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An Arizona Road Trip on the Edge of America



Jeff Topping for The New York Times

Ringing the triangle at Slaughter Ranch.

By KEITH MULVIHILL

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AS you enter the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in southern [Arizona](#), it's not the park's namesake plant, thick with a cluster of many branches, that inspires gasps of awe, but thousands of saguaro, the iconic tall cactus of countless Western films. Upright and lanky, with whimsically outstretched arms, one after another the saguaros wave you in.

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In the 1930s, when the [National Park Service](#) went searching for the best examples of each ecosystem in the country, it chose this tract of 330,000 acres, abutting the Mexican border, to represent the Sonoran Desert. Organ Pipe is part of Arizona's larger borderland, the grand expanse of desert, grasslands and staggering peaks that make up the southern third of the state. Acquired in the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, which also included part of what is now [New Mexico](#), it was an area where people of many kinds and cultures had long mingled: Native Americans and Spanish missionaries, miners and ranchers, cowboys and vaqueros.

In a [road trip](#) in this part of Arizona today, you'll find vast open land, big Western sky and adventurous people — some who live there and some just passing through.

The country itself can defy expectations. "It's so green with plants here — that's a

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surprise," Carolyn Crews, 25, of [St. Louis](#), said, surveying the scene at Organ Pipe, as she and two friends were finishing up a campstove-cooked breakfast. They had camped overnight at the Alamo Canyon campground, a tent-only site nestled at the base of the Ajo Mountain range, an uplift of reddish rock and jagged cliff faces.

Organ Pipe, a good place to start an exploration of the Arizona borderlands, is home to 28 cactus species and numerous [birds](#), reptiles and mammals including a handful of endangered Sonoran pronghorn antelope. It offers hours of scenic driving, but there's nothing like getting out to walk among the towering saguaros and organ pipes. Along the Alamo Canyon Trail, near the campground, the needles of golden teddy-bear cholla glinted in the afternoon sun; the musky-sweet smell of creosote, a desert perfume of sorts, filled the air.

When you leave the park and head east along Route 86, you'll pass through the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation. The land there is grassier, with stands of yucca plants and the deciduous desert tree called the palo verde. Homes are spread out at a distance from the highway or clustered in Sells, the Tohono O'odham capital.

Beyond the reservation, at the town of Three Points, head south on Route 286. A left on Arivaca Road leads to the tiny town of Arivaca. Depending on your predilections, you can enjoy a strong cup of joe at Caffe Aribac, where the beans are roasted on site, or a beer at La Gitana Cantina, an old cowboy bar where a sign on the wall reads "Manuell Corona Killed here June, 24, 1912. Killer captured by C. E. Bent." On a recent Sunday, men sat at the bar and enjoyed an afternoon beer. "This place is a lot friendlier than it used to be," an old-timer, who swayed in his seat from too much drink, told me. "Years back, we had a lot more fights."

Nearby, the Arivaca Cienega Trail, located in a nature preserve, is a haven for wintering birds and their admirers.

Another adventure awaits just off the main drag. At the T-junction on the western edge of town, turn left onto Ruby Road and ride over rolling hills of wheat-colored grasses dotted with mesquite trees. Distant mountain ranges rise in every direction. After a few miles, the asphalt gives way to a dirt road, bumpy and slow going but passable in most cars. Twelve miles and about 40 minutes later you'll reach the ghost town of Ruby.

Prospectors started pecking around these hills in the 1850s, but it wasn't until after the Civil War that an actual settlement began to take hold. When profitability of the mine bottomed out in the late 1940s, the residents packed up and left. Today, Ruby, which is about four miles from the Mexican border, is privately owned and having a second life as a quasi-tourist attraction. Its collection of crumbling buildings, serenely set under the rocky dome of [Montana](#) Peak, can easily fill a couple of hours of exploring.

"It's the quietest place I ever lived, but not the most remote," said Ruby's lone resident and caretaker, a 50-year-old man with Rip Van Winkle looks who introduced himself as Sundog. He explained his name with a story. Back in the late 1980s, fed up with life in [Los Angeles](#), he got in his car and drove down to [Baja California](#). He told his new friends that he was "like a dog following the sun." The name stuck and is now, he said, what everyone knows him by.

Sundog has worked his way from [Alaska](#) to [Chile](#). In these borderlands, he has [hiked](#) over many miles and into a few of the old mine shafts, and he'll gladly share his knowledge. "Not only is the area part of a major migration corridor," he told me, "but it's also the northernmost range for several Central American plant and animal species." Ruby's visitors, he said, span the ranks of the curious from biologists and bird watchers to "ghost town people," travelers who keep life lists of all the ghost towns they have visited.

Back on the trail, Ruby Road will take you 22 more winding miles through vistas of

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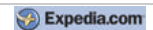
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oak and grassland before running directly into Interstate 19, the main artery between [Tucson](#) and Nogales. About two miles south, you'll find authentic Mexican food at Soto's PK Outpost, and close by, the Hacienda Corona de Guevavi, a bed-and-breakfast, offers up a charming retreat in a restored adobe ranch house.

Just off Highway 82 lies another less traveled but very drivable dirt road. [Forest Service](#) Road 61 (also known as Duquesne Road) follows the border for 55 stunning miles over the [Patagonia](#) Mountains, across the sweeping grasslands of the San Rafael Valley, and up to 6,575 feet atop Montezuma's Pass in Coronado National Memorial. As you make your way up the backside of the Huachuca Mountains, you begin to see vistas into [Mexico](#).

"I've seen more wildlife on that road than anywhere else in the area, including a mountain lion, and once a pack of coatimundi," noted Maggi Daly, a park guide at the visitors center. "Even after three years of being here, I am still struck by the incredible beauty all around. It's phenomenal."

From the parking lot at the pass, it's a short hike up to Coronado Peak and a sweeping panorama of the Sierra Madre in Mexico. Farther east, [San Jose](#) Peak rises from flat desert to 8,337 feet. Up here, the rugged landscape takes on a magical, golden-hued softness; somehow, it's easy to imagine Vasquez de Coronado leading 350 Spaniards across the valley in the 1540s.

Nearby, the mile-long Yaqui Ridge Trail descends to the border, where a rusty barbed-wire fence stretches in both directions as far as the eye can see. For now, it's all that separates Mexico and the [United States](#) in this remote spot. A border marker—a tall, thin white obelisk—gleams, sentinel-like, in the hot bright sun. This marker, No. 102, and dozens more like it were erected in the early 1890s. The peaceful serenity of this great, grand emptiness belies the political strife that has plagued this boundary from the day it was drawn. Overhead, a shiny black raven, free of any land-bound constraints, floats on the breeze, slowly drifting from one side to the other.

One last stretch of dirt road, about 50 miles away, is also worth a look. Driving east out of the town of Douglas, 15th Street becomes the Geronimo Trail and wends its way past rounded hills. Thickets of ocotillo and tall agave stalks spike the horizon. About a quarter-mile from the turnoff on Geronimo Trail, you see the white gate that says "Slaughter"; make a right and drive through it and into the John Slaughter Ranch, established in the 1880s.

John Slaughter's immense cattle empire encompassed pretty much all the land you see before you. Today the collection of handsomely restored buildings, about 200 yards from the border, is part of the Johnson Historical Museum of the Southwest.

"Just out there is where Pancho Villa camped with thousands of men during the Mexican Civil War before the battle at Agua Prieta," Bill Elliott, the resident caretaker, said, pointing beyond the barbed wire fence into Mexico. Within easy walking distance of the homestead, past the cottonwoods and willow trees that flank a natural spring-fed pond, another old border marker awaits: No. 77.

In these parts border politics is a delicate topic, and talk of the various types of fences now being erected brings passionate exchanges. Mr. Elliott, an affable man who hails from nearby Bisbee, takes a pragmatic view: "The government has a 50-foot easement along the border," he said, "and they are allowed to do what they want."

Mr. Elliott acknowledges that Border Patrol activities have some negative effect on the wildlife, and he hopes the vehicle barrier planned for the boundary along the ranch's property won't be too disruptive. "We can always plant more trees and shrubs to minimize its visual impact," he said.

"But," he said with assurance, "it won't interfere with our mission here, which is to

teach people about the past.”

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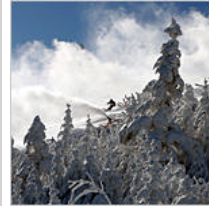
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