



Southeast Arizona Road Trip (A25A)

I only took one trip the last half of 2024, so I figured I'd better start my 2025 travel year early. I decided I'd start at Arizona's Montezuma Castle in the center of the state and from there head generally southeast for a nice mix of sites, with stays in Phoenix, Tucson and Sierra Vista.

Shortly before leaving on the trip, I found out that a massive polar vortex would bring bitter cold temperatures to much of the country. Brrrr! That prompted me to add a pair of long pants and a knit cap to my trip wardrobe – just in case.



En route to Phoenix I made a return visit to Montezuma Castle National Monument. On last year's Phoenix trip I stopped at its Montezuma Well unit. This time, it was the main unit, which I last visited in 2009. It features this well-preserved Sinagua culture cliff dwelling as well as the ruins of other ground-level pueblos. It has five levels and 20 rooms, as was built over three centuries starting in about 1100AD. Note the pair of small ruins to the lower right.

I based in Phoenix for two nights, with museum plans for my full day there. I first made a return visit to the excellent Heard Museum, which focuses on Native American artifacts and culture. Its *Home* permanent collection showcases pottery, basketry, jewelry, tools and other artifacts from several pre-contact Native American cultures found in Arizona, that makes it easy to compare and contrast them.



O'odham basketry

In addition to my ongoing interests in such things, it provided me with a nice test case for my new cell phone. Yes, I finally joined the ranks of cell phone owners – primarily for travel purposes. But I was hopeful that its camera would do much better with photos in “low light-no flash allowed” museum situations. I visit a lot of museums and take a lot of photos, but discard many of them as my regular camera does poorly in such circumstances. But even cheap cell phone cameras are geared for the “selfie” crowd, who often take photos of themselves in low light indoor situations such as homes, restaurants, bars, concert venues and bathroom mirrors (common on dating apps). So, I wanted to give my \$200 smart phone camera a try.



On the left is one using my regular camera from my 2020 visit. On the right is one using the cell phone camera from this trip. It is better lit, and much clearer and crisper (something gets lost in the translation when I then save these into PDFs), so the test was successful.



The museum's other permanent exhibit, *Hidden History*, focuses on Indian Boarding Schools. Native American children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to these schools where they were immersed in white American culture – new names, haircuts, wardrobes, foods, religions, and so on, with only English language allowed and little to no contact with their families. All this in order to “civilize” them. About a third of these kids died as a result.

Many of these schools operated “outing programs”. Basically, for a small fee you could “check out” a kid to work for a day, typically domestic work for girls and hard labor for boys.



I was preparing to take a picture of this sculpture, *Intertribal Greeting* by Doug Hyde, when I had to pause for a moment as two men walked into the shot carrying a different sculpture towards the museum. They stopped when they got to me, and one of them – Doug Hyde – introduced himself.



With a different Phoenix museum I wanted to see closed the day I was in town, I instead headed east to Scottsdale where I visited the small but informative Huhugam Ki Museum on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community reservation, a Hohokam-related pair of tribes.

While in Scottsdale, I also visited Taliesin West. A couple years ago, I visited a number of sites in Iowa and Wisconsin that had been designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, including Taliesin, his estate and workplace in Spring Green, Wisconsin. He built Taliesin West as his winter home, studio and school.



Frank Lloyd Wright's sprawling Taliesin West main building; Taliesin West and other Wright-designed sites collectively have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



With several of its chicken wings restaurants found across the Phoenix metro area, and you can say that Phoenicians are very fond of Long Wong's. Long Wong, of course, refers to the dragon king in ancient Chinese mythology.

I decided not to show you what you get when you cross an injury attorney's billboard with a tree.

My roundabout route to Tucson took me to the Picacho Mountains, and specifically the Picacho Mountains Petroglyphs Trail. (As it is on Arizona State Land Trust lands, I had to purchase an annual permit online before visiting the site.)



In about three hours of hiking where I stuck to the base of some hills, I came across a dozen rock art sites, many with numerous Hohokam culture petroglyphs. Had I scrambled up the rocky hills, I would have seen many more. In any event, with clear skies and temperatures in the mid-sixties, it was a nice day for hiking, with or without the rock art.



On the left, you see several saguaro cacti, including the wood structure inside a dead one. On the right, you see the very different wood structure inside a cholla cactus. The vertical wood strips in the saguaro don't have any horizontal connectors. This allows the saguaro to expand and contract depending on how much water it stores. The wood strips look pretty skimpy, but they're actually quite strong – a mature saguaro holding a lot of water can weigh as much as 2 ½ tons.



Saguaro wood strips can bend without breaking, making them useful for construction. This demonstration hut on the left at the Huhugam Ki Museum shows this. On the right is a cholla cactus loaded with yellow fruit, which is edible, although the cholla thorns are a particular nuisance to deal with.



En route to Tucson after my hike, I stopped at this, the Tom Mix Memorial. Tom Mix was the first “King of the Cowboys” star, whose film career was primarily during the silent movie age. The radio program *Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters* continued his cowboy adventures into the 1950s, although he never actually appeared on the program, and in fact he died in a 1940 car crash. The memorial marks the site where he died.



During a 2015 Arizona-focused road trip, I visited a number of the state’s state parks. But I missed two in the Catalina Mountains north of Tucson. So, I used the day from my two-night stay in Tucson to check them out. At Catalina State Park, I hiked the Romero Ruin trail to see the hilltop ruins of an ancient Hohokam village, a site that includes housing, compound walls, a ballcourt and a pit house site. It also has the ruins of the much newer Romero Ranch buildings mixed among the more ancient ruins.

Once I finished there, I took a second hike at the park along its Nature Trail.



I then headed north to the nearby Oracle State Park, where I hiked its Nature Trail. Although both parks are in the shadow of the Catalina Mountains and they're not very far from one another, there's enough difference in elevation and climate that I saw numerous saguaro and cholla cacti at Catalina but none at Oracle.

Biosphere 2 was an interesting experiment in which researchers constructed what was to be a large, self-contained environment in the desert near Tucson that could produce enough food and oxygen for a crew of eight people to live in for two years. Presumably, it could help us not only to learn about our environment, but also to better understand what it might take to build self-contained colonies in space.

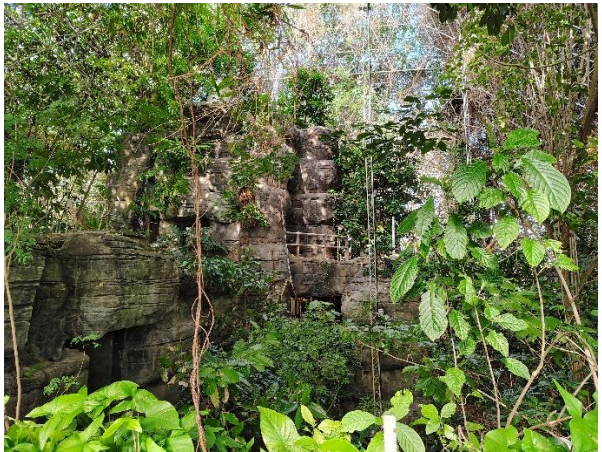
Things didn't work out as planned. Microbes consumed a lot more of the oxygen than anticipated, so when the internal oxygen level dropped from 20% of the air (like outside) to just 14%, they secretly supplemented it – “secretly” severely damaged the credibility of the experiment in the eyes of the scientific community.

Other lessons learned included that the UV protection on the glass while beneficial for the crew screwed up the behavior of the bees inside that were needed for pollination. A self-contained colony needs effective pollinators.

No longer self-contained, it still provides a place where scientists can investigate how climate and other factors can impact different types of environments through large-scale controlled experiments. Biosphere 2 is also open to the public for self-guided tours in and around the site.

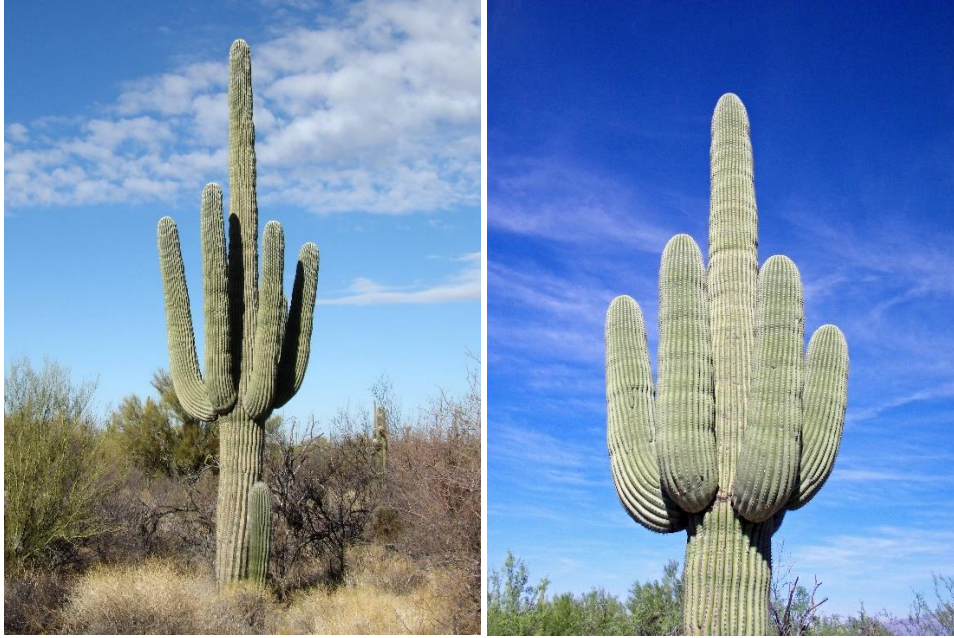


(Left) Biosphere 2. On the left is essentially a giant terrarium, home to different types of ecosystems. The dome on the right is one of the complex's "lungs", used to stabilize air pressure inside Biosphere 2 that would increase in the day's heat, and decrease in cool desert nights. (Right) The downstairs of a crew member's living quarters. I was a bit surprised at the size of the living quarters, but their reasoning was that when you're cooped up with the same few people for two years, crew members needed their own space to get away from it all.



(Left) The tropical forest ecosystem. (Right) The ocean ecosystem. Among other things, it is used for coral reef research here in the middle of the desert near Tucson.

On my way out of Tucson, I made a return visit to Saguaro National Park. I had revisited its west unit in 2023, so this time I took the scenic drive at its east unit, which I had last seen in 2015. The east unit is a bit disappointing as it seems that many of the saguaro have died out, something especially apparent when you see historical photos. But it is a pleasant enough scenic drive, although if you only have time for one of the two units, I recommend the west unit.



I immediately recognized the saguaro on the left at one of my stops, as it had caught my eye during my 2015 visit. The photos aren't from the same angle, but you can compare the 2025 photo (left) to the 2015 photo (right) to get a sense of how much this cactus has grown in the last 10 years. A saguaro can live for 150 years or more, and generally doesn't start growing its "arms" until it is at least 75 years old. Under the right conditions, a saguaro can grow up to 40 feet tall.



South of Tucson is the Titan Missile Museum. Clusters of Titan II missile silos were located in three parts of the country, including the Tucson area. After they were decommissioned, this silo site was preserved as a museum, featuring indoor displays, ground-level exhibits of the support equipment and this view down into the silo, and guided tours down into the silo itself (which I skipped, as my medical boots aren't really compatible with all the stairs and ladders involved in that tour).



I also made a return visit to the Tumacacori National Historical Park. It preserves the sites of the first Spanish missions established in what is now Arizona. The Mission San José de Tumacácori complex is open to the public, which includes the pictured ruins of the mission church, ruins of related buildings and an informative museum.

My trip continued towards southeast Arizona, where I stayed in Sierra Vista for three nights.

Although I didn't originally plan it this way, a lot of my sightseeing in southeast Arizona focused on the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, a Bureau of Land Management unit that includes about a mile on each side of a 40-mile stretch of the San Pedro River from about St. David, Arizona south to the Mexican border. The unit's ecosystem is home to dozens of species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish, and more than 100 bird species. It is also used by more than 250 species of migratory or wintering birds, and has been designated a "globally important bird area", making it one of the top birdwatching areas in Arizona.

I'm not a birdwatcher, but it is also home to colonial Spanish historic sites, ghost towns and mining camps, historic ranches, rock art sites and at least two Clovis archaic Native American culture sites that date back about 13,000 years. There are also several miles of hiking trails.



Starting from the north, a three-mile round trip hike led to the ruins of Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate, one of a number of colonial era Spanish military forts that stretched from California to Louisiana. Built with stone foundations and adobe walls, this is one of the best preserved of these forts, although only a few fragments of the adobe walls remain. Crop failures and continuous attacks by the Apache led Spain to abandon this site after just five years.



A tribute to the approximately 100 Spanish soldiers killed in action at this site



The ghost town of Fairbank. Fairbank was a railroad town, and for a time it had the closest station to Tombstone, Arizona. The schoolhouse on the right houses a small museum.



Among the museum's displays is this model of Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate. The white building in the model is the chapel, the ruins of which were in my photo of the presidio ruins.



The Millville Historic Townsite and Rock Art Discovery Trail leads to the site of Millville, where you can see the ruins of two mills built to process ore from the silver mines at Tombstone. Millville had access to water from the San Pedro River, water that was scarce at Tombstone. The mills crushed the silver ore into a fine powder that was then smelted using heat and a mercury wash to extract the silver. Across the San Pedro River from Millville was the town of Charleston, which is where many of the millworkers lived. The mills shut down when groundwater flooded the Tombstone silver mines in 1886, and the towns were left in ruins after an 1887 earthquake. What little of Charleston there is left to see is hidden by the shrub growth along the San Pedro River.



The trail here also leads to a pair of Hohokam petroglyph sites



This nearby marker commemorates the site of the Battle of the Bulls, arguably the strangest battle in the Mexican-American War. The Mormons under the leadership of Brigham Young had left Nauvoo, Illinois and were in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area en route to present-day Utah when the war broke out. Needing cash for their journey, Young offered the U.S. a company of men to help fight Mexico, resulting in the creation of the Mormon Battalion. The Mormon Battalion would go on to undertake the longest overland march in U.S. army history, and they helped to secure both San Diego and then Los Angeles. But it was here along the San Pedro River where they engaged in their only battle.

After the Apache ran Mexicans off their ranches in the area in the 1830s, their calves and cows were eventually killed off. Surviving bulls herded together, fighting off mountain lions and other predators and becoming wild and quite territorial. The curious bulls began stalking the battalion. They soon charged the battalion, damaging wagons, killing some mules and seriously goring three men. The Mormons managed to kill at least 15 of the bulls before the remaining animals ran off. Low on food and with their leather boots wearing out, this proved to be a godsend for the Mormons.

Murray Springs Clovis Site is one of two Clovis culture sites in the San Pedro Riparian area. About 13,000 years ago, Clovis culture Native Americans killed and butchered large game at the site, leaving behind mammoth bones and Clovis artifacts, such as a bone tool believed to be a shaft straightener, projectile points and other artifacts. Unfortunately, I found that the site is currently closed due to vandalism.



A reproduction of the Clovis shaft straightener found at the Murray Springs site



A giant cottonwood tree towers over the San Pedro House. San Pedro House was built to house the ranch manager for the Boquillas Land and Cattle Company, whose operations were centered on this area. Today, it houses a book store and information center for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, and it has a display of mammoth teeth and reproductions of artifacts found at the two nearby Clovis sites.

Also in this area is the site of the Clanton Ranch, although I didn't hike out to it. The Clantons and their ranch hands were accused of cattle rustling and were believed to be grazing stolen cattle at this ranch. You may recognize the Clanton name from their conflict with Wyatt Earp, his brothers and Doc Holliday that culminated in the "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" in nearby Tombstone, where Billy Clanton and brothers Tom and Frank McLaury were killed.



The Hereford Bridge area provides access to hiking trails near the site of the long-gone town of Hereford, at one time a stagecoach station on the route between the towns of Bisbee and Tombstone.



There still isn't much to see at the Lehner Clovis Mammoth Kill Site (I first stopped here in 2019), where the bones of 12 mammoths and assorted Clovis culture tools were found. They have started building an interpretive trail to make the site more informative, but none of the signs have been installed yet.

Palominas, the southernmost part of San Pedro Riparian, covers about four miles south of Highway 92 to the Mexican border. This area is used primarily for birding and hiking. Because of its location on the border, signs caution visitors to avoid suspicious activity and to stay away at night because this is a popular route for smuggling and illegal border crossings. (The border wall follows the south end, but news coverage has shown just how easily the border wall can be breached.) Mine was the only car parked here, so I kept my eyes on my surroundings as I took a short hike. I didn't see anyone, but I saw ample evidence of border crossings.



Its depth and the cottonwood trees that line the dry San Pedro riverbed provide useful cover for migrants following the river. Although not a formal trail, there were numerous footprints in the sandy riverbed.



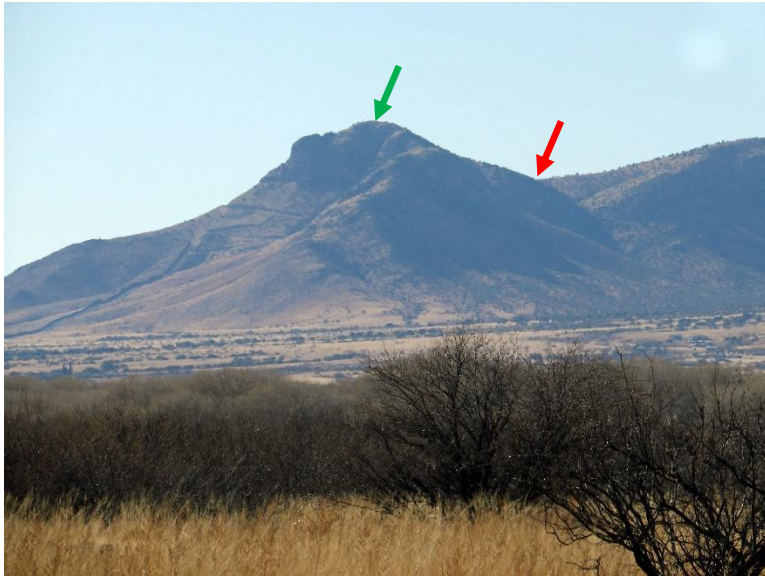
I also found some clothes and cheap blankets, muddied and worn, that had been discarded in the area.



I came upon a pair of crosses, one labeled “Unidentified” in Spanish and one with the name “Ronald Joaquin Mazariegos”. The crosses were adorned with a wire sculpture of Jesus on the cross and a small metal angel.

When I got home, I did some research. There’s a group in southern Arizona, the Franciscan Mission Service, that erects crosses at sites along the border where dead migrants have been found, and then holds memorial services for the deceased, what they call “pilgrimages of remembrance”. Ronald’s remains were found on January 24, 2019, but they were not identified at the time, which was when the group erected the first cross. When his remains were identified eight months later, the group erected the second cross, this one with his name and age on it. Ronald made it to the United States and past the border wall, but died less than four miles later.

Like I said, mine was the only car parked here. That and my hiking around may have caught the attention of the Border Patrol because as I returned to my car to leave, I saw that a Border Patrol agent had parked at the entrance to the parking area. He left when I did.



The mountains just to the west of Palominas are home to Coronado National Memorial. It commemorates the Coronado Expedition led by Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado between 1540 and 1542. He was on a quest to find the rumored Cities of Cibola a.k.a. the Seven Cities of Gold. His expedition ultimately reached present-day central Kansas before he realized that he shouldn't believe everything he reads on the internet and turned around. He did, however, claim much of this region for Spain, basically telling the natives he encountered that they were now subjects of Spain, and if they didn't like it, they would die. The Coronado Expedition crossed into what is now the United States here along the San Pedro River valley.

I've been to Coronado National Memorial twice before, both times arriving late in the day, so I only had time to take in the views from Montezuma Pass (red arrow). This time, I got there early enough to check out the small museum at the visitor center and to hike the trail from Montezuma Pass to Coronado Peak (green arrow), where I could check out its excellent views of the surrounding area.



The Coronado Expedition headed north (left) here, following the San Pedro River valley at this point. The fence along the border with Mexico is marked with blue arrows; Mexico is to the right. The cottonwood tree-lined route of the San Pedro River is marked with orange arrows. Ronald Mazariegos may have illegally crossed the border into the United States where the border fence crosses the San Pedro River, which is marked with the red arrow. I found the memorial to Mazariegos approximately at the site marked with the green arrow.



Looking west from Coronado Peak



Bisbee, Arizona was a major copper mining/old west town. The mines closed about 50 years ago, but Bisbee now uses that history as a tourist draw. But I visited both Virginia City, Nevada and Deadwood, South Dakota last year, and both seem to have a lot more to offer visitors than Bisbee does, if you're into that mining/old west town vibe.



I do recommend the rather interesting Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum, located in the building that once housed the headquarters of the Copper Queen Consolidated Mining Company, later the Phelps Dodge Corporation. An underground tour of the old Copper Queen Mine is also available.



You can also view the Lavender Open Pit Mine at Bisbee. It got its name not from the color of some of the rock in the area but rather from Harrison M. Lavender, a Phelps Dodge corporate executive.



Naco is a dusty border crossing town on the outskirts of Bisbee. Its block-long downtown features one bar and this, the U.S. Customs and Immigration station. I brought my passport with me in case I decided to cross over into Naco, Mexico, but there didn't seem to be any more to see on that side of the border than on this side.



Probably Naco's only claim to fame is that it is the site of the ruins of Camp Naco. This is the only remaining border fort of the several constructed along the border during the years of the Mexican Revolution. It was built in 1917 after Pancho Villa's attack on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916. Troops stationed here including so-called Buffalo Soldiers (all-Black regiment) units patrolled the border and protected U.S. citizens who came to the area to watch Mexican Revolution battles occurring across the border in Naco, Mexico. It is currently undergoing restoration.



The wall along the Mexican border at Naco

I seem to have reached the end of Arizona. So, I turned around and headed back home.