



Copenhaver Castle on Camelback Mountain, left; the castle's 20-person hot tub, right

## Crowning Achievement

A Phoenix orthodontist drilled his way into Camelback Mountain and built a castle worthy of a king. Now it's on the market for \$3.5 million.

**A**LTHOUGH MOCK castles have been built in Phoenix to market everything from amusement parks to adult stores, they are merely wood-and-stucco facsimiles without any true royal aspirations. The city does, however, boast a true regal fortress featuring impenetrable rock walls and towers, a drawbridge and a dungeon reached by secret passageways. The castle is the brainchild not of a king but of retired Phoenix orthodontist Dr. Mort Copenhaver.

Almost single-handedly, the high-energy dentist brought a childhood dream to fruition by designing and constructing, over a 12-year period, what is perhaps the city's most unique residence, Copenhaver Castle.

"My dream growing up was to build something overlooking a lake, but that was tough to do in the desert," Copenhaver says. "Instead, I built the castle overlooking a sea of lights."

Copenhaver began his odyssey in 1967 by purchasing an unlikely mountain lair for his castle: an almost vertical 2.5-acre lot on the south side of Camelback Mountain. Although the parcel was prized for being the highest private lot on those slopes, building on such steep terrain seemed impossible. Then 34, Copenhaver, who was raised on a Colorado ranch, was undaunted by the Herculean task.

In a nod toward both his profession and his newly acquired site near the jaw of the camel, Copenhaver named the site Alveolar Ridge – a dental term for a jaw ridge in the mouth – and set to work. Assisted by laborers and friends, he blasted into the granite rock of Camelback Mountain to excavate a narrow, steep, 25-degree-grade driveway up to a site he would level for his castle.

Legal battles with a neighbor and the

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— COPENHAVER CASTLE CARETAKER ZACH ROBERTSON

city, plus a month spent in the hospital as a result of his bulldozer exploding, netted Copenhaver all of 18 inches of driveway after one year of work. Undeterred, he finally completed the driveway after three years at a reported cost of \$500,000.

"Friends thought I was nuts, but it was something I always wanted to do," Copenhaver says. "Sometimes when the project seemed too daunting I would go up there at night to meditate. The site's peacefulness would recharge my enthusiasm."

Copenhaver initially designed the Moorish-looking stronghold by making a model with dental plaster. He bartered with contractors for engineering, plumbing and electrical work by offering dental services in return.

Much of the arduous labor he did himself. Taking a sledgehammer to the excavated rock, he fashioned stones averaging a hundred pounds so he could move them by hand. These stones, along with about 50,000 bags of concrete, were used to build the castle's 18-inch- to 6-foot-thick walls that blend in seamlessly with the mountain.

"It was a fun project; mornings and weekends I would work at the castle, and during the afternoons I would practice dentistry," Copenhaver says. "The two complemented each other; dentistry is more mental, and construction is more physical."

By late 1977, Copenhaver had moved into the 7,800-square-foot home, which featured 20 rooms on eight levels. Ten balconies provided breathtaking views of the city. Wrought iron and stained glass salvaged from the Fox Theater in Downtown Phoenix were used throughout the castle.

The castle's amenities were fit for a king and queen – and their entourages. The Great Room boasted a 17-foot-tall waterfall that cascaded above a fireplace and a 20-person spa that was recessed into



## Phoenix Files History

the floor and placed below a retractable roof. The dungeon could be accessed by a hidden door or via a secret passage from the Great Room. The punishment doled out in the dungeon couldn't have been too severe; it was equipped with a wet bar.

The castle, decorated in a medieval theme, quickly became the place to see and be seen. "I hosted quite a few social functions at the castle," Copenhaver says. "By the late 1970s, publicity about the place had spread all over the world and people were very curious to see what it was like."

Public tours attracting as many as 4,000 visitors were held one weekend a year, with proceeds going to a foundation that Copenhaver started to provide orthodontic services to children. The castle also was the scene of political fundraisers and lavish parties.

"The place had a Playboy mansion mystique with the oversized hot tub, dungeon, mirrored bedrooms and secret passages," says caretaker Zach Robertson.

In 1985, Copenhaver put the castle on the market for \$7 million when his company, DentalHealth, went into bankruptcy. He eventually lost the home. In 1989, Jerry Mitchell, co-founder of the original Rawhide in north Scottsdale, bought the castle for \$985,000. He, too, lost it to bankruptcy in 2005.

Copenhaver Castle, now owned by Old Standard Life Insurance Company, is back on the market for a modest asking price - at least by royal standards - of \$3.5 million. Guests are greeted at the property entrance by a plaque stating, "Alveolar Ridge 1967." The gated driveway to the castle climbs steeply for 70 feet and then switches back and forth twice in a white-knuckle ride



Dr. Mort Copenhaver took a decade to build his castle, then lost it to bankruptcy.

before ending some 300 feet above street level. The local fire department's engines can't negotiate the imposing driveway, so the fortress has its own sprinkler system. The driveway doubles as the castle's dry moat, with a drawbridge connecting the master bedroom to Camelback Mountain (kept raised to deter curious hikers). Heavy oak doors at the front of the castle part to reveal a spacious interior - albeit in need of renovation - with a jaw-dropping vista of Phoenix.

Will Copenhaver Castle be purchased by an owner eager to restore its majestic luster, or will it stand vacant as the white elephant

of the Phoenix home market?

Although visitors are awestruck by the castle, no one with deep pockets had come forth as of press time. In February, two days of tours followed by an auction failed to elicit a buyer. Proposed new uses for the property include a medieval wedding center or a bed and breakfast, both of which would require rezoning.

Perhaps the only certainty regarding Copenhaver Castle is that, because of its solid construction, it's destined to be an awe-inspiring landmark on Camelback Mountain for a very long time.

— Douglas Towne