

# Quirky Southwest Towns You Should Know

by Joseph Schmitt

What makes a quirky town *quirky*? Well, it helps if it's off the beaten path a little. And it's got to have unexpected elements and an unconventional history. I think it also helps to have more art galleries than churches and preferably few, if any, stoplights. Most of all, a quirky town is defined by its residents and their innate appreciation for diversity and an unusual drive toward the unconventional. I'll explore four such towns here, where open minds and curious hearts will find it easy to relax, explore and encounter other quirky souls.

## Bisbee, Arizona

Bob Klein and his partner, Jeff Trujillo, had planned a two-week camping vacation across their home state of New Mexico and into southern Arizona. But only days into their trip, a little town named Bisbee threw a wrench into their plans. While in southern Arizona, someone suggested they have dinner in a nearby town they weren't familiar with: Bisbee. After dinner, Bob and Jeff got a room, sold their house in New Mexico and bought and refurbished a miner's cottage and adjacent home. While this series of events didn't happen overnight (Bob is quick to stress the entire process took over five years), the couple did fall in love with Bisbee instantly. It's hard *not* to fall in love with this beautiful artists' enclave, with its well-preserved Victorian structures, Wild West motif and, above all, its people. "The people were just so friendly," says Bob. "You could just tell they were happy to be here and happy to have you visit."

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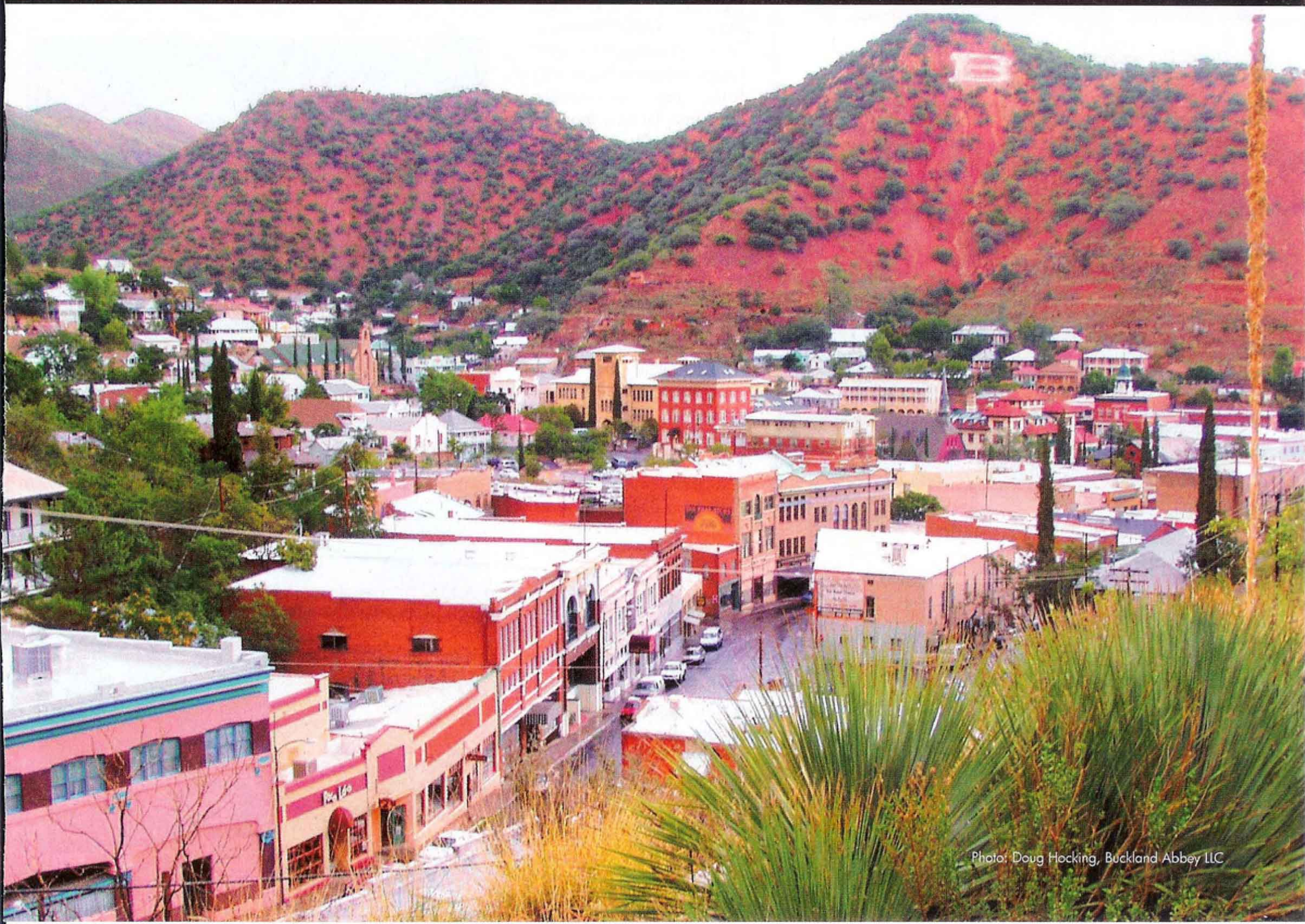
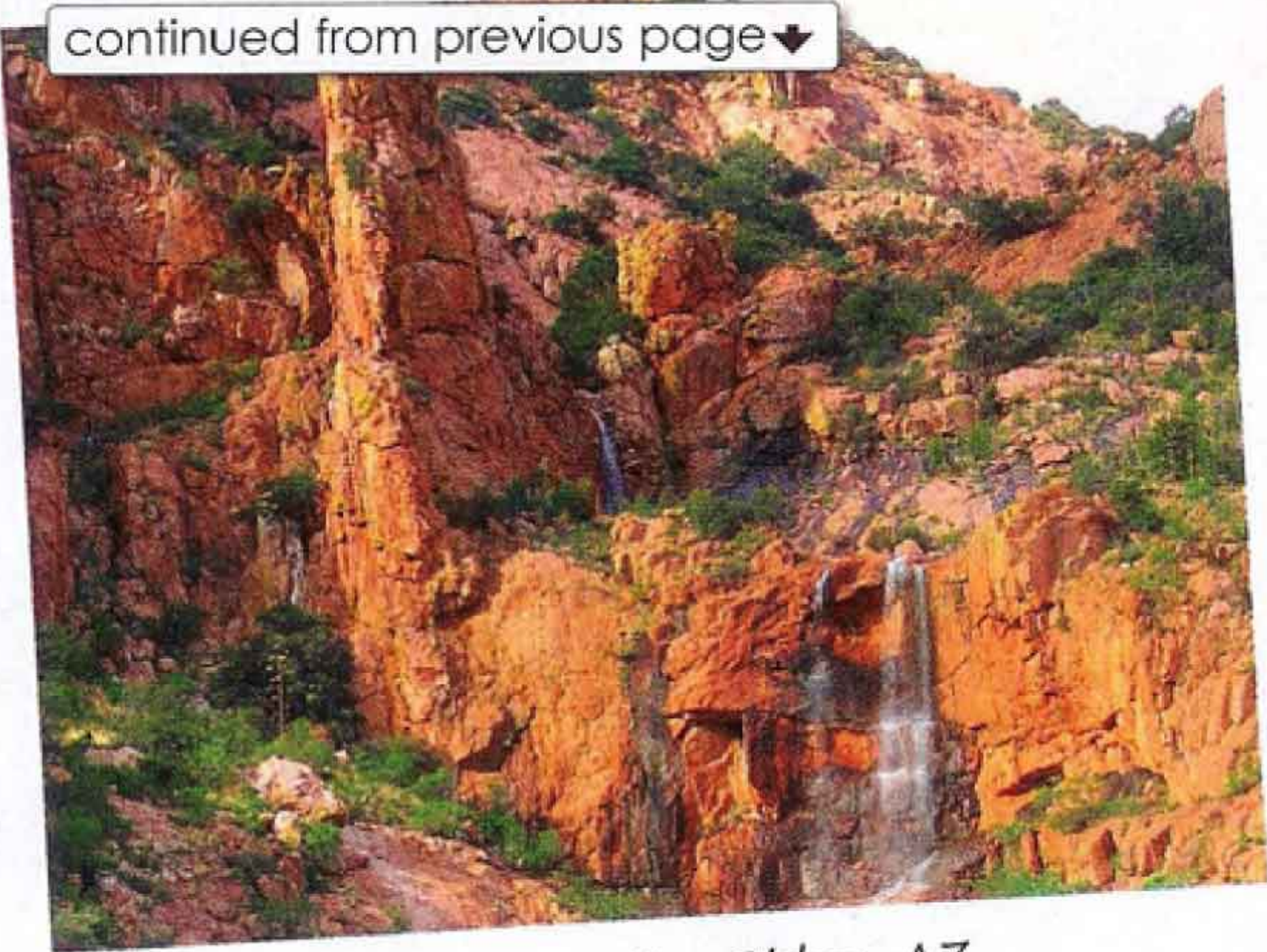


Photo: Doug Hocking, Buckland Abbey LLC



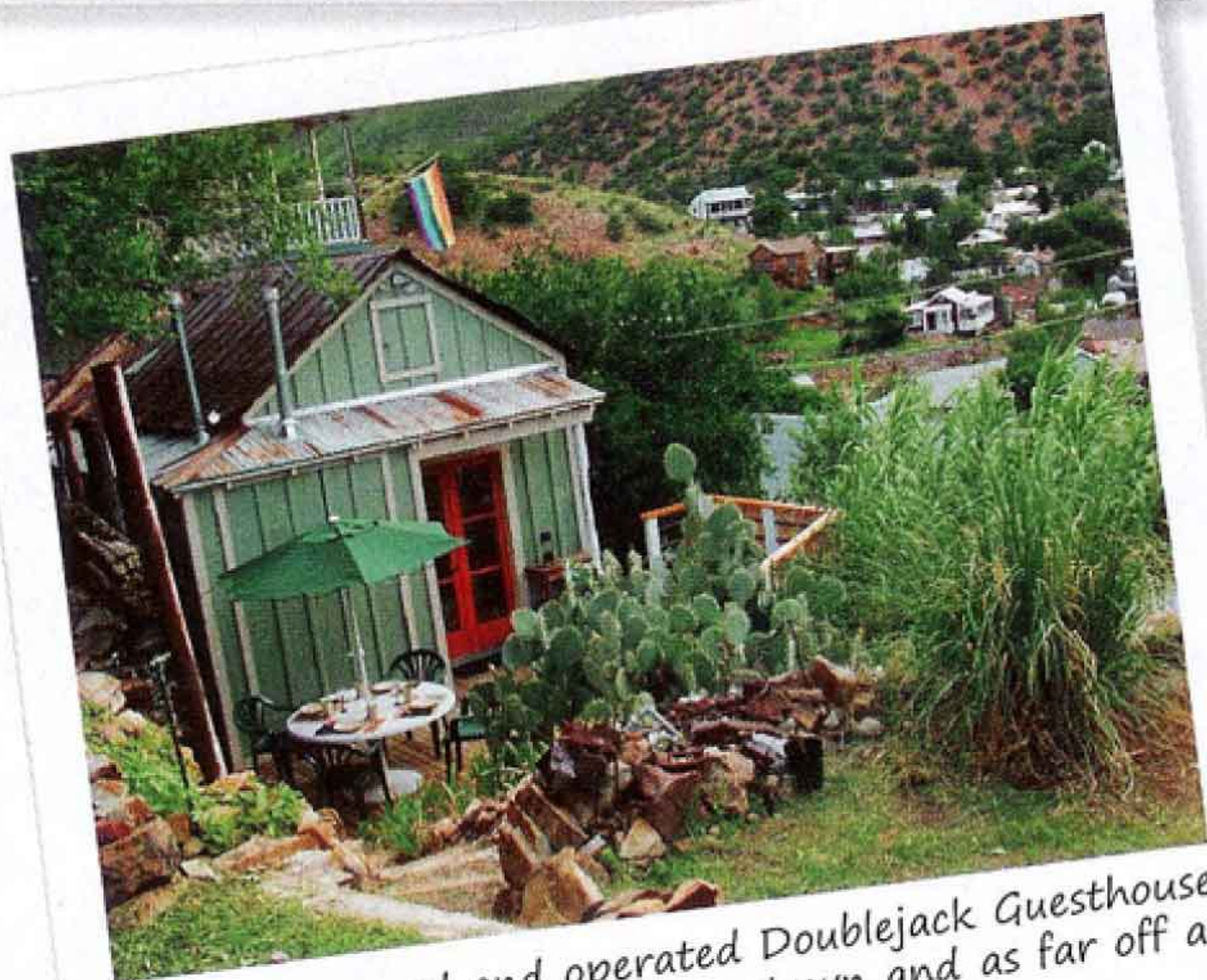
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Scenic beauty surrounding Bisbee, AZ  
Photo: Doug Hocking, Buckland Abbey LLC



Historic Downtown Bisbee, AZ  
Photo: Doug Hocking, Buckland Abbey LLC



The gay owned and operated Doublejack Guesthouse in Bisbee, AZ, overlooks downtown and as far off as Mexico. Photo: Doublejack

In the late 1800s, the "Queen of the Copper Camps" was one of the richest mineral sites in the world. And by the early 1900s, Bisbee was the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco. When mining operations ceased in the mid-1970s, mining employees left and free spirits moved in and found Bisbee ideal for pursuing artistic endeavors. Today the population of greater Bisbee is somewhere around 6,000.

## Don't Miss in Bisbee

The Copper Queen Hotel ([copperqueen.com](http://copperqueen.com)), Arizona's oldest continually running hotel.

Nearby Kartchner Caverns State Park ([azstateparks.com](http://azstateparks.com)) for deep cave exploring.

Scrumptious Cafe Roka ([caferoka.com](http://caferoka.com)), where their world-class dinners still include soup, salad and sorbet and there's live jazz on Friday nights.

Visit Bisbee Chamber of Commerce ([bisbeearizona.com](http://bisbeearizona.com)) for more dining, shopping, lodging and activities.

Bob also credits Bisbee's progressive attitudes to its long history of ethnic diversity, dating back to the mining days, when Poles, Swedes and Mexicans all lived and worked here together. Today, Bob and Jeff own and operate the **Doublejack Guesthouse** ([doublejackbisbee.com](http://doublejackbisbee.com)), a charming one-bedroom miner's cottage that has seen some dramatic upgrades in its 100-year history, now with a king-size bed, claw-foot bathtub, full kitchen and wireless high-speed Internet.

Opened in 1877, Bisbee's Queen Mine quickly became one of the richest copper mines in the world. Today you can venture deep into the now inactive mine on the **Queen Mine Tour** ([queenminetour.com](http://queenminetour.com)). Another must for history buffs is a visit to the **Bisbee Mining & Historical Museum** ([bisbeemuseum.org](http://bisbeemuseum.org)), the Southwest's first Smithsonian Institution affiliate. A visit to the historic Muheim Heritage House will also take you back into the 19th century.

Located just 90 temperate miles southeast of Tucson, Bisbee is a year-round destination with surprisingly wonderful dining, a diverse arts scene and fine

museums, all surrounded by a rugged landscape that beckons bikers, hikers and history buffs. For a quirky good time like only Bisbee can produce, you might plan your visit around late June to help celebrate Bisbee's fifth annual **Gay Pride** ([bisbeepride.com](http://bisbeepride.com)). Last year's Bisbee Pride saw events like the Leather and Lace Street Party, the Poolside BBQ

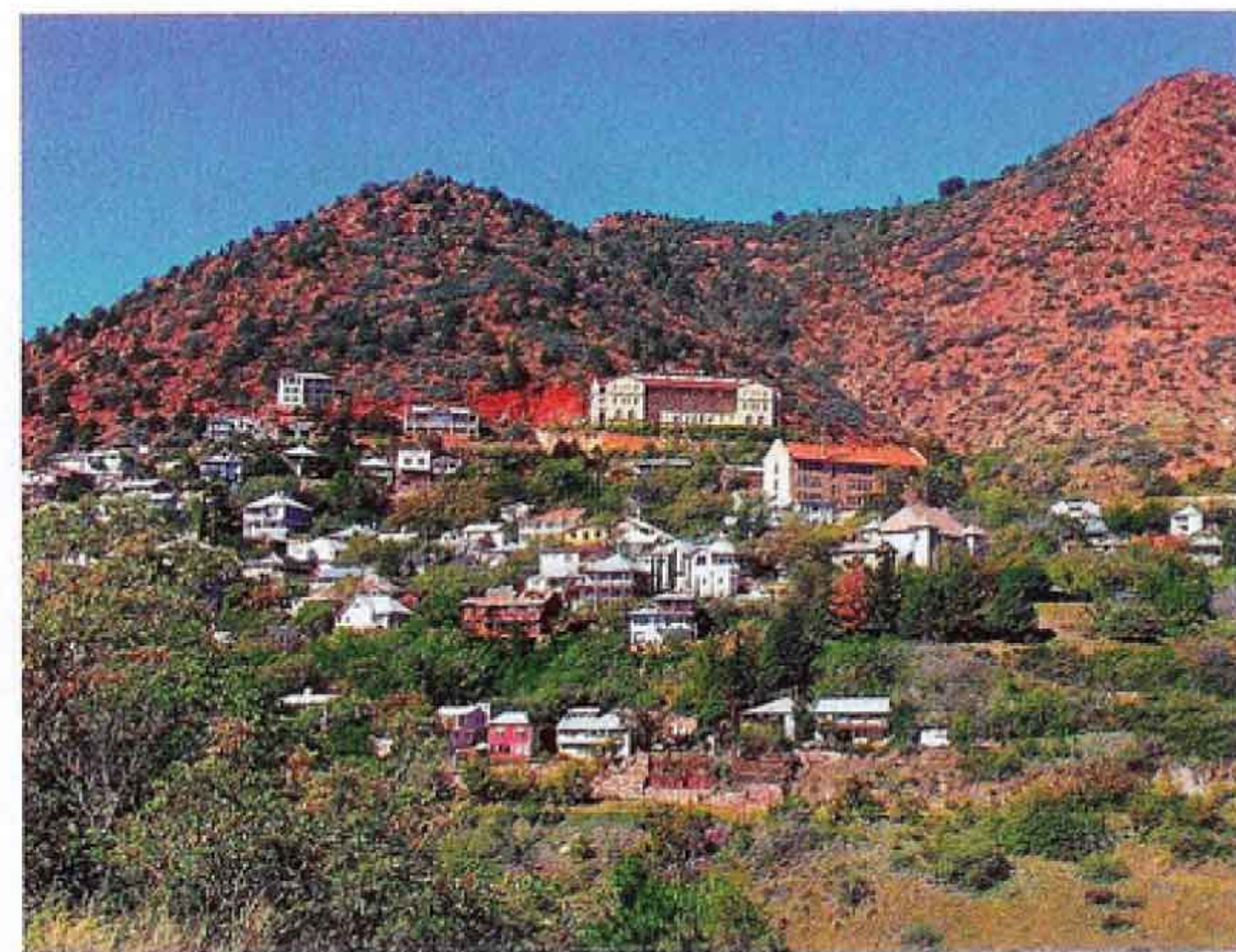
and Swim Party and the ever-interesting Lingerie Pub Crawl. Don't forget your bloomers!

## Jerome, Arizona

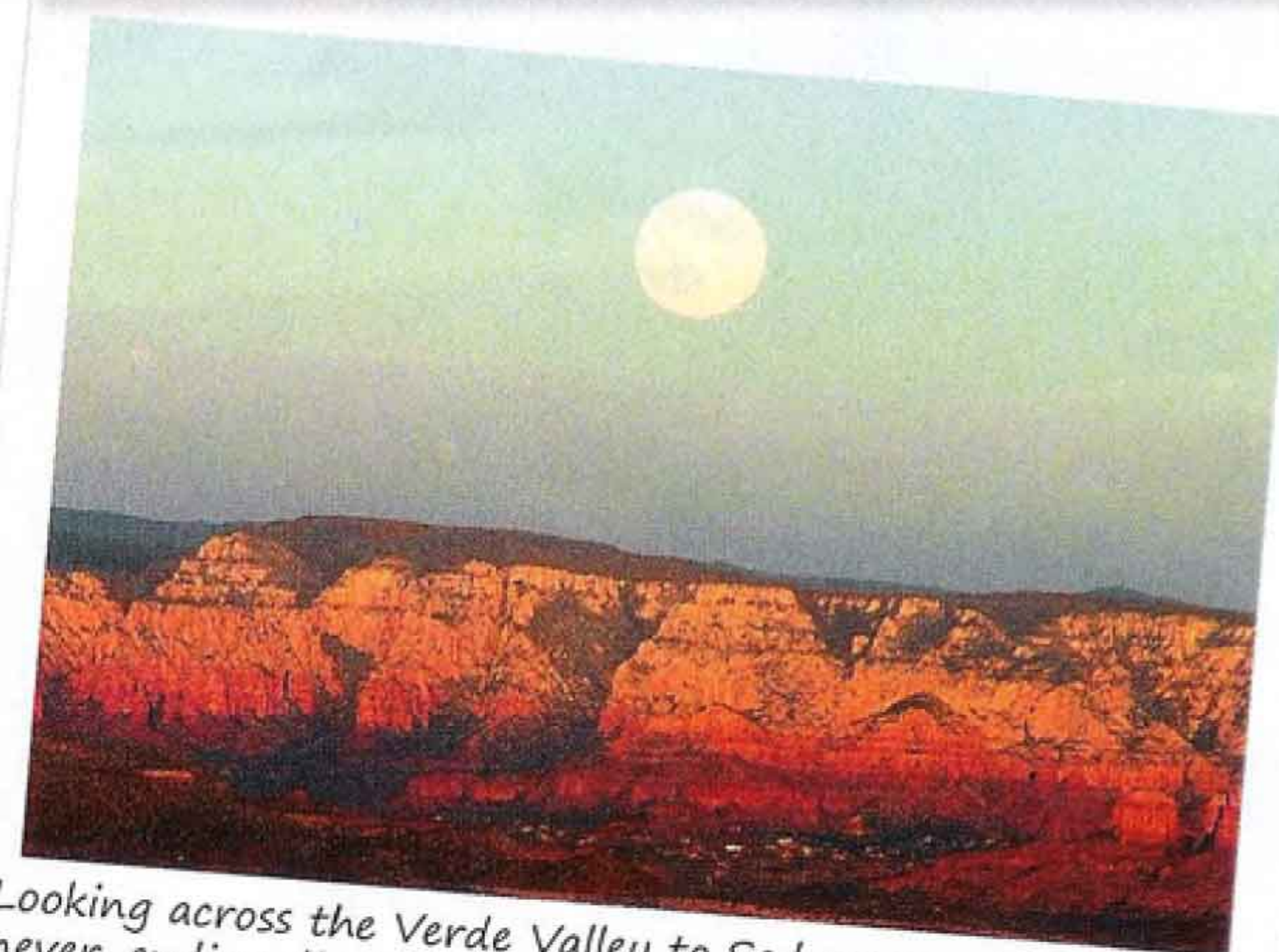
You won't have to wait at any traffic lights in Jerome, but you will get something of a workout as you wander its steep mountainside streets. Donna Chesler, owner of **Gallery 527** ([gallery527jerome.com](http://gallery527jerome.com)) and local photographer, proclaims, "You see things in

Jerome you just won't see anywhere else," referring mostly to the diverse arts and crafts scene. But having traveled to Jerome numerous times during my short life, I know she's also talking about the town's historic buildings and its ghostly reputation, as well as its striking beauty, with sweeping views across the Verde Valley below, stretching on to the colorful rock formations of nearby Sedona.

With a mere 400 year-round residents, roughly half of whom are artists of some variety, Jerome has a long-standing reputation as a quirky, almost mystical place. The town's gay and lesbian residents are fully

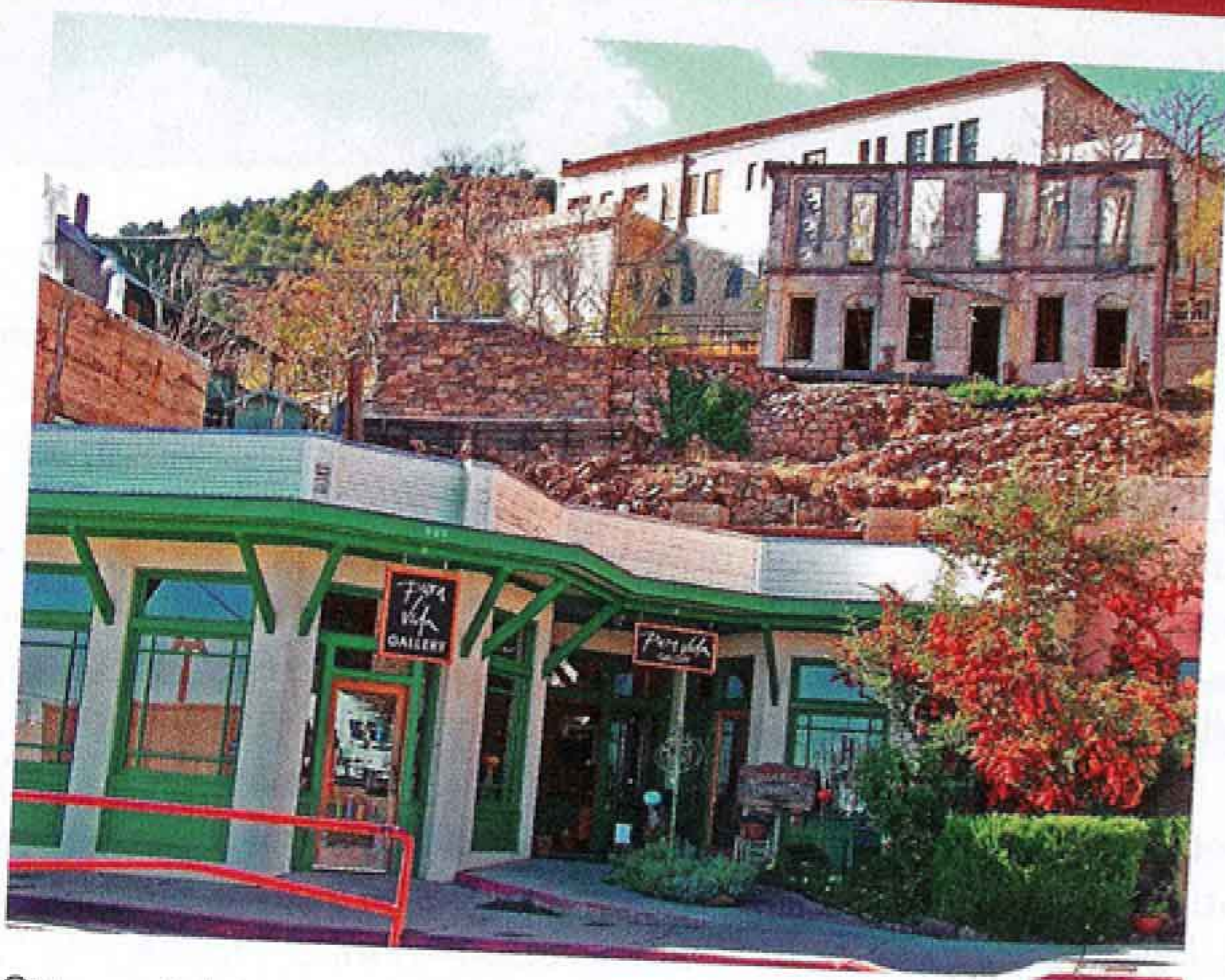


A "downtown" view of the mountainside town of Jerome, AZ. Photo: Donna Chesler ([cheslerphotography.com](http://cheslerphotography.com))

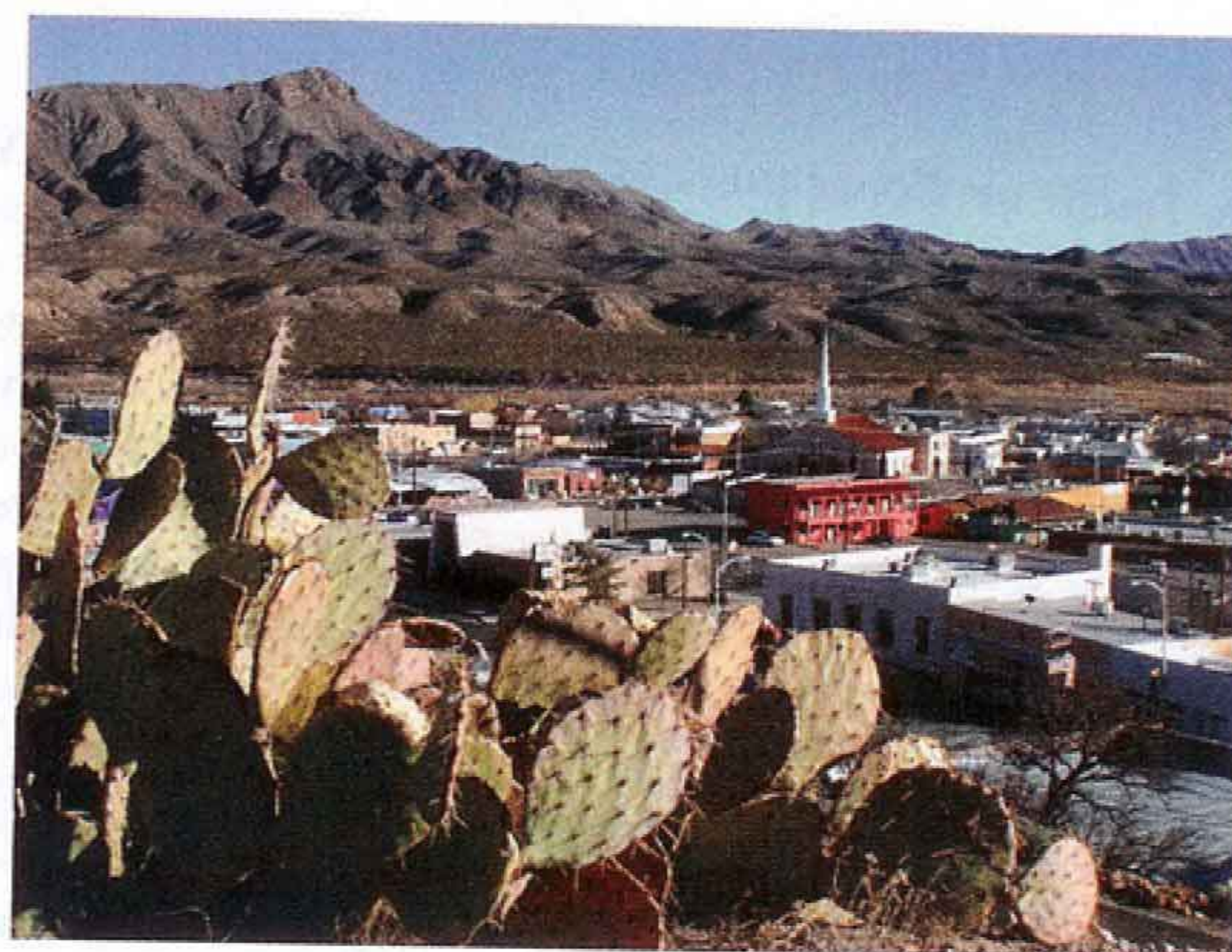


Looking across the Verde Valley to Sedona provides a never-ending display of beauty. Photo: Donna Chesler ([cheslerphotography.com](http://cheslerphotography.com))





Owners Michael Gamble and Danny Burris host a delightful champagne and chocolate party every first Saturday during Jerome Art Walk.



A downtown view of Truth or Consequences, NM. The small town with a funny name and magical hot-mineral waters. Photo: Joseph Schmitt

### Don't Miss in Jerome

The Mile High Grill and Inn ([jeromemilehighinn.com](http://jeromemilehighinn.com)), a small inn upstairs with a handsome grill below, serving hearty homemade meals to hungry trekkers.

Pura Vida ([puravidagallery.com](http://puravidagallery.com)), one of the top craft galleries in the United States, and Nellie Bly Kaleidoscopes ([nellieblyscopes.com](http://nellieblyscopes.com)), with kaleidoscopes, art glass, marbles and jewelry—just two of the many unique artisan shops you'll find in Jerome.

Jerome Art Walk ([jeromeartwalk.com](http://jeromeartwalk.com)), the first Saturday of each month, when galleries stay open late and supply live music, wine and food.

Alan Johnson and Brian Sullivan welcome you to their quaint Flatiron Cafe (928-634-2733) for fresh breakfast and lunch with a Southwest flair. The Flat, upstairs, is a nicely appointed guest room, conveniently located mere steps from your morning espresso.

Visit Jerome Chamber of Commerce ([jeromechamber.com](http://jeromechamber.com)) for further visitor information.

integrated into the art and business community, making such "matter" matter very little. Visitors of all persuasions and orientations feel comfortable and welcomed here as they stroll through dozens of galleries, dine alfresco on homemade strawberry pie or sip on a local wine or handcrafted beer.

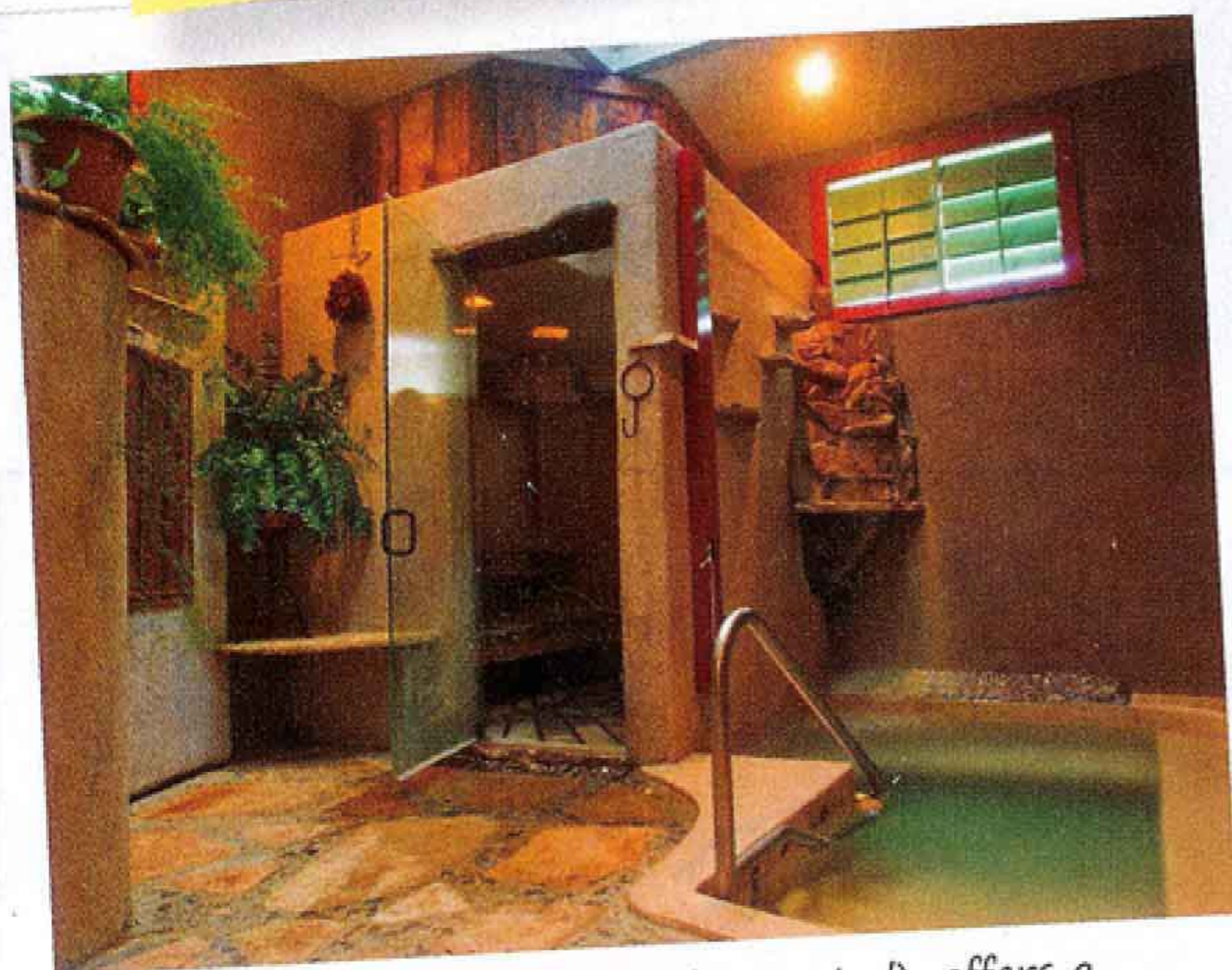
### Truth or Consequences, New Mexico

Where can you find a small town with a yoga studio in a former church, a refurbished motor inn decorated with *Twilight Zone* and *Golden Girls* memorabilia, healing practitioners that align chakras and read tarot cards, and hot mineral springs that were once a favored destination of Geronimo? New Mexico, of course. Welcome to Truth or Consequences, the eccentric town with a funny name and even quirkier residents.

Formerly known as Hot Springs, the town changed its name in 1950 when Ralph Edwards, host of a wildly popular game show, *Truth Or Consequences*, challenged a town in the U.S. to change its name to that of his show. Nearly 60 years after the name change, T or C (as the locals call it) is still more famous for the neutral-pH mineral waters found throughout town than it is for the game show that went off the air before many

of us were even born. Still, the town celebrates its oddball name every year during **Fiesta** ([torcfiesta.com](http://torcfiesta.com)), a two-day celebration each May with pageants and parades in honor of Ralph, the town's de facto mascot.

It was the magical waters that first made me fall in love with this small town of roughly 7,000 residents. Ranging between 104 and 114 degrees, the mineral waters flow freely at many hotels and inns throughout town. The water is free of any odor, and you can drink it right from your private tub. Just as the Rio Grande streams by at the edge of town as it has for millennia, time passes slowly here, seemingly unnoticed. There's no rushing around downtown, addresses aren't even necessary, and you barely need to look both ways before crossing a street. Everywhere you go in Truth or Consequences, you'll meet locals and regular visitors who make this town even quirkier than its name would suggest.



The Blackstone (gay owned and operated), offers a unique natural mineral Wet Room with hot mineral tub and mineral sauna. Truth or Consequences, NM



The private "Roman" hot mineral tub, with perfectly balanced pH mineral spring water, roughly 107 degrees at the historic Sierra Grande Lodge, Truth or Consequences, NM. Photo: Joseph Schmitt



## Don't Miss in Truth or Consequences

**Main Street Gallery** ([mainstreet-torc.com](http://mainstreet-torc.com)) for a range of cutting-edge original works, with an adjacent art center and community space opening soon.

**The Pelican Spa** ([pelican-spa.com](http://pelican-spa.com)), a retro kitsch motel with three rooms, plenty of private hot mineral tubs for soaking plus a full kitchen and community room; a great choice for small groups.

Your hosts Rob and Ralph at **Blackstone Hotsprings** ([blackstonehotsprings.com](http://blackstonehotsprings.com)) are pretty famous around town, in part for their quirky aesthetic. Each suite at the nicely appointed motor inn is fashioned after favorite television shows and characters, such as the

Roy Rogers Suite and the Babaloo Suite. You'll love the Wet Room, a hot-spring sanctuary with a giant soaking tub and geothermal steam room with a waterfall.

**Mothership Yoga Lounge** ([mothershipyogalounge.com](http://mothershipyogalounge.com)) is a spiritual experience with workshops, retreats, classes and even a house DJ, all housed in a former church.

**Cafe BellaLuca** ([cafebellaluca.com](http://cafebellaluca.com)) features homemade Italian-inspired cuisine for lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch; closed Tuesdays.

Find out more about T or C and Sierra County at [truthorconsequencesnm.net](http://truthorconsequencesnm.net).

## Madrid, New Mexico

It was evening when I set out on a 30-minute drive from Santa Fe to the small town of Madrid (pronounced MAD-rid) with my friend Caroline. The starry night drive along Route 14, also known as the Turquoise Trail (a National Scenic Byway), illuminated New Mexico's otherworldly beauty that seems to stretch forever. Knowing that New Mexico is full of eccentric individuals and progressive artists and that I was in the good hands of a good friend, I was surprised to feel a tinge of apprehension as we slowly found our way down a dark road into a town of under 300 residents. It seemed that we were entering a rather rough-looking neck of the woods.

We found parking in a dirt lot and made our way into the **Mine Shaft Tavern** ([themineshafttavern.com](http://themineshafttavern.com)), and my apprehension grew. As an Arizona native, I'd been in these kinds of bars before with my gun-toting brothers, where big-city gays like me don't really fit in. But the place was packed and the mood was rather festive, with live fusion music of some indie country-rock variety. Everywhere I looked, it was cowboy boots, woolly beards, plaid shirts, hardwood floors...and a large bar lined with booze. Enjoying my first

drink, I scanned the room with greater intent, and then it hit me: This might be the first rural saloon where I actually fit in.

We had come to Madrid, in part, to join a mutual friend and local real estate agent, Kevin Bobolsky. Kevin filled me in on how this former mining town evolved into a hippie hangout and drug lair in the 1960s and eventually turned into the slightly more respectable artists' haven that it is today. "The beautiful thing about Madrid," says Kevin, "is that you've got this funky old mining town in the middle of nowhere, and it's really gay-friendly. In fact, the outlying area is littered with gay cowboys and cowgirls, making art and living off the grid." Even fashion guru Tom Ford has a massive ranch just upstream from Madrid. Although I doubt he's living "off-grid."

After a couple of drinks, we made our way outside for a moonlit tour through town. While the tour didn't take long, the town turned out to be absolutely charming. The 100-year-old wood-framed cabins that once housed miners are now brightly painted and showcase local artistry and house fun little boutiques. You won't find a stoplight for miles around, but what you will find are welcoming smiles and a laid-back attitude that leave you wanting more.



An authentic 1950's boardgame from the Television show and the town's namesake. Photo: Joseph Schmitt

## Don't Miss in Madrid

Interesting events like the Sexy Solstice Burlesque Show or Film Club Fridays, showing classic cult camp films, at Madrid Central Station ([themineshafttavern.com](http://themineshafttavern.com)) adjacent to the Mine Shaft Tavern.

**Mama Lisa's Ghost Town Kitchen** (505-471-5769) has an eclectic made-from-scratch menu using organic items whenever possible. Operating hours vary, but you can call ahead to make sure Mama Lisa is in the kitchen.

Visit the Madrid Merchants Association at ([visitmadridnm.com](http://visitmadridnm.com)) for details on lodging and other year-round activities.

Visit Joseph Schmitt's travel and lifestyle blog at [vonschmitt.com](http://vonschmitt.com)



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