

## Tucson/Las Cruces Road Trip (A23A)

I've been to Tucson, Arizona before, but I had more sites I wanted to see in the area, including some that might have associations with the Snaketown archaeological excavation site at Hohokam Pima National Monument, so I started there. I then headed to Las Cruces, New Mexico where I had some sites in the area that I had originally targeted on a 2019 road trip that was cut short due to car trouble. I took a different route back to the Phoenix area so that I could see the Salt River Canyon, nicknamed the Little Grand Canyon.

I targeted Phoenix my first night, so that I could do some sightseeing on the drive between Phoenix and Tucson the next day. The drive to Phoenix is pretty straightforward. Follow US 93 to Wickenburg and then US 60 into Phoenix. I did stop in Wickenburg to check out its Desert Caballeros Western Museum, which primarily focuses on local pioneer and mining history.



The museum also had an exhibit about the bolo (a.k.a. bola) tie, which was invented by Wickenburg native Victor Cedarstaff. The bolo tie is now the official neckwear of both Arizona and New Mexico.

Hohokam Pima National Monument is an official National Park System unit between Phoenix and Tucson. It protects the Snaketown archaeological site. Snaketown was an Ancestral Sonoran Desert culture (Hohokam or Ootam/Hohokam) site that was populated from about 300BC to 1100AD, and was known for its increasingly impressive use of irrigation to support agriculture, tapping into the Gila River for water. Pottery was often decorated with a red-on-buff style that was common across the broader Hohokam region, an area the size of South Carolina.

Snaketown underwent archaeological excavations in 1934 and again in 1964-65. The Gila River Indian Community does not allow public access to the excavation sites as the sites are on their reservation, so it's not possible to visit them. And even if you could, the sites were backfilled for preservation so there isn't much to see. But technically you've been to the national monument if you take I-10 between Phoenix and Tucson because it crosses a corner of the national monument.

The Gila River Indian Community, however, does manage the Huhugam Heritage Center, a small museum on the reservation that features some Snaketown information and artifacts. Other Snaketown – and more broadly, Hohokam – artifacts reportedly can be found at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson and the visitor center museum at nearby Casa Grande National Monument.



The Huhugam Heritage Center does not allow photos, but I found this picture online that shows the red-on-buff style of Snaketown/Hohokam pottery. The repetition of animal and human figures in the design (upper left, center, right) is something that I don't recall seeing before, and was quite interesting to me.



As I continued on to Tucson, I stopped at Picacho Peak State Park. I hiked a couple short trails here back in 2015. This time I hiked a stretch of its Sunset Vista Trail on the peak's west side, sunny today but in morning shadows when I was here last time.



View towards the “saddle” along Sunset Vista Trail



Don't expect to take in the sunset vista along Sunset Vista Trail, though. The trail closes at sunset.





Looking back towards Picacho Peak from the road to Sasco Ghost Town and part of Ironwood Forest National Monument



Ruins of Hotel Rockland at Sasco Ghost Town





Ruins of the smelter operation at Sasco

Based in Tucson for three nights, I used my first full day there for return visits to Ironwood Forest National Monument and Saguaro National Park. There isn't much to let you know that you're in Ironwood Forest National Monument. I made a brief stop here in 2015, but targeted three areas for this trip for some sightseeing and hiking, including the approach to Ragged Top Mountain, an area where there had been extensive desert restoration, and this – the Titan II Missile Interpretive Site, where there had once been a Titan II missile launch complex. The complex has been shut down and filled in, but there was a nice interpretive trail here, with several markers and informative signs along the trail.



This is where the missile silo was once located.



I returned to Saguaro National Park to repeat hike the trail to the top of Signal Hill, site of a number of ancient Hohokam petroglyphs, and to hike three short trails that I missed my last visit here.



One of the petroglyphs on the summit of Signal Hill



Ocotillo blooms with a saguaro cactus forest and Wasson Peak in the distance (yes, Wasson Peak)





A saguaro cactus forest



Buds and blooms atop a saguaro cactus

For my second full day in Tucson, I headed over to the University of Arizona campus where I targeted three museums and explored the campus a bit.

The Arizona State Museum displays artifacts, including pottery, weaving, jewelry and fetishes from numerous Arizona tribes, including the Hohokam. Although I didn't see any pieces explicitly identified as being from Snaketown, there were a number of items from Gila River Hohokam sites, including examples of the red-on-buff pottery.

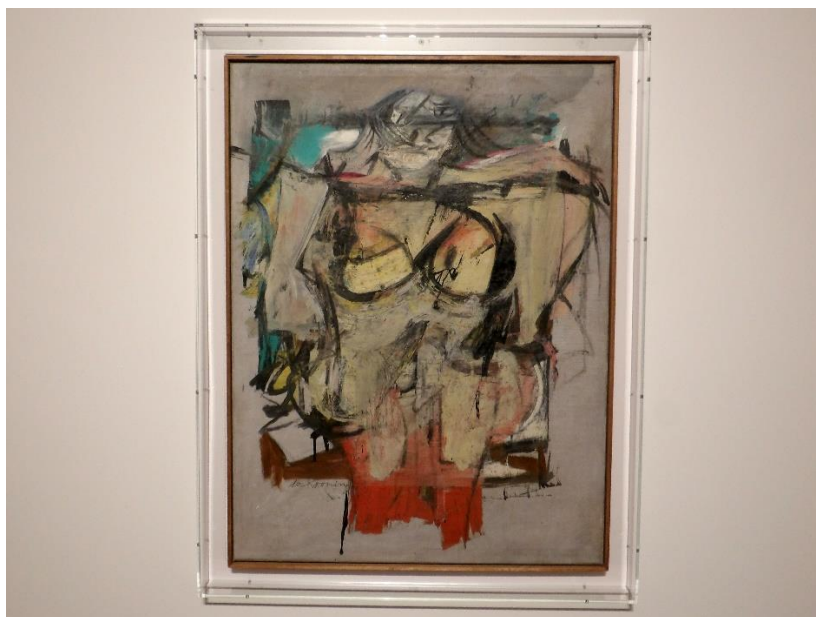


Weaving and pottery from Hohokam, Salado and other cultures on display at the Arizona State Museum



Battles between white settlers and Native Americans – especially those who settlers called the Apache – were part of Arizona’s history exhibited at the Arizona History Museum. Spanish colonialism and mining were among the other major highlights of this museum.





The University of Arizona Museum of Art dedicated a whole room to this one painting. More to its history, anyway. It had been stolen and was missing for decades before it was recovered and restored.



I took an “out of curiosity” walk around the University of Arizona campus. After all, back in 1986 as I was finishing up my master’s degree in linguistics at the University of Iowa, I was accepted into the University of Arizona’s linguistics Ph.D. program. They also offered me a halftime paid position as a teaching assistant. However, they paid their T.A.s exactly half of what Iowa paid me for the same amount of work. At Iowa, I also held a second job to avoid taking on any more student loans. I wasn’t willing to take on additional student loan debt to accommodate a 50% pay cut, so I turned down their offer and went into industry – which of course worked out pretty well for me. Pictured is the Douglass Building on campus, home to the University of Arizona’s Linguistics Department.

After leaving Tucson, I drove almost straight through to Las Cruces, New Mexico along I-10. A bit west of Las Cruces, though, I left the interstate – and pavement – to spend a few hours exploring the Potrillo Volcanic Field, and more specifically its Aden-Afton Volcanic Field. The area is part of the Rio Grande Rift, a continental rift zone that follows the Rio Grande River from southern Colorado to the Texas-Mexico border. There are numerous volcanic sites in the rift zone, these in addition to a number of other volcanic sites across New Mexico.

One of the features of the Aden-Afton Volcanic Field is the Kilbourne Hole crater, a national natural landmark. Kilbourne Hole is a maar volcanic crater. These types of craters form when magma from the mantle reaches water in the earth's crust, superheats it, and the resulting steam pressure causes a massive explosion that produces a crater. One consequence of this is that chunks of mantle rock are brought to the surface because of the explosion – such rock is normally too deep to be retrieved through drilling or mining.



Kilbourne Crater ranges from about 1.5 to 2.1 miles across, and it is about 443 feet deep. Apollo 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17 astronauts use geological training they got here to support their work on the moon.





On my way to Kilbourne Crater, I passed a trailhead, which I stopped at on my way back to the interstate so that I could hike the Aden Crater lava flow area a bit.



Las Cruces, Mesilla and the distant Organ Mountains come into view.

I first visited Las Cruces in 1994 when I attended a conference at New Mexico State University, and I've stopped in town a few times in the years since then. I planned on three full days in town for this visit, with the first focused on the Mesilla Plaza area and local museums, as that was the only day of the three that the museums were open.



Mesilla Plaza is at the heart of Mesilla's old town, established before 1850 when this area was still part of Mexico. Barely. After the Mexican-American War, Mexico ceded much of today's southwest US to the United States, with the boundary just north of Mesilla. However, in 1854, the US made the Gadsden Purchase, buying what is now southern Arizona and southwest New Mexico from Mexico to support a southern cross-country train route. Only then did Mesilla become part of the United States.

In July 1861, Confederate troops from Texas conquered Mesilla and claimed Arizona Territory for the Confederacy, although the Texas troops withdrew a year later.



Built in 1850, this building on the plaza once housed the capitol of Arizona and New Mexico. Later, it was the courthouse in which Billy the Kid was tried, convicted and sentenced to hang. Today, it is a retail store that sells tourist-oriented merchandise.



The Rio Grande Rift pushed up layers of sandstones, mudstones, silts, shales and limestones that date back 100s of millions of years, creating the Robledo Mountains. About 280 million years ago, the mudstones were coastal mudflats along an inland sea on the Permian Period's supercontinent Pangea. The mudstones captured claw marks and tracks from large reptiles to small insects, plant impressions and even raindrop marks. But no dinosaurs. This was millions of years before dinosaurs walked the earth. Prehistoric Trackways National Monument, just north of Las Cruces, preserves the area.



I hiked part of this trail at Prehistoric Trackways to get a feel for the area. It leads to one of the sites where tracks were discovered, but the rock slabs that held the tracks and impressions were removed from that site and placed in some museums, including one in Las Cruces.



Creosote shrubs fill the foreground, common here in the Chihuahuan Desert. The Rio Grande River here has no flowing water – the river was filled to capacity further north near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, but water is being captured to fill reservoirs between there and here. Pecan trees grow in the field to the left of the river. Those are the Organ Mountains in the distance.



Some of the track and impression-bearing rock slabs collected at Prehistoric Trackways are displayed at the Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science. Some of the tracks seen here are from dimetrodons, meat-eating reptiles that actually had more in common with today's mammals than with dinosaurs.



Scorpions haven't changed a lot in hundreds of millions of years. This fossil cast contains scorpion tracks and body and claw impressions that clearly resemble those that can be observed today.



The Las Cruces Museum of Art next door was hosting an exhibit of work by Gaspar Enríquez called *Chicano Pride, Chicano Soul*, featuring a number of paintings he created using an airbrush.



*Las Patsy, Los Homeboys y Los Quartos*



*Proscrita*

The nearby Branigan Cultural Center has rotating exhibits focused on aspects of southern New Mexico life and culture. At the time of my visit, one of its three exhibits featured local student-created art.



*Sundae Funday* is a painted/glazed clay sculpture.

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro – the Royal Road of the Interior – was a Spanish colonial “road” that connected Mexico City to remote Santa Fe, 1600 miles to the north. It was the oldest Euro-American trade route in what is now the United States.

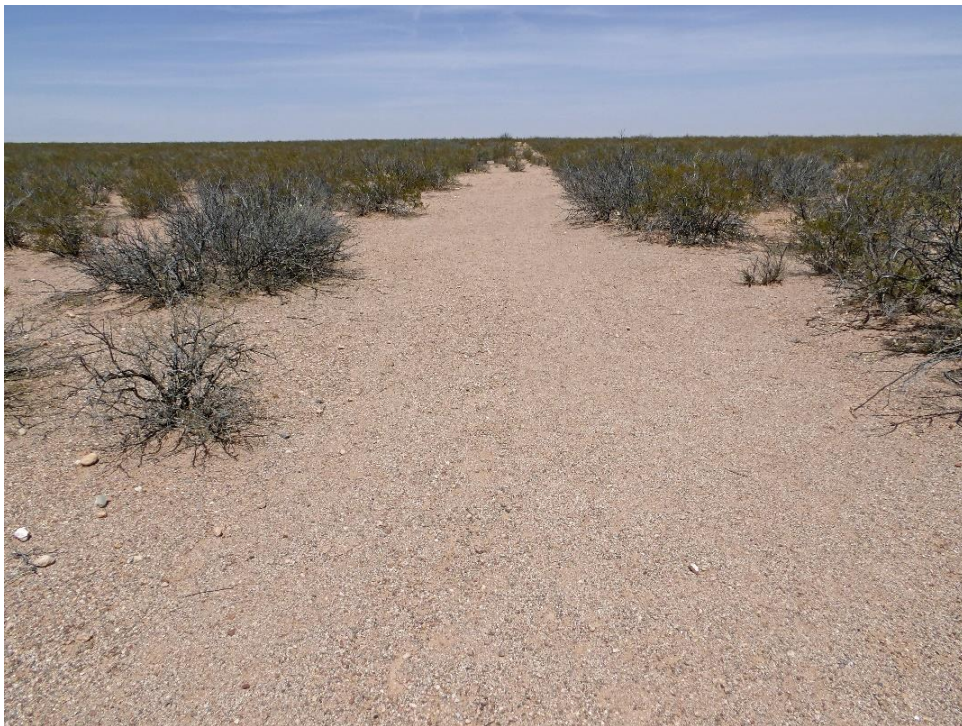
El Camino Real was used to send soldiers, settlers, religious leaders, livestock and freight between the two cities. Once it reached the Rio Grande River, about where today’s Texas, New Mexico and Mexico meet, it followed the river for much of the rest of the way to Santa Fe. Except there was a stretch where the land along the river was quite rugged, so much so that the trail moved away from the river for a waterless 90 miles. This segment was known as Jornada del Muerto, or Dead Man’s Journey (or Route of the Dead Man). With a couple hiking destinations, Dead Man’s Journey is a fun day trip out of Las Cruces.

Point of Rocks is a rock escarpment along the trail, and it was an important landmark especially for those heading south on El Camino Real, as it indicated that water was only 10 miles away.





From the top of Point of Rocks, one can see the sandy stretch that El Camino Real followed between here and the modern train.



At Yost Escarpment, a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile hike from the parking area gets you to this segment of the actual El Camino Real, where you can then hike along a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile segment of the old Royal Road. For this stretch, the views weren't much – a broad, expanse of creosote shrubs and some distant mountains.





After  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile on El Camino Real, you reach this small bluff, the turnaround point for today's hikers, but a place where wagons, livestock and people once had to carefully work their way down the bluff to continue their journey to Santa Fe. In the distance is Spaceport America.



State-owned Spaceport America made New Mexico the third state in the country from which rockets are launched into space. Except for special tours, it is not open to the public.



Kilbourne Hole and the Aden-Afton Volcanic Field are in Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. Another part of the national monument lies to the northwest of Las Cruces, adjacent to Prehistoric Trackways. A third part of the national monument lies just to the east of Las Cruces and includes the Organ Mountains. For my third day in Las Cruces, I headed to this part of the national monument, where I hiked the Dripping Springs Trail and did some exploring and sightseeing.



View of the Organ Mountains from along the Dripping Springs Trail. The plant front-left is a sotol, or desert spoon. They're used ornamentally in the Las Vegas area, but this is the first area I remember seeing them grow in the wild.



The purple flowers of this shrub caught my eye. Then I noticed the deer watching me. Given all the hiker commotion, I was surprised to see it hanging around so close to Dripping Springs Trail.





There are a few sites at the turn-around point for Dripping Springs Trail, including Dripping Springs itself. It can be pretty when there's actually water flowing off the mountain, which wasn't the case the day I was here.



The ruins of Boyd's Sanatorium can also be found at the turnaround point. Dr. Nathan Boyd built it here in a futile attempt to treat people with tuberculosis.





The west-facing side of the Organ Mountains. My last night in town was when I first noticed from my hotel room how well the mountains caught the late day sun. Since then, I've seen a number of great and dramatic photos featuring the mountains, clouds and late day sun, something to keep in mind if I head out here again someday.



The San Augustin Pass Overlook along US 70 has nice views of the east side of the Organ Mountains as well as the Tularosa Basin, home to the White Sands Missile Range. This includes the town of White Sands, the main residential area of the missile range. There's a missile range museum in town, but it was temporarily closed at the time of my visit to the area.



The Carrizozo Volcanic Field is just west of Carrizozo, New Mexico. It features two lava flows. The Valley of Fires Recreation Site is located along the Malpais Lava Flow, the second youngest lava flow site in New Mexico at just 5000 or so years ago. A nature trail winds its way through the lava flow.

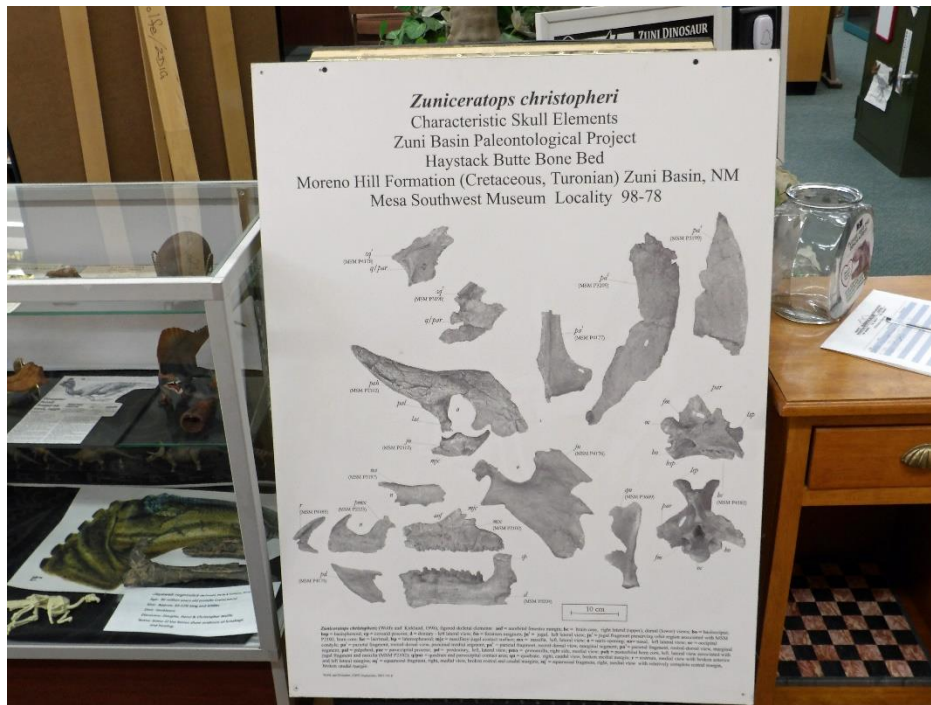


Along the Malpais Nature Trail



The nature trail passes this stretch, which provides excellent habitat for tarantula burrows.





There's a small dinosaur display at the Zuni Dinosaur Institute for Geosciences in Springerville, Arizona. Among its finds are fossils from a new dinosaur genus, named *Zuniceratops christopheri* for Christopher Wolfe, the 8-year-old who actually discovered it.



Casa Malpais was a Mogollon culture site. The ruins, seen here from the highway, can only be visited as part of a guided tour.





I returned to the Phoenix area from Springerville via Highway 60, which I chose because it passed through Salt River Canyon, nicknamed the Little Grand Canyon. Whitewater rafting is popular in the spring along this stretch of the Salt River.





For my last stop, I made a return visit to Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, the site of a Hohokam great house ruins. The museum featured Hohokam artifacts including pottery, but nothing specifically identified as coming from Snaketown.



These 4-story tall ruins are the last surviving ancient Hohokam great house.



For centuries, ballcourts were common features at Hohokam settlements. This ballcourt ruins has been covered with dirt to preserve it for future research, a common archaeological practice.





Wildflowers and lizards were common, but I missed peak blooming season. Clockwise from top left: cholla cactus; prickly pear cactus; saguaro cactus; banana yucca; purple sand verbena; claret cup cactus; ocotillo; greater earless lizard