

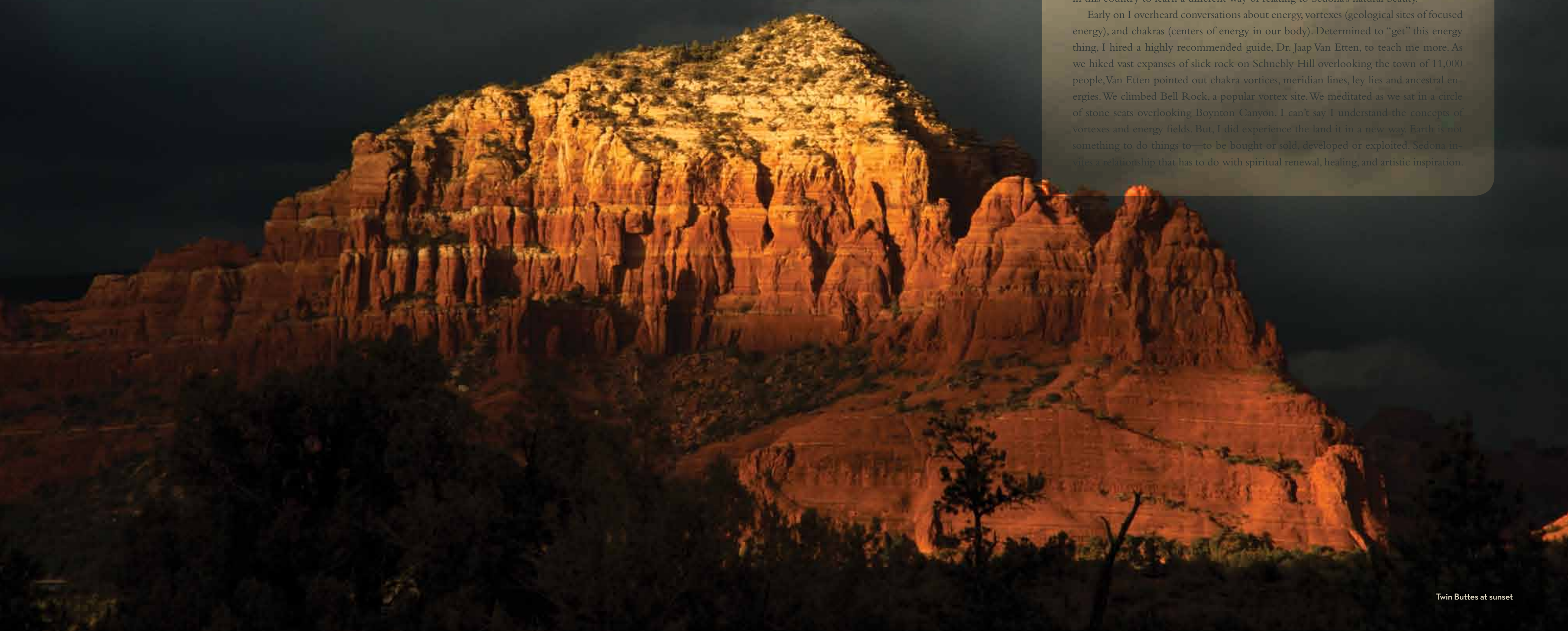
SEDONA

Red Rock and Renewal

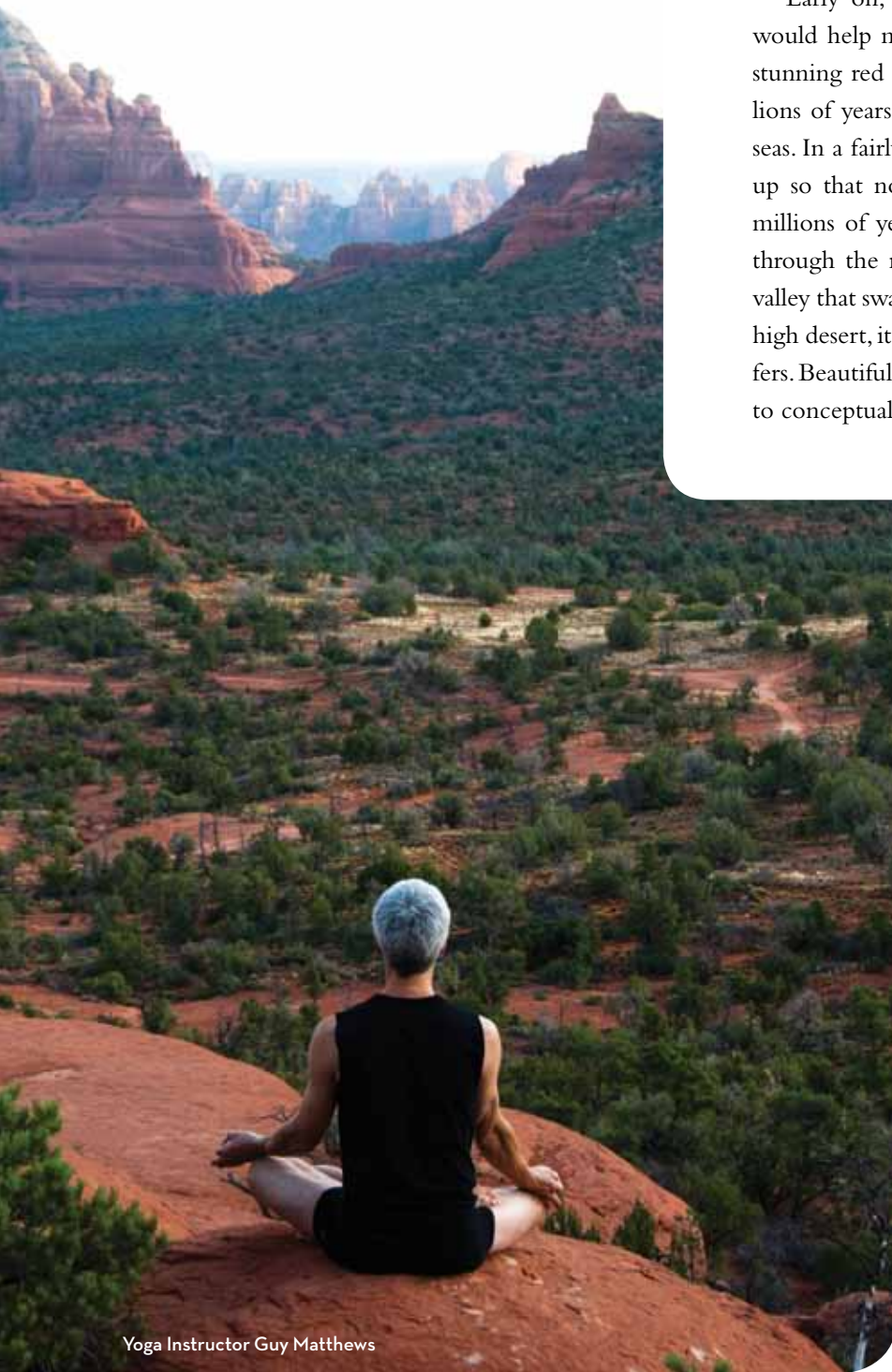
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Pam Taylor*

When I first came to Sedona I wrote my grown children that a simple drive to the grocery store involves Imax-quality cinematic scenes. My initial impression of the towering red rock buttes was typical for an East Coaster who understands natural splendor as it flies by in a car window or as something to compose in a camera viewfinder. In short I was a spectator. It took me awhile of living in this country to learn a different way of relating to Sedona's natural beauty.

Early on I overheard conversations about energy, vortexes (geological sites of focused energy), and chakras (centers of energy in our body). Determined to "get" this energy thing, I hired a highly recommended guide, Dr. Jaap Van Etten, to teach me more. As we hiked vast expanses of slick rock on Schnebly Hill overlooking the town of 11,000 people, Van Etten pointed out chakra vortexes, meridian lines, ley lines and ancestral energies. We climbed Bell Rock, a popular vortex site. We meditated as we sat in a circle of stone seats overlooking Boynton Canyon. I can't say I understand the concepts of vortexes and energy fields. But, I did experience the land in a new way. Earth is not something to do things to—to be bought or sold, developed or exploited. Sedona invites a relationship that has to do with spiritual renewal, healing, and artistic inspiration.



Twin Buttes at sunset



Yoga Instructor Guy Matthews

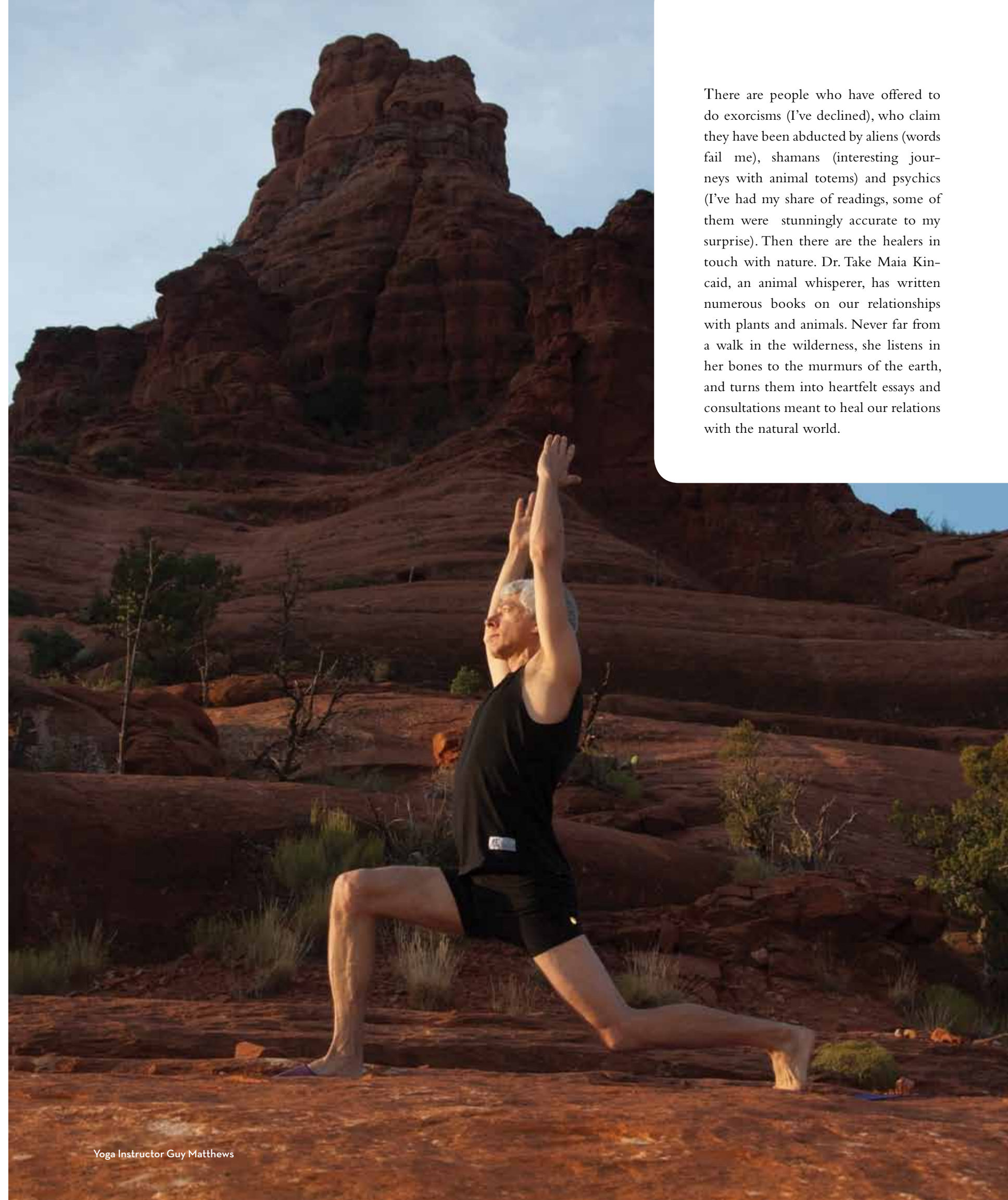
T rue—many people come to hike, bike, and take jeep tours: Sedona has 4 million tourists a year. But they also come to settle into meditation, do yoga on the slick rocks, or circulate QI energy of the wind currents and desert waters. The people I meet here are not put off by the musky smell of javelina and are tantalized by a glimpse of coyote. They are not afraid to embrace desert contradictions—the sweetness of agave nectar oozing from delicate flowers of a hard-armored plant or the powdery chill of snow on hardy cactus.

Early on, while still in mental mode I believed that facts would help me understand what is spread out before me. The stunning red color of the rocks is old-fashioned rust. For millions of years Sedona was approximately a mile under ancient seas. In a fairly recent event, geologically speaking, it was thrust up so that now Sedona is almost a mile above sea level. For millions of years Oak Creek has been carving a steep canyon through the rocks and now opens into today's green riparian valley that swaddles the town. Ironically, although Sedona is now high desert, it sits on the underground waters of limestone aquifers. Beautiful scenery, interesting facts. But, as usual, I was trying to conceptualize what I was seeing and feeling.

I began to “read” the fragility of this hardscrabble earth. Now I smile when I see discrete little signs, put up by Friends of the Forest along the hiking paths. The signs, “Healing in Progress,” urge people to stay on the trails because the high desert ecosystem is truly fragile. What has taken eons to construct ecologically can be undone with a thoughtless boot step. In short, I began to step into the landscape's invitation to intimacy.

For centuries Native Americans have had an intimate relationship with the land. The Sin Agua (Spanish for “without water”) people built dwellings high in the cliffs. They gathered at communal agave roasts along creek beds at areas like V-V Ranch to the south of Sedona. Here they created some of the finest petroglyphs in Arizona, including an ancient solar calendar pecked out of rock face to determine planting and harvesting times. Although the Sin Agua mysteriously disappeared by the mid-fourteenth century, their descendants, the local Yavapai people still perform sacred ceremonies in the area.

Along with this search for spiritual renewal comes alternative healing. Energy healers bloom faster here than desert blossoms after the first spring rains. Sometimes it seems that everyone is a healer of some kind.

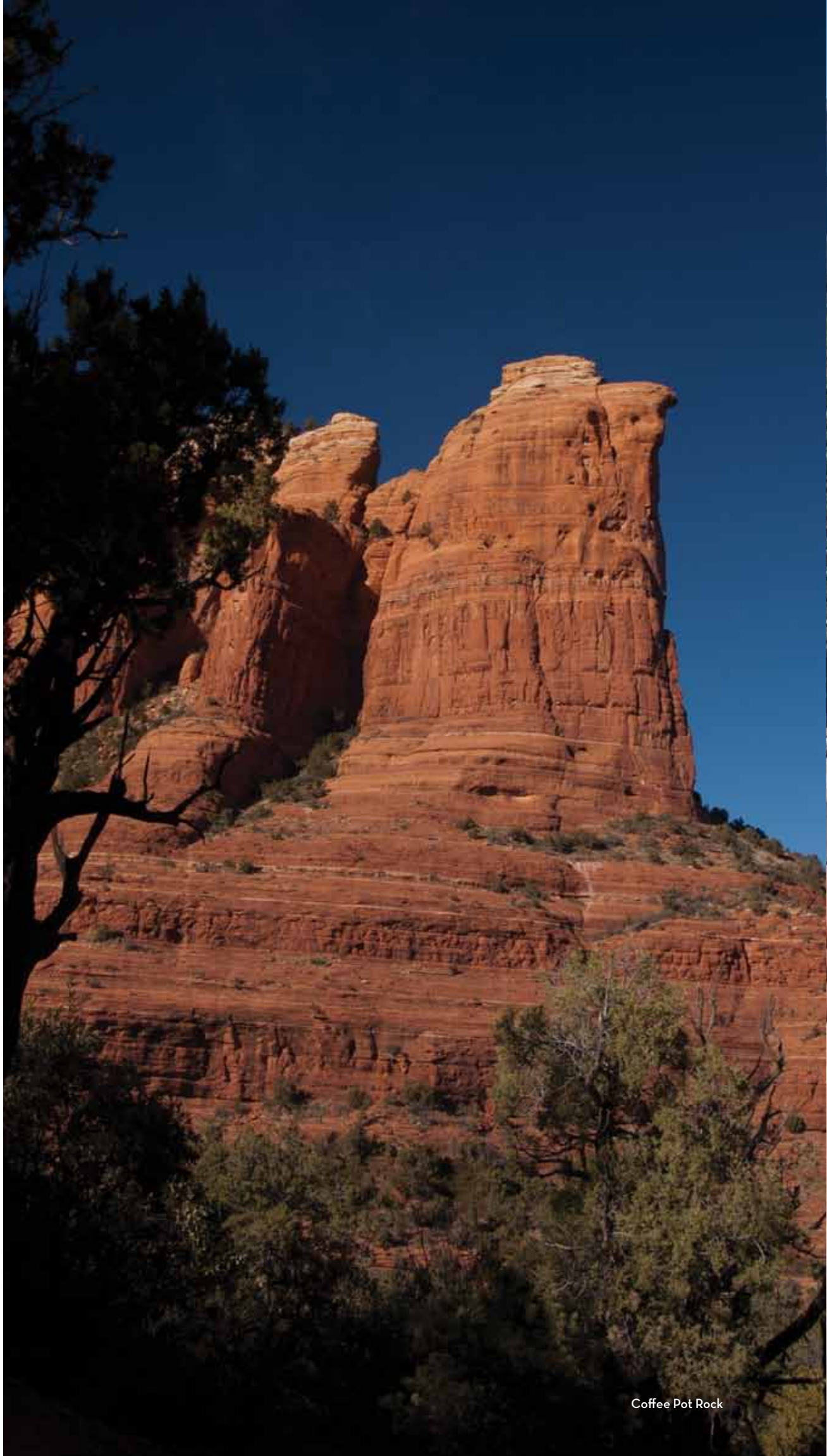


Yoga Instructor Guy Matthews

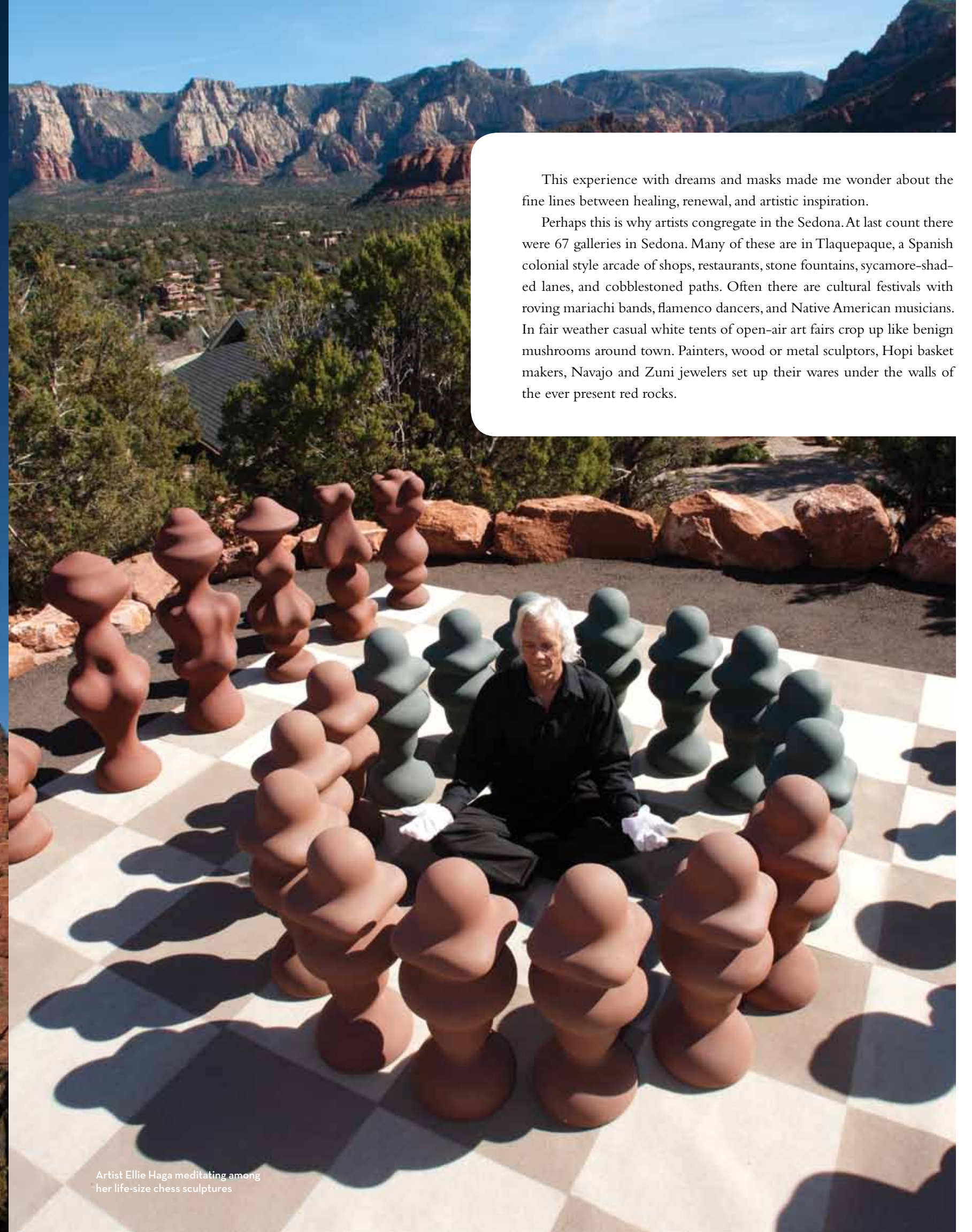
There are people who have offered to do exorcisms (I've declined), who claim they have been abducted by aliens (words fail me), shamans (interesting journeys with animal totems) and psychics (I've had my share of readings, some of them were stunningly accurate to my surprise). Then there are the healers in touch with nature. Dr. Take Maia Kincaid, an animal whisperer, has written numerous books on our relationships with plants and animals. Never far from a walk in the wilderness, she listens in her bones to the murmurs of the earth, and turns them into heartfelt essays and consultations meant to heal our relations with the natural world.

Sarah Smith-Nathan, a registered nurse and acupuncturist for more than 35 years, began painting to express the vibrant light and energy she had been witnessing when she treated patients. Living at the base of an imposing mesa she calls Dragon Mount, she depicts the energies she sees outside her studio and feels as she walks the neighboring paths. The results are paintings with names like *Sacred Geometry*, *Moonlit Shaman*, and *Flying Before the Wind*.

Another healer and artist is Johanna McNamee, a Jungian therapist who tends dreams. She teaches people how to re-enter their dreams, and dialog with those characters and landscapes. Part of this healing process is artistic; she uses natural objects, dance, and song to explore dreamscapes. Intrigued, I took a workshop called "The Mask Speaks." We made face-masks out of clay, a sensuous bypassing of logical conceits. Our fingernails encrusted with bits of clay, we decorated our masks with indigenous materials, such as red dirt, canyon leaves, etc. At a certain point we danced with our masks in nature. I no longer felt like a spectator to the rocks.



Coffee Pot Rock



Artist Ellie Haga meditating among her life-size chess sculptures

This experience with dreams and masks made me wonder about the fine lines between healing, renewal, and artistic inspiration.

Perhaps this is why artists congregate in the Sedona. At last count there were 67 galleries in Sedona. Many of these are in Tlaquepaque, a Spanish colonial style arcade of shops, restaurants, stone fountains, sycamore-shaded lanes, and cobblestoned paths. Often there are cultural festivals with roving mariachi bands, flamenco dancers, and Native American musicians. In fair weather casual white tents of open-air art fairs crop up like benign mushrooms around town. Painters, wood or metal sculptors, Hopi basket makers, Navajo and Zuni jewelers set up their wares under the walls of the ever present red rocks.

Then there are artists who have made this home. Ellie Haga, the first female car designer in Detroit has retired here to live and work in her studio perched on a cliff overlooking Oak Creek. Her life-size sculptures are a presence in the landscape. One is a giant life-size chess set laid out under the mesas and buttes. Another is a sculpture set that glows under the desert stars.

Music is as natural here as the heat and stars. Desert music can be as subtle as the trill of a canyon wren or as bombastic as enthusiastic musicians drumming up the full moon at summer solstice. The sound of

water in the desert is precious beyond belief. As are the plaintive notes of a solo flutist in a cave far from the town lights.

Different people experience the Red Rocks in unique ways. Some have helped me feel the earth beneath my feet, some have helped me shake off my mental concepts of what is possible, and some have opened up new ways of experiencing nature through movement, sound, and artistic expression. Most of all it is wonderful to simply sit on a sunbaked rock, listen to the breeze in swaying cottonwood branches, and gaze out at the roiling clouds in a cerulean sky.

