

# The Wisdom of Stones

Sometimes, traveling heavy can lighten your load

ONCE AGAIN, MY SUITCASE had a red "HEAVY" tag on it, and the customs agent at John F. Kennedy International Airport gave me a funny look when he opened it and saw the bluish speckled stone the size of an orange. He examined it, sure he'd find a secret compartment, but it was only a rock I'd picked up hiking.

Most people collect souvenirs from their travels—a hand-woven basket from Mexico, a Peruvian blowpipe or a piece of turquoise jewelry from Phoenix. I collect rocks. They cost nothing and are always there to remind me of the mountains, the desert and the bottom of the sea—everything I lack in New York City.

Sure, I can get my nature fix in the northern end of Central Park near a small waterfall where I can listen to the birds and pretend I'm in the Santa Rosa Mountains. But eventually I have to leave the dirt trail and head for home amid the sounds of Manolos clicking on the concrete sidewalk and sirens wailing. Back at my apartment, I can pick up one of my stones, close my eyes and pretend I'm still in Tucson.

When I was a kid, we lived in a house with a back yard facing the woods. There, I could escape my family. I'd race to the woods to sit on my favorite boulder, listen to the wind and feel at peace. After I left for college, years passed before I again felt such serenity. I found it once more on a hike at Canyon Ranch in Tucson. Sabino Canyon was a refuge of soaring canyon walls, cooling springs and towering saguaros that made me feel like that little girl in the woods.

About an hour into the Sabino hike, we stopped for a snack. When we started up again, my backpack felt heavier, although I'd eaten two apples and gulped a bottle of water. I forgot about the extra weight as we continued through a grove of saguaros standing tall against the cloudless sky, but at the summit I opened my pack and discovered a gray-and-white speckled grapefruit-sized rock placed there as a joke by another hiker. The stone was round and felt cool and smooth in my hands. I held it as I looked out at a heady view of the Santa Catalina Mountains. For a change, I wasn't worrying about anything.



I decided to bring the stone home with me to conjure up this moment. All I would need to do is close my eyes, wrap my hands around its smooth surface and think about these saguaro-studded hills.

Later, I went on a whitewater-rafting trip in the Grand Canyon. Most days we'd paddle through huge rapids with names like Lava Falls, Granite, Hermit and Crystal. The rapid after Crystal is "ABC," or Alive Below Crystal. Each morning I'd awaken when sunrise cast its orange glow against the cliffs, climb out of my sleeping bag and walk down to the river to look for gray stones with a vein of white quartz running through the center that the guide called "lucky stones." Then I'd sit on a rock and listen to the sound of the river lapping against the banks, cocooned in peace. On the last morning, I'd given up finding a lucky stone. Suddenly I saw it right in front of me: a smooth gray stone with a line of white quartz.

Now, my lucky stone from the Grand Canyon sits on my desk at home, and when I'm searching for an idea that won't come, I close my hand around it and remind myself that everything will come if I'll just let go.

I have scores of stones now, but my favorite is still that original gray-and-white rock from Sabino Canyon slipped into my backpack as a joke. It serves as the first entry in the stone journal of my travels. I shut my eyes, take a breath, feel its smoothness and transport myself back to the stillness of the saguaros. And when I have that Arizona image entrenched firmly in my mind, I can slow down, release my stress and remember what's really important. So I'll keep gathering stones and traveling heavy. Lugging an overweight suitcase is a small price to pay for serenity, a small price to pay for keeping life light. ■■