

Spring training – where the score is secondary to the fun

By Kathryn Reed

SCOTTSDALE – Eighty-degree days in March and beer vendors meandering through the outfield grass. Clearly this is not AT&T Park in San Francisco.

It's Scottsdale Stadium – where the Giants call home during spring training. They will be playing there for another week to get ready for the real season.

It's appropriately named the Cactus League based on the flora throughout the Phoenix area where 15 teams play in 10 stadiums.



Fans are closer to the field at spring training.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

There is something special about spring training. Parks are more intimate, fans of the sport – not just of the teams playing – fill the stands, beer is brought to you, a slew of players fill the lineup, and the sun is beating down. It's less intense – maybe because the score doesn't have the same

meaning as during the regular season.

It's hard not to run into someone from Tahoe. The Merkleys were sitting a few rows in front of us on the grass, with one of the boys wearing a South Tahoe High shirt. John Rice's trip overlapped with ours. For many in Tahoe, it's an annual ritual – where that crack of the bat sounds rhythmic and the thought of snow melts.

Players make a habit of signing autographs for throngs of fans. It's almost like you could be on a first name basis with them. If only Buster would want to play a game of catch.

Load up your wallet

Spring training is big business for Arizona. And it's not cheap.

Bring cash. Many vendors at this particular park wouldn't take plastic. Food prices are creeping up to what AT&T charges, what with \$6 garlic fries and \$8.50 for Gordon Biersch beer.

Tickets, too, are pricey – \$25 to sit on the grass on a Sunday. This is more than any of my season ticket games at AT&T ballpark. The price dropped to \$12.50 for a Tuesday afternoon game.

In addition to the ballpark prices, extra taxes are levied on visitors to provide all the fun. The Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority collects a 1 percent hotel tax, which will expire in 2031. Maricopa County adds a 3.25 percent tax on car rentals.

But tax revenue for the tourism agency is short \$165 million, in large part because of the recession. That money was supposed to go for stadium improvements. Individual towns may need to pony up the cash for the upgrades to satisfy agreements with various baseball teams.

The state brings in about \$350 million a year off people

coming to the region for spring training, according to the *Arizona Republic*. A record 1.59 millions fans filled the 10 stadiums for about 230 games in 2011, the newspaper said.

How to save

But not everything is expensive. We parked in the free, unlimited parking lot owned by the city of Scottsdale. Parking on city streets was available for free for three hours.

And the trolley is free, too. And the sign for it makes sense – visitors know it's public transit and the schedule is posted. How refreshing.

Meandering up and down the streets of Old Town Scottsdale can fill hours. It's just a couple blocks from the stadium. Stores are varied, sidewalks wide and most are covered – which on a hot day would be incredibly welcome. It's touristy without having the feeling it was created just for tourists.

The Old Town Tavern is perfect to sip a local brew after the game. Baseball chatter echoes from most of the tables.

Lodging is all over the board. We stayed at a friend's condo in Scottsdale at the Troon North Golf Club. Perfect accommodations for the four of us – me, Sue, mom and my sister, Pam.

For golfers, this is an ideal location. For those more interested in listening to songbirds announcing the arrival of a new day, bunnies hopping at twilight, and cacti flowers sprouting, then Troon North is still the place to stay.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)