



A ghost of a chance

Hillside hamlet a favourite haunt for high-spirited visitors to Arizona

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM MARCH 26, 2011



The Jerome Grand Hotel, formerly the United Verde Hospital, presides over this vertical city.

Photograph by: Dawna Freeman, edmontonjournal.com

JEROME, ARIZONA — The young woman at the registration desk reached around behind her, plucked a room key from the hook beside the cubbyhole and hesitantly handed it to me. "This is Room 32. It's one of our most 'active' rooms. I shouldn't be doing this, so please bring it right back."

We are standing in the lobby of the Grand Hotel in legendary Jerome, Ariz., about 140 kilometres north of Phoenix. It's a short side trip for sightseers from Prescott or Sedona, or a destination for seekers of ghosts and the paranormal. Jerome Grand Hotel, built as a five-storey hospital in 1926, has been visited by ghosts and ghost hunters since it reopened in 1996.

My girlfriends and I were coming from Sedona, not for ghosts, but to see one of the most vertical cities in the United States. This haunted hamlet, home to 400 living souls, clings to the side of a mountain in the high desert of central Arizona.

We drove up in the morning. And I mean drove up. Not only is this 1898 city a mile (1.6 km) above sea

level, it's pitched on a 50-degree slope. From top to bottom, this tiny ghost town varies in elevation by as much as 1,500 feet (457 metres).

In its heyday, this rough-and-tumble hillside village was the largest copper mining town in Arizona, producing \$1 billion in copper, gold and silver over 70 years. By 1920, it supported a booming population of 15,000 miners, gamblers, cowboys, gunslingers, immigrants, bootleggers and prostitutes, living up to its reputation as the Wickedest Town in America. But when the mine closed in 1953, and the population fell to 50, Jerome became known as Ghost City, the largest ghost town in America.

So here we are on a chilly February morning in one of the most haunted ghost towns in Arizona. Resident ghosts are featured at several of the eating and lodging establishments. The Jerome Grand Hotel offers its guests weekday ghost-hunting tours — complete with meters, infrared thermometers and digital cameras — so they can help document the hotel's paranormal activities.

We drop our heads and crane our necks to look out the car window at this large Spanish Mission-style building perched solidly above the town on Cleopatra Hill. We're heading there first to take in the sweeping view of the valley over lunch at the hotel's award-winning restaurant.

We never expected to gain access to one of the most haunted guest rooms.

But driving up and down the steep streets to find the road to the hotel was making Dana, our back-seat passenger, nauseous, so we parked and climbed the stairs linking switchback streets. By the time we entered a copper jewelry shop to ask for directions, Sandra and I were feeling a little light-headed ourselves.

"You've just arrived," says the '60s-generation sales clerk after we describe our queasiness and the condition of our friend on the bench outside. "That's normal. It's a very quick elevation change." She adds helpfully, "In this high altitude, you need to increase your red blood cells. Eat some food."

So we detour up another flight of stairs to the Jerome Palace Haunted Hamburger restaurant, formerly a boarding house with a female ghost named Claire. The back of the menu features the disappearing tricks of tradesmen who haunted the construction workers during restoration.

A green chili burger and fries restores our equilibrium, but Dana still feels dizzy moving the food around her plate. Resuming our hike in the opposite direction, up another narrow road to the Grand Hotel, she explains she can't turn her head too quickly: "It feels like I'm walking on Jell-O."

Looking ahead, she doesn't see the town dropping away below us. Hippies turned the ghost town into a funky arts colony in the '60s, and vestiges of the past century still abound, despite the town's efforts to gussy it up for tourists. Historic buildings include everything from original rickety clapboard shanties on stilts, leaning lodgings, refurbished brothels and saloons, to restored Victorian homes, new boutique shops, 30 art galleries and studios, and two wine-tasting rooms.

Declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976, Jerome boasts the oldest operating silent movie theatre in Arizona, and one of the state's first Safeway stores. The House of Joy, now an eclectic vintage store, apparently made one madame very wealthy back in the day. Halfway up the hill, the landmark 23-room Douglas Mansion, built for \$150,000 in 1916 above the owner's Little Daisy Mine, is now a visitors' centre and state memorial museum, with family and mining artifacts.

The 23-room hotel at the top of Hill Street is the highest structure in the Verde Valley at more than 5,000 feet (1,500 metres). It was the last to be built and built to last, able to withstand mining blasts. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for other buildings — including the jail — that toppled over or slid down the town's slope. But when the mines slowed down after the Second World War, the United Verde Hospital closed in 1950 and remained vacant for the next 44 years.

We enter the hotel through the Asylum Restaurant, presumably named after the hospital's ward for the insane on the third floor. The maternity ward, on the fourth floor, was a TB infirmary before the boom years. The operating room on the second floor is now the grand suite.

In the lobby, a friendly desk clerk invites us to browse through a leather-bound ledger that documents the strange occurrences experienced by hotel guests. There must be more than 300 handwritten entries recorded since the hotel opened 15 years ago.

The hotel was once featured on the TV show Sightings, and guests can turn to Channel 3 in their room to watch videos of other hauntings in Jerome. The Arizona Paranormal Research Society made a preliminary investigation (Case #B-203) of the hotel in August 2007, before shooting a Channel 3 Halloween Special.

Most of the hotel's recorded paranormal activity occurred on the third floor. Many wrote about hearing cries of distress, a meowing cat, or seeing a little boy.

Guests complained of pin pricks in their arm while sleeping, or feeling like they were being strapped down in bed with a heavy weight on top of them. A few were moved to report they spent the night because they were born here.

In Room 32, we're told an executive is said to have shot himself and a female patient jumped off the balcony. Guests staying in this room repeatedly described similar electrical disturbances, with ceiling fans turning on and off, or turning in one direction and then the other, lights turning on and off, and the balcony door opening and closing.

One couple wrote they were so rattled by disturbances in their room after taking the afternoon ghost tour, they checked out at 9:30 that same night.

I ask the young clerk if we can walk up to the third floor. She shakes her head slowly; we have to be hotel guests. Then she glances over her shoulder and grabs the key to Room 32.

We enter the vintage 1926 Otis elevator cage, the first self-service lift in Arizona. On the second floor, the doors and stairwells are wide, reminiscent of the institution's former purpose. Hallways are filled with old furnishings, like an upright piano and an antique telephone switchboard. The rooms are described as homey, but some guests wrote that the period furnishings weren't all that comfortable.

We step into the room and I'm immediately surprised by how nice it smells. I was expecting eau de must, or a staleness masked by a Vegas-strength air freshener. But this room smells quite heavenly, soft and delicate, like the skin of a fresh-cut peach. Could it be the lingering scent of the woman who threw herself off the balcony?

I take a picture of the mirror above the sink in the bathroom, hoping to catch a ghostly orb in my photograph. We swing open the shuttered doors and gasp as we step out onto an iron railing balcony. The view of the Verde Valley to beyond the Red Rocks of Sedona is spectacular.

Before leaving, we pause, waiting quietly for a flicker or a breeze, but nothing stirs. As we begin the descent to our car three blocks below, I wonder if our sixth sense, like our sense of balance, is a tad off.

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