

Urban Experiment in the Desert

Guests get a glimpse of the architect's utopian vision

Paolo Soleri was a genius — if somewhat quirky. He came to Arizona in 1947 as a student of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, but the two equally brilliant architects clashed. Soleri became known for his urban design work and eventually made his home in Scottsdale with his wife and two daughters.

Soleri used his artistic talent to create beautiful hand-poured ceramic and bronze windbells. For the remainder of his life, those windbells became the foundation that would finance his ambition to create ecologically sustainable urban environments.

Soleri started his dream in 1970 by beginning construction on Arcosanti, which sits just off Interstate 17 an hour north of Phoenix. It was to be the living representation of what he termed arcology (architecture + ecology). Soleri envisioned it as the opposite of urban sprawl — people living together in harmony with the land, efficiently utilizing its resources, and working in close proximity to one another. Soleri planned for 5,000 residents to someday move into Arcosanti, but only five percent of the originally planned buildings were constructed.

Even though he passed away in 2013, his work continues under the Cosanti Foundation. There are only about 80 residents now living there, but many volunteer their time to preserving Soleri's dream.

In exchange for their help around the facility, students receive the opportunity to learn about arcology and participate in everything from design, construction, and landscaping to metalworking, hospitality, and communications. Artists help produce the Soleri Windbells.

Guests are invited to experience Soleri's urban experiment and listen as guides demystify the buildings that sit just a mile off the interstate. Guides lead one-hour tours daily that give visitors the chance to explore Soleri's former workspaces, discover the concepts behind the unique buildings, walk through the ceramic studio and the bronze foundry, and learn about community life. More advanced tours on architecture and planning are available by appointment.

Visitors also can enjoy one of the three buffet meals offered each day at the café, and can book one of the guest rooms available for overnight stays. These accommodations are similar to dorm rooms — simple, no frills, some with private baths, each with a Paolo Soleri siltcast design on the ceiling — but the simplicity is defied by magnificent Arizona views. The rooms have full glass fronts that look out over Agua Fria National Monument and some of the best sunrise vistas anywhere.

This isn't a luxury stay. It's about exploring the history of Arcosanti, sitting around the shared tables of the café chatting with residents, speaking with the archivist about Soleri's passion, and watching artists pour molten bronze for the bells. It's about taking time to disconnect from the online world for a few hours and wondering if perhaps Soleri was onto something with his great urban experiment in the desert.

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