Canyon Trail](#). These sites have “energy flows that exist in dimensions deeper than electricity and magnetism” and therefore can’t be pinpointed or measured, he writes.

One morning, as I sat beneath the sacred butte of Cathedral Rock along Red Rock Crossing trail, I tried to connect with the area’s “combination” energy. According to Mr. Sanders, Cathedral Rock’s unique formation of peaks and saddles gives it both upflow and inflow qualities.



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To help induce hypnosis, I pictured beams of light projecting out of my body and encircling me. When that didn't work, I envisioned the same beams making a figure-eight through my body's energy points, or chakras: into my belly, out my back, through my heart, into my mouth and out the base of my head. But I couldn't clear my mind of earthly concerns — namely, how I accidentally stepped on a patch of living [cryptobiotic soil crust](#) that most likely took centuries to form.

During a crystal workshop at the hotel [L'Auberge de Sedona](#), I imagined myself as a human pendulum and swung toward a carnelian. I tried “charging” the stone at a spot near the base of Cathedral Rock that my mom deemed sufficiently energetic and carried it around with me the rest of the trip. Thumbing it in my pocket, I felt reassured by its presence, but I can't say I sensed any of its healing power.

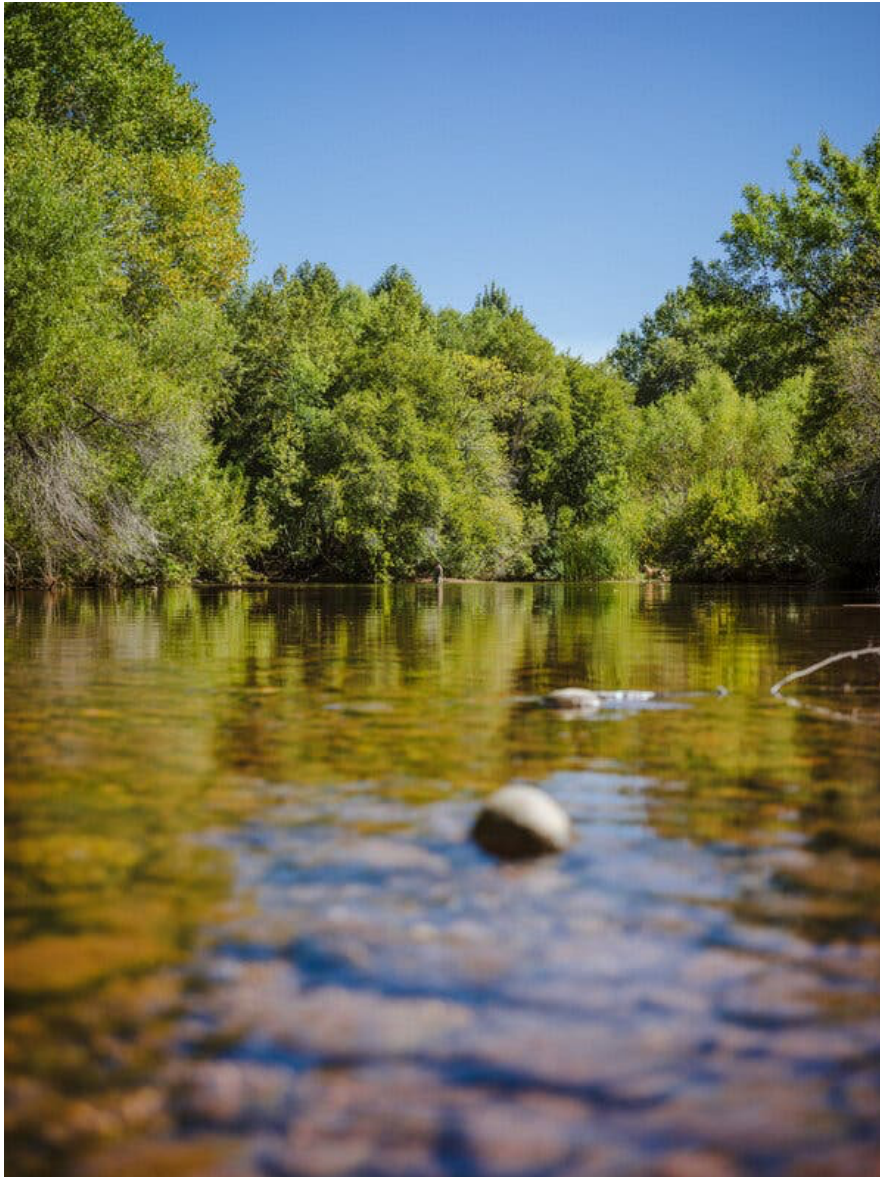


*The area's cryptobiotic soil crust likely took centuries to form.*



At an oracle card reading my mom performed at Airport Mesa, a panoramic viewpoint reached by an easy three-mile loop trail, I pulled a Bobcat Spirit card, which represents the idea that not all things in life can be understood through intellect. I let myself believe that at no other time and in no other place could it have applied to me more.

In the end, I couldn't reach my higher self, let alone a past one. But as I explored the sunset mesas and painted buttes, I found something else. I discovered that my mom's form of spirituality is perhaps not that removed from how and when I come closest to feeling spiritual: through awe.



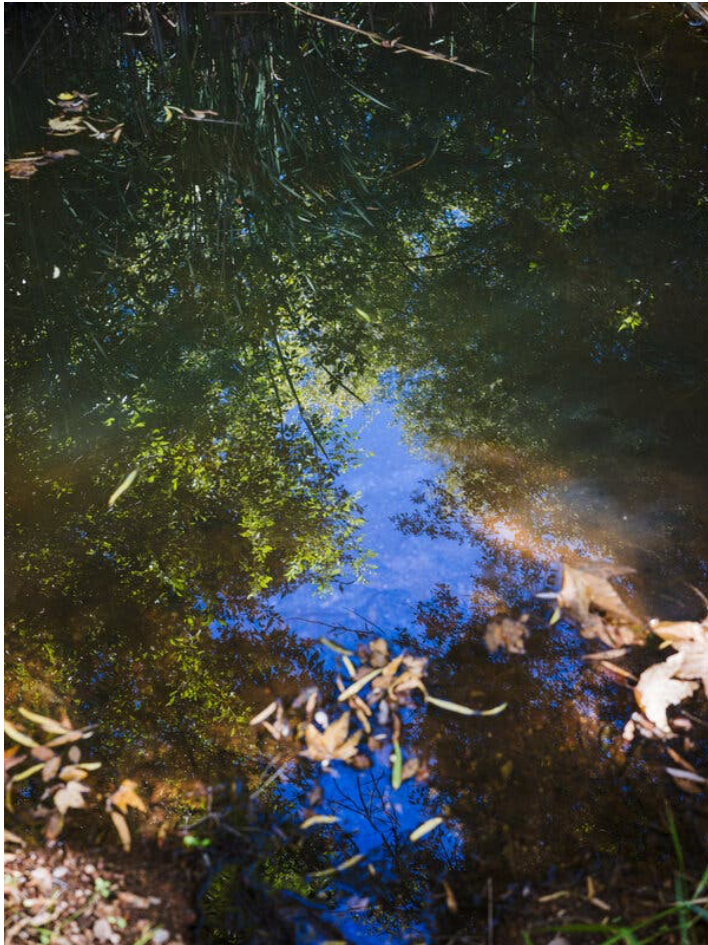
*Red Rock Crossing is a popular Sedona swimming hole and also the site of a supposed vortex.*

**Energy or awe?**

In his 2023 book [“Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life,”](#) Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, defines the feeling as “being in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world.” Although awe is an emotion, it can also act as the connective tissue that stitches together the everyday enigmas that inform — or challenge — our philosophies. In this way, it’s not unlike empathy.

One overcast afternoon, my mom and I climbed Bell Rock, a monumental butte that from afar looks like an anthill, a mound of crimson earth dotted with busy bodies. It’s a very popular upflow vortex, which Sedona’s tourism board describes as a site that will help you “soar to a higher perspective.”

We set out to find an energy point, sitting and meditating at one spot before trying another. My mom sensed vibrations from a rocky outcropping, which she walked up to and rested her body on. I joined her, arms spread open. I can’t say I sensed any cosmic energy, but when she asked if I felt anything, I realized I did — a warm hum.



*Experiencing awe in nature, according to the researcher Dacher Keltner, means acknowledging vastness and the unknown it holds, feeling a vanishing sense of self and recognizing we could be related to something much larger, which then opens the mind.*



Dr. Keltner describes the “unfolding pattern” of feeling awe as such: acknowledging vastness and the unknown it holds, feeling a vanishing sense of self and recognizing we could be related to something much larger, which then opens the mind. He calls this final step “wonder,” and says that those of us who experience brief daily moments of awe tend to “feel more comfortable with mystery, with that which cannot be explained.”

My mother is among the 22 percent of Americans who, according to a [2023 Pew Research Center study](#), see themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” a contingent that may espouse New Age concepts like astrology, a belief in psychics, and the presence of spiritual energy in nature and objects. Many of these beliefs have seen spikes in popularity in recent years, as evidenced by [increased traffic](#) to astrology sites, an [ever-growing market](#) for healing crystals and [greater demand](#) for psychic-reading services.

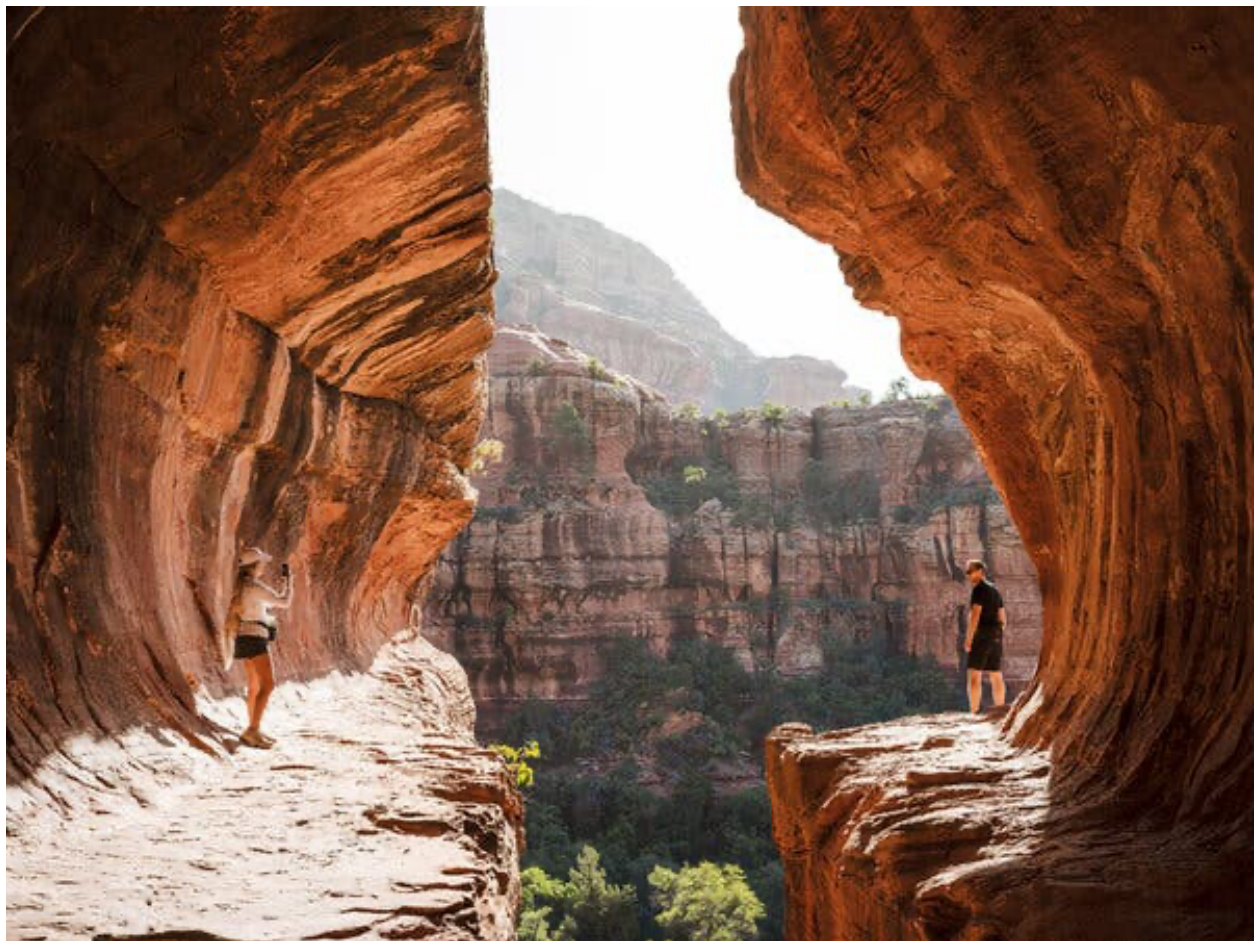
According to the same Pew poll, more than a quarter of Americans also believe in reincarnation, a concept widely held in my mom’s Chinese culture.



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Whether we're able to gain access to our past lives is a different line of inquiry. The field of parapsychology, which studies mental abilities outside the known laws of science and nature, remains rare in academia, with only a few institutions dedicating research units to it, including the University of Virginia. At its [Division of Perceptual Studies](#), Dr. Jim Tucker, a psychiatrist and professor of neurobehavioral sciences, oversees a database of 2,500 stories of previous lives voluntarily reported by children, most of them American.

While Dr. Tucker believes that the accounts he's able to corroborate indicate that "consciousness may exist outside the physical," he is skeptical about hypnosis-induced regression because "the method has proved unreliable for accessing memory," he said. Even so, he said, "regression can be therapeutic."



*Subway Cave opens out to a breathtaking scene of flushed red and burnt orange strata, that can bring on a sense of awe.*

### **Feeling the connection**

At Boynton Canyon, we reached Subway Cave to find lots of people: multigenerational families, Instagram couples and what looked like a bachelorette party. The cave opens out to a breathtaking scene of flushed red and burnt orange strata, and its ledge



provides a perch from which you can take in far-reaching views. My mom and I walked to the end of the shelf to find some quiet. Before we knew it, the crowds around us had left and only a few people remained in the cave — echoes, out of sight.

I looked over the valley, closed my eyes, and experienced a familiar mix of feelings — all of which, according to Dr. Keltner, result from awe. I felt small and insignificant in relation to my surroundings, better connected to the life-forms around me, and less aware of time passing. I wondered what the Ancestral Puebloans must have felt when they first saw it.



*The spiritual history of central Arizona's Verde Valley begins with the Ancestral Puebloans, whose presence in the Sedona area can be traced to as early as 1500 B.C., and who left behind drawings on some of the rock walls.*

Next to me, my mother was similarly having thoughts of connectedness, gratitude and continuity. But there were important differences. Those first people were strangers to me; to her, they could have very well been us in a previous life. I took in the spectacle of nature at its most remarkable; for my mom, it represented a manifestation of a spiritual plane.

A single cloud cast a shadow over us, making the silence feel more acute, before a sudden breeze broke the stillness. I felt a chill come over me, not quite sure where my mother would be when I opened my eyes.



*Is the Sedona experience one of connecting to a different spiritual plane or communing with nature? It depends on the beholder.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/17/travel/sedona-new-age.html>