

## Gila Bend Road Trip (A21A-1)

The pandemic is still underway, but the winter surge has finally ebbed. After five months at home, I needed a change of scenery. So, I planned another socially distant road trip, targeting outdoor sites in the region around Gila Bend, Arizona, located southwest of Phoenix on the way towards Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

I've visited the national monument a few times over the years, but my attempt at a comprehensive visit back in 2018 was marred by overcast skies and periods of rain. So, I wanted a sunny day visit there. There are also a couple ruins sites near Gila Bend that can only be views from a distance. With my 30x optical zoom camera, I figured I might get some better pictures of the ruins than I did with my old 15x optical zoom camera when I saw them a few years ago. I also found a few other sites in the Gila Bend area worth checking out.

The drive from Las Vegas to Phoenix is pretty straightforward – Highway 93 southeast to Wickenburg, then Highway 60 into Phoenix. I've taken it a handful of times over the years now, so I decided to break up that route a bit on the way down and then take a California route back north, hitting a few new-to-me stops along the way.

Like my first stop on the way down. Bagdad, Arizona. It's a mining town in the middle of nowhere between Highways 93 and 89. And it turns out, not much else. But the drive through the mountainous region to get to Highway 89 was pretty.



*A small Bagdad park displays some mining equipment*



*The mine entrance. Alas, I couldn't get closer to get a decent view of the copper mine.*

The Bagdad area is home to one of the largest copper reserves in the world. The mine yields about 7.2 pounds of copper for every ton of rock that gets pulled out of the mine.

I headed south on Highway 89 towards Yarnell. Some of my distant cousins established the Shrine of St. Joseph of the Mountains there, which I visited in 2015. Depending on the time, I wasn't certain I would stop, but found that it was closed due to the pandemic, which made my decision simple.



*Along the Stations of the Cross trail at the Shrine of St. Joseph of the Mountains*

In 2013, the Yarnell Hill Fire burned thousands of acres in the area, destroying 127 buildings in Yarnell and damaging several areas in the shrine.

But the fire is remembered for the 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots fire crew who were killed on June 30, 2013 when the fire overran their position. Arizona established a memorial state park at the site in 2016.



*Memorial sculpture at Granite Mountain Hotshots Memorial State Park*

A nearly seven-mile round trip hike leads to memorials at the fatality site.

I continued on to Gila Bend, Arizona for a three-night stay.

For my first full day in Gila Bend, I focused on sites in the Gila Bend area, starting with return visits to view the Gatlin Ruins Site and the Fortaleza Ruins Site.

The Gatlin site was discovered in 1959 when the area was being checked out ahead of the construction of a dam on the Gila River. On about 300 acres they found an ancient Hohokam village with one of their earliest known platform mounds and two ceremonial ball courts among its features, suggesting that it was an important site along a major Hohokam trade route. It's on city property. Some websites suggest that a split developed between volunteers working to prepare the site and new city government officials, resulting in the volunteers quitting and the site more or less being mothballed for years now. It's not open to the public.



*A platform mound at the Gatlin site visible from the road. Little else of the site is visible from the road.*

The hilltop Fortaleza ruins site was built by the Hohokam and occupied between 1200AD and 1450AD. It was a defensive site marking the southwestern edge of Hohokam territory. It is on reservation lands, and is generally off-limits to visitors. With adjacent farms being private property, and Fortaleza can only be seen from a distance.

I thought that my newer camera with its 30x optical zoom would help me get a better look at the site from a distance, as my old camera had just 15x optical zoom. But the cameras were made by different companies, and apparently had much different starting points. I found out when I got home that my current camera's 30x optical zoom didn't get me any "closer" to the ruins site than my old camera's 15x optical zoom did.



*Fortaleza ruins site at Point of Rocks, outside Gila Bend, Arizona*

My next stop was the Agua Caliente Ghost Town. Along the way, I passed the old Stanwix Ranch area.



*The Stanwix Ranch site in the distance was where the Battle of Stanwix Station was fought. This was the westernmost skirmish of the Civil War. Union troops pushed back a detachment of Confederate troops.*



*The small rise in the distance is the Sentinel shield volcano which erupted over 3 million years ago.*



*The ground and hillsides in many areas of the Sentinel-Arlington Volcanic Field are covered with volcanic rock. But the hills aren't volcanoes. Rather, the hills were created after the eruptions, pushed up through a layer of volcanic rock, giving them a surface coating of the rock.*



The ghost town of Agua Caliente (Spanish for Hot Water) was the site of a hot spring. A resort hotel (top) and other buildings (e.g., bottom) were built there, and it was famous in its day for its high-class clientele. But irrigation demands dropped the water table and the springs dried up. And with them so did the town.

For my next stop, I took the back route from Agua Caliente to Painted Rock Petroglyph Site, a small outcropping featuring thousands of petroglyphs, all very easily accessible. I stopped here in 2015, but I got here near dusk on that trip, so I wanted to see the site with better light.



*The geometric pattern petroglyphs are generally Western Archaic and may date back 2000-9000 years. The petroglyph figures are generally Gila style, and may date back 600 to 2300 years.*



The highlight of the trip was the day I spent at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. It's in the heart of the Sonoran Desert and is home to a wide variety of cacti and other desert plants, but it's one of the few places north of Mexico to see the Organ Pipe Cactus.

I stopped at some waysides, took the 21-mile Ajo Mountain Loop Drive, and checked out part of the Puerto Blanco Road.

And I took my first real trail hike since breaking a bone in my foot last June. The crack healed just fine, but the summer's immobilization left me with a bad case of tendonitis. I was finally well on the road to recovery from that last Christmas when I somehow did the equivalent of getting a severe sprain in the ankle of the same foot (don't know how it happened – I woke up with it) and was off my feet for another five weeks, which set back the tendonitis.

The tendonitis is still there, but improving, so I thought I'd try a hike, figuring I already had an appointment scheduled with my foot doctor for the following Monday. Both feet ached at the end of the hike – more due to stretching some muscles that hadn't experienced hiking on rocky uneven surfaces and other aspects of desert trails in eight months. But no lingering aftereffects. So, I continue with the stretching exercises, daily walking, and applying heat. And now finally the occasional hike.

Here are some assorted pictures from my day at the national monument.



*Saguaro Cacti are plentiful*



Organ Pipe and Saguaro Cacti



A hillside of Organ Pipe Cacti



Organ Pipe Cactus & Friends



Ocotillos are one of my favorite desert plants, but they get too big for my yard. And they're not on my HOA's approved shrub list. 😞

They're a semi-succulent, with long, unbranched spiny stems, suggesting cacti, but they're actually closer to tea or blueberry plants than they are to cactus.



When it's been sufficiently wet, their stems are covered with small green leaves. In very dry weather Ocotillos shed their leaves, and can look like they're dead. But if you look closer, you'll see streaks of green on their stems. This gives them enough chlorophyll to survive extended leafless periods.



With decent spring weather, you'll see bright orange flower clusters at the ends of an Ocotillo's stems.



*Teddy Bear Chollas look all cute and cuddly from a distance, but they're designed to attach onto anything that passes by too closely. What breaks off may eventually find its way to a decent spot on the ground where it may start a new plant.*



*The park borders Mexico, so signs warn park visitors of possible encounters with illegal aliens or smugglers in the park. There are also places like this, where water is left out for those who have crossed the border through here, the blue flag visible for some distance.*



*An Organ Pipe Cactus waves goodbye*

For the drive home, I first headed to Quartzsite, Arizona to check out a couple sites just outside of town.

The first was the Quartzsite Rock Alignment. To help planes find the local airport, years ago they spelled out QUARTZSITE followed by an arrow with rocks on an open patch of desert floor that planes could use the alignment to line up with the runway. The site is now protected.



The second was a geoglyph site, the Bouse Fisherman Intaglio. Natives scraped the image into the rock-covered desert floor centuries ago, and it managed to avoid destruction all of this time.



*Information sign about the geoglyph*

A short hike from an unsigned parking area leads to the geoglyph site. The angle of the sun made it easier to see the geoglyph from the top or side than from its “upright” position.



*View from left of bottom (red -> head, green -> raised leg, blue -> water surface, purple -> part of fish)*



*View from top (red -> head, green -> raised leg, blue -> raised arm, purple -> bird in sky)*

There was another geoglyph site in California west of Blythe that I targeted, but the map I printed off wasn't very helpful due to construction in the area, and the site wasn't marked, so although I found the right road, and I found an archaeological site warning sign, I didn't find the geoglyph site. I'll have to try again. I ended up driving straight home after that failed stop.

And that was the end of my first trip of 2021.