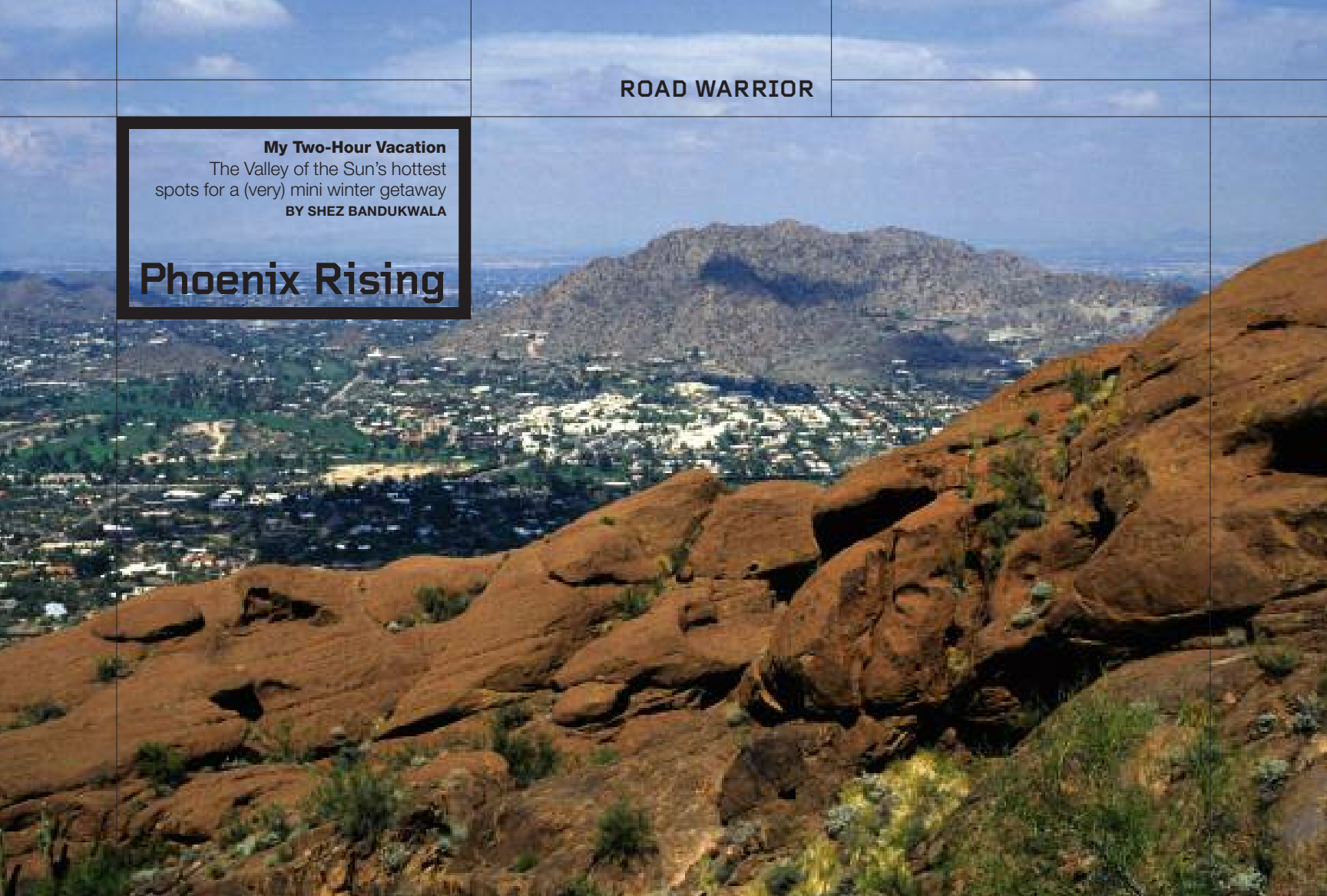


My Two-Hour Vacation
 The Valley of the Sun's hottest spots for a (very) mini winter getaway
 BY SHEZ BANDUKWALA

Phoenix Rising



In late fall, daytime temperatures in Phoenix average 72 degrees, the humidity hovers around 0.2 percent, the desert beckons with an ethereal radiance . . . and I was holed up in a conference room.

Before a recent business trip to the Valley of the Sun, however, I realized that in the two hours I had between meetings, I could squeeze in both a summit of the area's most spectacular peak *and* dinner at its best sushi restaurant. I even had a chance for some face time, considering I was making the ascent with the CFO of a company I was talking to.

THE FILE
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Squaw Peak 2,608 feet.
 602-262-7901 (Ranger Station)

Ritz-Carlton 2401 E. Camelback Road. 602-468-0700; ritzcarlton.com

Zen 32 3160 E. Camelback Road. 602-954-8700

ITINERARY

5 P.M. Meeting at Esplanade Tower in central Phoenix.

5-5:15 P.M. Drive to Squaw Peak. (Take N. 24th Street north and turn left on E. Lincoln Drive. At the second intersection, make a right on Squaw Peak Drive, which leads to the park.)

5:15-5:17 P.M. Park by the SUMMIT TRAIL sign in the first parking lot and change into hiking clothes in the car. Grab a water bottle.

5:17 P.M. Begin ascent. It's reasonably steep but not a technical climb — nothing too difficult, except maybe the top 20 feet.

5:30 P.M. Halfway there. Keep one eye out for gila monsters and rattlesnakes.

5:42 P.M. Reach the summit just as the late-year sun is dipping behind the horizon, painting the tops of the peaks blood-red. Take in the vista of the city twinkling in the darkness below.

6:02 P.M. Complete descent. (Still no rattlesnakes?)

6:05-6:20 P.M. Drive back to the Ritz-Carlton.

6:20-6:25 P.M. Shower and change.

6:25-6:29 P.M. Drive eight blocks to Zen 32. Don't be put off by the fact that it's located in a strip mall. All the best restaurants in Phoenix are located in strip malls.

6:30 P.M. Get seated and order sake. Not sure what to eat? When Jennifer Aniston and Vince Vaughn were here not long ago, they went for spicy tuna rolls, yellowtail sashimi and the Zen Citrus Yellowtail.

7 P.M. Stand up and stretch aching quads. Make way to the outdoor patio. Order a Zen Punch nightcap. Then (sigh) back to work. **D**

Shez Bandukwala, 41, is a partner in the Chicago office of ThinkEquity Partners. He specializes in alternative-energy transactions.

AS TOLD TO CRISTINA VELOCCI, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC / STACY GOLD/GETTY IMAGES (PHOENIX); IAN SPANIER (SHOES)

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