



DESERT DREAMING: TUCSON, US

"Trust the bike, it can handle more than you think," says my guide Rob as I pedal hard to keep up with his pace on a trail in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains. Our ride takes us through picture-perfect desert: towering saguaro cacti entwine their spiny fingers up to 40ft into the sky, while barrel cacti burst into bloom and amber sand paths streak gravelly tracks. Gaining in confidence and with Rob's words spurring me on, I speed behind him towards a bank that he mounts with ease, but for which I'm not entirely prepared. My front wheel makes it up, but the rear bounces and bucks me out of the saddle, over the handlebars and face down into the dirt, narrowly missing the myriad needles defending the desert flora.

Face-planting aside, southern Arizona's ancient pine-clad ranges and desert plains are playgrounds for adventure seekers. Minutes from the laid-back, modern city of Tucson, you'll find rugged peaks and formations spanning 1.66 billion years of geological time, and trails made for horse riding, biking, rock climbing and even winter skiing. The timeless landscapes of the surrounding Sonoran Desert wait to be explored on foot or on wheels.

One of the world's hottest deserts, the Sonoran is also surprisingly one of its richest, with more than 2,000 species of flowering plants, some 200 species of birds and a diverse range of animals adapted to thrive in the environment, including mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and peccaries, known locally as javelinas. Walking the sandy trails in Saguaro



National Park, I spot clues of their presence - animal tracks disappearing into the bush, as Gila woodpeckers dart amid the centuries-old saguaros, excavating holes that provide sanctuary for other birds.

Human presence in the Tucson Basin dates back around 12,500 years to the Pleistocene Age, with areas along the Santa Cruz River believed to be the oldest inhabited region of the US. The Hohokam culture emerged between 300 and 1500CE. Trading with people from Mexico, the settlers of the Sonoran Desert farmed squash, corn, beans and agave. The culture is famed for its pottery and complex irrigation systems, which archaeologists are still discovering in southern Arizona's desert valleys and beneath its cities today.

Later came Jesuit missionaries, beginning with Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in 1691, remembered in a magical museum, Gallery in the Sun, the former desert home and studio of artist Ettore 'Ted' DeGrazia. Capturing the Jesuit interactions with the local desert people in his paintings, Ted also built a small adobe chapel in the grounds, the Mission in the Sun, in honour of the priest. In 1692, Father Eusebio founded a Catholic church and school on a grander scale, Mission San Xavier del Bac, in Tucson. Completed in 1797, San Xavier is one of the most beautiful Spanish missions in the country, known as the 'white dove in the desert', with gleaming white walls and soaring arches and domes.

A backdrop to change, the Santa Catalina Mountains rise from the desert as a great mountain island, soaring to higher than 9,000ft at their summit, Mount Lemmon. Along with the nearby Tucson and Rincon Mountains, the Catalinas have weathered battles of colonisation between the Apaches and Spanish in the 1700s, conflicts between America and Mexico in the 1840s, mining for copper, silver and gold in the 1850s, and growing modern-day urbanisation. Tucson is the only major city in the US located in the middle of a national park (Saguaro),

and Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is intended to balance the growth, protecting native species and 440,000 acres of critical desert habitat.

Hiking the pools and waterfalls of Sabino Canyon in the foothills of the Catalinas at sunset, the landscape is washed with technicolour. Impossibly beautiful purples and pinks streak the sky, sanguine sand shifts under my feet, and gold kisses the saguaros, before the giants morph into mystical silhouettes, dancing across the indigo horizon at twilight. A million hidden cicadas or crickets launch into song, batwings swoosh above me and a warm wind whispers in my ear as I cross the car park and hear the growl of motors eclipsing the eternal sounds of the desert. Turning onto the highway, I head back to the city as the last glow of the sun outlines the mountains, and the saguaros dance, as they always have, into the starry night.

Where to stay

Among the places to explore the territory is the historic Hacienda del Sol near Tucson. Meaning 'Dwelling of the Sun', it was built in 1929 as an exclusive girls' finishing school. Set amid 34 acres of fountains, botanical gardens and trails, its guests can make the most of the Arizona weather horse riding, hiking and watching out for visiting critters including bobcats, coyotes and roadrunners. It also has uplifting views of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

For details about the Hacienda del Sol, visit haciendadelosol.com. Southwest Trekking offer guided hiking and mountain biking excursions in southern Arizona, visit swtrekking.com. To find out more about Tucson, go to visittucson.org or visitarizona.com.

Visit travel.state.gov for the most up-to-date travel advice and any quarantine restrictions that might be in place.

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