

An oasis of fun awaits in the Arizona desert

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FIRST POSTED: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 08, 2009 04:01 AM EST | UPDATED: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 08, 2009 04:07 AM EST

Hotels in Scottsdale, Arizona, are what Disney is to Orlando. They are amusement parks and lodging rolled into one -- families can spend entire weeks having kid-fun in Scottsdale without ever leaving their hotels.

Two huge hotels in this exclusive suburb of Phoenix stand out for their family friendliness: The Phoenician and The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess.

With its sprawling grounds, lagoon, golf courses and five heated pools, Fairmont's bejewelled Princess is a destination all on its own. Its 6,000-sq-ft kids' pool area is literally an oasis in the desert, with water slides, basketball, volleyball and a segregated zero-entry splash area for toddlers. Called the Sonoran Splash -- the hotel is in the midst of the wide Sonoran Desert -- this pool area is also home to a giant shaded sandbox full of Tonka trucks and beach-friendly toys.

But the best part has to be the Princess's poolside private cabanas with electricity that hooks up TVs, phones and snack bars full of family friendly snacks like pizza, burgers and cool drinks.

Later, children can eat in a kids-only dining room, surrounded like a fishbowl by giant glass windows through which parents in the main dining room can spy on their charges. After dark, kids can grab an inflatable tube and float in the pool while watching movies on a giant poolside screen.

Teens can also hang out -- where else -- the Hang Out, a no-adult zone with a private music room, plasma TVs, and more than 100 DVDs. The Hang Out's Cyber Cafe has computers, a snack area, Xbox stations and couches.

The Princess's Kids Club is a supervised camp-like program for kids aged five to 12 that features hikes, arts and crafts, and catch-and-release fishing in the hotel's giant lagoon. Parents can steal the time to golf or simply lounge in the hotel's best feature: The rooftop Willow Stream Spa, with soothing waterfalls that block out all sounds of kids playing in the pools below.

The Phoenician's location at the base of Camelback Mountain provides a completely different feel. Camelback is a fascinating and truly pretty backdrop to the hotel's sprawling collection of pools and gardens. Kids are fascinated by desert flowers growing along Camelback's paths -- its Cactus Garden has 350 varieties of cacti indigenous to Arizona as well as to Africa and the Galapagos Islands.

Kids are instantly attracted to The Phoenician's nine tiered pools, including the raucous one with the 165-foot twisting waterslide, and the serene one with its mother-of-pearl tile and cascading waterfall. Poolside cabanas are also for rent.

There are specific camp counsellors for teens, along with basketball, water sports, hiking and tennis and golf clinics. For kids aged five to 12, the Phoenician Kids Club offers supervised hikes, swimming, sports, arts and crafts, and tours of The Phoenician's swanky \$25-million art collection that includes French tapestries, Navajo rugs and bronze and marble sculptures.

When families do roost themselves out of these massive hotels to explore the Arizona, there are hikes in the Superstition Mountains, cowboy train rides through the North Verde River Canyon, 4x4 and hot-air balloon tours of the desert, and Arizona's Grand Canyon, reachable by car in about 4.5 hours.

Rates at both The Phoenician and the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess drop dramatically during the summer months. For more information on The Phoenician, visit thephoenician.com. For more on the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, visit fairmont.com/scottsdale.

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