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ARCOSANTI: THE COMMUNE FOR MILLENNIAL DREAMERS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ARIZONA DESERT

Arcosanti sits on the edge of a mesa in the middle of the desert / *Maggie Grimason*

The adventurers who make their home in a futuristic eco-city in the desert of Arizona have one thing in common: they're almost all under 30

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“You have to get off the island sometimes.” The young man standing before me is in a faded music festival T-shirt that's worn very thin. Like everyone who lives here, Tom's skin is tanned from days spent under the Arizona sun. He's about 23, with a long beard and a camouflage hat shading his eyes – casual means functional here. It's a strange metaphor to describe the place that surrounds us, because we are in the middle of the Sonoran desert – almost the middle of nowhere.

He's taking the last tour of the day of Arcosanti. This town is the antithesis of Phoenix (70 miles south), Las Vegas, Albuquerque and other sprawling desert metropolises. Arcosanti finds the magic in urban life by honouring and uplifting its day-to-day environment. Dreamy architecture inspired by the landscape – it's largely built into a canyon – springs up almost out of nowhere as visitors follow a dirt road from Interstate 17.



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Billed as an “urban laboratory,” the experimental town is the culmination of futurist architect-cum-philosopher Paolo Soleri's theory of arcology – that is, the union of architecture and ecology. Soleri came to America as an apprentice at Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright's workshop in nearby Scottsdale. The headstrong Italian cut his apprenticeship short, but Soleri never left the desert. There he decided to realise his theories about how urban life could be, shaping a “city in the image of man.”

Soleri acquired 260 acres of land in Yavapai County in 1970. He saw Arcosanti as an answer to the anathema of modern urban life, what he called in one of his numerous books – the “inherently wasteful consumption of land, energy, and time tending to isolate people from each other and community.” With cantilevered concrete slabs bedecked by passive solar windows built into sustainable architecture designed to move upward in organic, mixed-use habitats, today Arcosanti is less than five per cent complete. Though Soleri – who died in 2013 – refused to classify Arcosanti as a “utopia” or “commune,” residents are less shy.



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Most of Arcosanti's residents are millennials and dreamers (Maggie Grimason)



Yes, it's odd that Tom describes this desert village as an "island", but I realise – standing among the domed, sun-bleached cement structures, where few doors have locks and cyprus and olive trees grow well over our heads – Arcosanti does feel otherworldly. The bronze and silt-cast ceramic bells made in the town's foundries hang everywhere, ringing with the breeze. Their chimes can be heard throughout the Arcosanti's winding paths, hidden stairs, and painted apses. Resident cats snooze peacefully in the grass beneath them. In a word, it's idyllic.

I amble down the dirt path lined with blooming paddle cactus to the guest housing after being warned about rattlesnakes and scorpions. The largest accommodation block, near the base of the river canyon, is a humble line of single rooms with shared baths, built atop a terraced garden. Goldfish stir the water of small ponds built into the poured cement steps. Santana blares through the floor-to-ceiling screened-in window of my neighbour's unit. "Are you an adventurer?" he asks me, beer in hand. Arcosanti's amiable chef, he lives here with his two young sons, basalt canyon walls as his front yard, grand piano set up in his otherwise humble digs.

The stories of how the 'arconauts', as they call themselves, landed here vary widely. Some have studied urban planning. Some wandered in on the heels of a road trip, took a tour, and never left. Some study architecture. Some are interested in alternative living. Most are aged between 20 and 30. "My parents are both architects," says one young resident, blonde hair pulled out of her eyes by a bandanna. "So I had heard of it. But when I came here and took a tour, I literally cried. I had never felt anything like that before." She took the requisite five-week workshop in arcology required of all potential residents, and in May of 2016, became a fledgling arconaut.



At Arcosanti you're immersed in the landscape (Maggie Grimason)

Yet life in Arcosanti isn't nonstop idyllic. Talking to them, I hear one word over and over again: drama. "You see the same 60 or so people over and over again," Tom says on our tour. "You party with them, you work with them, you get this primal sense of community, so drama is inevitable." As tequila flows poolside, I wonder what drama might unfold in the apartments above here, or in what's known as Camp – more rustic and less central housing, where 13

newer arconauts reside (housing is based on seniority), tasked with caring for the town's chickens and goats. Later, the pool action evolves into a part in a rooftop apartment - the details of which, I'm afraid, must remain strictly off-record. "I think it's just about how small the pool of people you're going to have sex with becomes," one former resident says gamely, when I ask about drama.

Mostly, though, Arcosanti seems liberated from prosaic melodrama. In fact, it feels wonderfully lawless. Once checked in, I have the run of the town, opening doors, climbing staircases and discovering more and more rooms. Behaviour at Arco is governed from the ground up, by social control.

And to those of us from the "real" world, it's a revelation. It's relaxing, but homely rather than luxurious. And it's a place that thrums with purpose. Almost everyone who lives there says they feel inspired by the setting - and I'm not sure it whether it's their conviction or the city's design, but I feel it, too. "These people," one resident tells me, with a broad sweep of her hand to indicate the entire population, "do not suffer from the same malaise others do." Another arconaut paraphrases Soleri himself, reiterating the place's call-to-arms for dreamers and visionaries: "The buildings are just the instrument, the people make the music."

I look out at night, as cars pass like beads of light on the interstate that's visible across the mesa. Soon it'll be time for me to leave. Yet, as long as the highway is bisected by a road that leads to Arcosanti, it will always be possible to travel somewhere far away.



With only a few other residents, there's plenty of 'drama' at Arcosanti (Maggie Grimason)

Travel essentials

Getting there

BA flies direct from Heathrow to Phoenix from £517. Hire a car from the 70-mile drive. A well maintained, mile-long dirt road leads guests into the village.

Staying there

Guest accommodation in the village starts from \$30 (£24) a night for a single room with a shared bathroom. For more space, there's the Sky Suite – a two-bedroom apartment overlooking the mesa from \$100 (£71). Both options are bookable via the [website](#).

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More information

Arcosanti offers one-hour tours every day on the hour between 10am and 4pm (but not 12pm) – tickets cost \$10 (£8). Note that the town is not very accessible for people with disabilities. Guided tours can be made accessible, but overnight guests may find the many steps and dirt paths difficult to navigate.

arcosanti.org

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