What does 8,000 feet elevation, red raspberry muffins, stately Ramses, Bruschetta and Jeffrey have in common? Well, if you look closely, you will discover all of these and more at the Baker Butte Lookout Tower in Coconino Forest. Meeting Shirley Payne, the Tower’s fire guardian, was a special treat.

Driving uphill to Baker Butte Lookout Tower, from the FR 300, you will drive through richly lush terrain, ferns abundantly spread beneath the maples, Douglas firs, Gamble oaks and the Ponderosa pines. Wild flowers surprise you during their blooming season.

Arriving at the top of the hill, you will likely be greeted—no, not by an oversized statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses--but the resident, very fit 20-year-old horse in his corral. “Neigh, neigh” in horse language likely means “Welcome to all gentle humans who will respect all here at Baker Butte Lookout.”

After parking, I hollered a “Hello!” I was greeted back by a friendly voice, “Hello!” It was Shirley Payne from up top in the Tower. She’s in charge here and devoted to keeping a lookout for any possible fires.

While climbing the 42 steps up to reach the tower top, whose elevation is 8,074 on ground level but 8,100 feet in the tower, I whispered admonishment to myself for not staying in better shape! But, the views were well worth the effort! Panoramic views -- 360 degrees of green shapes and shadows to mesmerize the eyes and make the heart beat faster. As I reached the top, Shirley pulled up the trap door, so I could enter.

Greeting me there was her large black Labrador, Jeffrey, with a stuffed toy in his mouth, as if to say “Want to play?” I was surprised to learn this gentle, peace-filled animal was only about two years old, with a birthday in November. He wasn’t a romping, ever-active puppy at all. Shirley said she
worked with him to get him calm. It worked beautifully.

I eagerly asked Shirley, “What’s it like to live and work here at the top of the world? (her words).”

“I get a couple days free each week and I ride (Ramses) all over the area. I’ve had five bear sightings, although two bears may have been around for a second visit.”

Shirley takes her job seriously and has been devotedly working at Baker Butte for many years. How devoted to the lookout tower? Well her license plate says it all: “BAKER LO.” She published her book *Baker Butte Journal 2010*, with colorful photographs chronicling her life as a “tower ranger” and she shares some very excellent favorite recipes. Yes, she is well known for her delicious food preparations too. On a previous visit, I had the delight of tasting her berry muffins. *Yummy* modestly describes them.

I learned from Shirley there are 77 Lookouts in Arizona still staffed. Baker Butte Tower was originally built in 1937 by the CCC (Civil Conservation Corp). In the winter of 2009, a metal catwalk around the tower enclosure was added. I walked around the tower top on that catwalk. It’s a strange feeling to see the ground below your feet through the steel mesh, magnificent vistas around you as you look out and seeing the skies above you. The feeling is expanding and exhilarating. Free and yet safe. When I took a photo of the distant ridge I love, she told me that it has no name. Wow, so now I call it No Name Ridge. Shouldn’t we give it a name?

I learned that, in 2010, the Lookout got new walls and windows but the floor is still the original one with some understandable chips and wear.

In 1983, Shirley and her husband transferred from Grand Canyon and she started work as part-time relief at Moqui Lookout Tower that turned into a full-time job. After 12 years, she transferred to Baker Butte Tower where she has worked for 22 years (so far). Her husband, though now retired, still works with the forest service doing logistics during fire-fighting season and was gone to the 911 site crises for a month. This summer, he was sent to fires in New Mexico, Oregon and Washington and was gone 80 days, working 16-hour days. She worked as many hours but here at Baker Butte.

“I like my own company,” she said. I agreed. Nowadays, I too am relishing the quietude of my own personal space and life. It is radically different from my past, taking care of places and people nonstop. But it is a good change. I still love people and the places I go but now I can choose when and where.

“What about fire seasons?” I asked. During those, she must work sometimes 10-12 hours daily and often works thirteen days on with only one day off. But her devotion and love of what she does carries her through those times. She
says her good news about fire seasons is that she has never had to be evacuated. (Yet.)

Shirley said the fires this year have burned very hot, engulfing and crowning. She added that lightening fires have a blue hue to them. When lightning strikes the tower, the steel catwalk glows with sizzling sounds. She has insulators on her stool legs for protection. I also learned that when fires begin in heavily fueled areas, the smoke is much darker.

What does this “Lookout Lady” like? Well, her list is appreciatively long but here’s a few: the wildlife, the weather, away from many people, her dog and horse, the happy hummingbirds and-the crickets.

She smiled. “I love to listen to the crickets at night.” I was surprised by that. I didn’t think that, at 8,100 feet in the air, you could hear crickets chirping down on the ground. But, the air is so very quiet, I think you can hear everything super clearly. She told me that when she visits friends, they have the air conditioning running nonstop. It is so loud she finds sleep difficult. But at the tower, all is cool and quiet.

Shirley’s parting thought? “I don’t think I will ever get tired of these views.” I silently agreed. I would add, she probably won’t tire of her lifestyle here either.

Our beautiful -- and wildly diverse -- famous Arizona Rim Country is a treasure for us all to use and appreciate. With our privileges come our inherent responsibility to be kind to this land, keep it clean and safe also. May your journeys in our Rim Country bring happy memories that invite you to return.

IF YOU GO: To get there from Payson, take SR87 north through Pine and Strawberry approximately 28 miles. (near mile post 281). See Sign saying: To the FR 300 Road, Knoll Lake. Turn right onto FR218, make first LEFT turn onto FR300 road aka Rim Road. Here it becomes a bit like a washboard but slowly persevere. You are only 1.3 miles to destination. In about 1/3rd mile, you come to a green metal gate on right. If the gate is open, turn RIGHT and proceed uphill. Take it easy, the road is kind of bumpy. (If gates are closed, please respect their space, as it is not open for visitation. Your courtesy is expected and very much appreciated.)