

# A DESERT STATE OF MIND

Two different experiences  
shape a visit to Tucson, Arizona

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY DIANA BALLON

Think of Tucson as a basin with steep edges. An urban desert, defined less by its architecture than by its natural beauty, benign climate, blue skies and the dazzling interplay of light and shadow.

A city of about a half million people, Tucson—a mere one-and-a-half-hour drive from Phoenix—is surrounded by five mountain ranges. Here cacti stand at attention along sidewalks, in front yards and across vast stretches of beige desert. When they bloom in April, they offer resplendent contrasts in purple, white, red and yellow.

For Canadians, the Grand Canyon and the red rocks of Sedona are likely the two most conjured images associated with Arizona. However the sprawling city of Tucson—part urban, part country—are where desert and mountains collide. Canyons are there to be climbed. Museums display everything from contemporary photography and desert wildlife, to aerospace and Jewish history. Accommodations vary, depending on where you want to stay, be it a dude ranch, upscale resort or historic inn.

## THE DUDE RANCH EXPERIENCE

Although having rarely ridden a horse, fantasies of the Wild West and life on a dude ranch was what first drew me to this town. Arizona ranches have been around since the 1920s and Tucson boasts two of the best in the state.

Most dude or guest ranches began as working cattle ranches and evolved into guest ranches that range from working to family to luxury. In the 1940s,

there were some 100 guest ranches in Tucson, but this number decreased to about 30 in the 1960s and then gradually dwindled to two as urban sprawl swallowed up most of the land.

We stayed at one of these two remaining ranches: White Stallion Ranch ([whitestallion.com](http://whitestallion.com)), which TripAdvisor consistently rates number one out of 130 Tucson accommodations. It's the ultimate all-inclusive, but without the typical bikini-clad, sunburnt, tequila-guzzling guest that you think of on a beach holiday. Instead, visitors roam around in jeans and cowboy boots when they're coming from or heading out for one of several daily rides that are included in your stay. The ranch sits on 3,000 acres and also includes family-style meals, accommodations in one of 41 casitas or a four-bedroom house, and other amenities, like an outdoor heated pool, sunken tennis court, spa, and recreation room with a private movie theatre. (There are no TVs in the rooms.) Nighttime entertainment includes a Wild West show (think gun slinging, whip cracking and trick roping), an art class and a cowboy singer.

Six p.m. is social hour, when guests gather around the bar and lounge area. Our kids make a beeline for the saddle stools, I make a beeline for the prickly pear margaritas. (It's an honour bar, but at \$3.50 it's a steal.)

Dinner is buffet style and families are free to sit at outdoor tables. Conversation stops briefly as

a railroad bell announces one of the owners, Russell True, who describes the rides for the next day. Depending on the day, this might include fast or slow rides, rides into the mountains, and rides that include wine and cheese, beer and Cheetos, or breakfast.



White Stallion Ranch



The Dude Ranch Experience





Photo by Diana Ballon

Bisbee was recently rated as the most historic town in America.



Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum



Mission San Xavier del Bac

Each guest provides their height and weight prior to arrival and is matched with an appropriate-sized horse for the duration of their stay.

Our last morning, we saddle up for our 7:30 a.m. breakfast ride. This is one of the slow rides, a leisurely amble across the desert in the still-cool air of early morning. Everywhere you see saguaro cacti and the low brush of mesquite and creosote bushes, as well as palo verde and ironwood trees. After about 40 minutes, we arrive, almost magically, at shaded picnic tables with blue and white checked tablecloths. We line up with our plates to get coffee, and eggs with sausage, potatoes and blueberry pancakes cooked on mesquite coals over a grill.

I have little appetite in the morning before heading to my downtown office in Toronto. But here in the desert, the air is fresh, the wind is warm and the sun feels hot. And I'm famished.

#### RESORTS THAT MERGE WITH THE DESERT LANDSCAPE

If riding the dusty trails with the kids is not your idea of a vacation, family resorts are another option. These properties tend to be built in the foothills of the mountains on large properties where desert and mountains are your backyard, and the twinkling lights of downtown are simply spots on the horizon.

We chose the Loews Ventana Canyon Resort ([loewshotels.com/ventana-canyon](http://loewshotels.com/ventana-canyon)), at the foot of the Santa Catalina Mountains. Featured in *Architectural Digest* in 1984, it's one of the first green hotels built in America. There's an 80-foot waterfall, a butterfly garden and a six-mile hiking trail on the property. Designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, the brown stone walls merge with the desert landscape, a pond flows under the main building, cooling the lobby through the summer months, and the rocks and minerals on display here are borrowed from the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum.

The resort's high-end restaurant, the Flying V Bar & Grill doesn't disappoint. Executive chef Ken Harvey describes Tucson as "healthy, balanced life with the

seasons." Our dinner begins with award-winning guacamole, prepared tableside, along with prickly pear lemonade, an amuse bouche for the kids, and tequila and margaritas for my husband and me. This is followed up by tiger prawns escabeche and short rib tacos, and then veal porterhouse with bacon mac and cheese. Divine. Dessert is a lavish and delectable chocolate tasting.

With his full-sleeve tattoos that hide scars from cooking burns, Harvey talks about the synergy of the town and how Tucson chefs are congenially collaborative. (People flock here for his food, as they do at Ventana's more casual Canyon Café, which draws anywhere from about 400 to 800 for their famous Sunday brunch.)

After our meal, the kids and I float on our backs in the beautiful outdoor pool, while next to us, a group is gathered around getting an astronomical tour of the stars.

#### A SIDE TRIP TO BISBEE

Bisbee, a two-hour drive from Tucson and a mere four miles from the Mexican border, is a magically serene place—a quiet desert oasis—in the Mule Mountains. It's recently been rated as the most historic town in America.

From the 1880s to mid 1970s, more than 45 billion dollars worth of metals were excavated here. After the mines closed, Bisbee became an affordable haven, attracting artists and other free spirits opting into a slower pace of life.

Gary Dillard, an historian and our highly informed tour guide with Lavender Jeep Tours ([lavenderjeeptours.com](http://lavenderjeeptours.com)), begins by taking us up through the historic district of Bisbee, which is built into hillsides dotted with colourful old homes and surrounded by red mountains. We drive along High Road—with the startling blue Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico in the distance. Then we head out of town, through Warren, where wealthy copper barons and mine managers once settled, past an open pit mine and old ballpark where Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio once played. We then pass

a massive cemetery followed by The Shady Dell, a motel where guests stay in sleek, restored airstream trailers from the 1950s.

At the Copper Queen Hotel ([copperqueen.com](http://copperqueen.com)), we're free to tour around on our own. We travel by underground trolley 1,800 feet into the mine with Queen Mine Historic Mining Tours, donning hard hats, bright yellow slickers and head lamps.

Afterwards, we settle in for a beer (root beer for the kids) at the Bisbee Brewing Company, before checking into the eminently charming Canyon Rose Suites ([canyonrose.com](http://canyonrose.com)), where our two-bedroom suite in a restored turn-of-the-century building is more like a small house—perfect for family.

#### OUR TOP 5 SIGHTSEEING DESTINATIONS AND HIKES

1. Order cocktails in the lounge of the **Hotel Congress**, built in 1919. Try the \$5 Mexican ice water, the closest thing to a margarita.
2. Visit the **Creative Center for Photography**. Started up by Ansel Adams at the University of Arizona, it boasts an excellent collection of mainly black-and-white prints. Entry is free of charge.
3. Hike **Sabino Canyon** (about a 15-minute drive from Ventana Resort). There is a 45-minute narrated shuttle bus ride, which covers some of the best scenery in the area.
4. Roam along the meandering, two-mile path through the **Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum**. See a mother hummingbird feeding her baby in the aviary, explore underground caves, visit the art gallery and check out the aquarium at the entrance.
5. Constructed in the late 1700s by Franciscan missionaries, **Mission San Xavier del Bac** is a stunning example of Spanish baroque architecture.

#### GETTING THERE

Fly directly to Tucson or take non-stop flights to Phoenix. If arriving in Phoenix, avoid the I-10 and instead, take a slightly longer, but much more scenic route: the 60 freeway east to Apache Junction, the 79 through the town of Florence, then the 77 into Tucson.