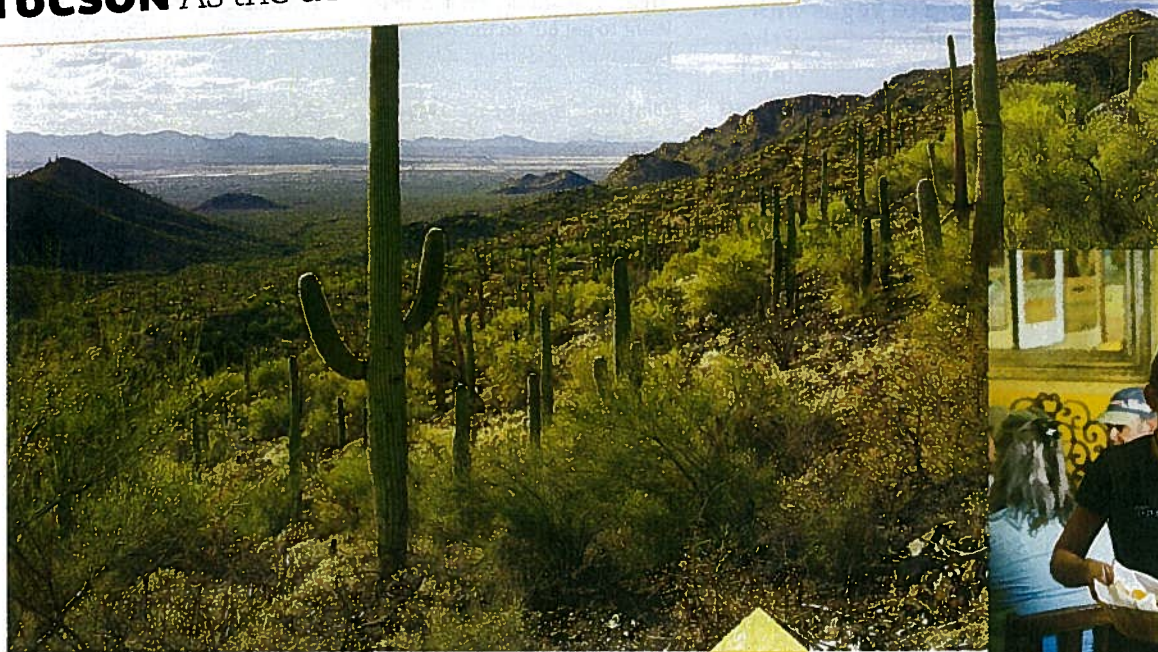


TUCSON As the desert cools, head outdoors



Go ahead and indulge in the flavors of the Southwest in Tucson. Then get your heart pumping by biking, riding horseback, or hiking the city's beautiful desert landscape.

BIKE ALONG THE RIVER

Ranked among the top-five bicycling cities in the country, Tucson has more than 325 miles of well-marked bike lanes and trails in the metropolitan area. Pedal along the two-lane asphalt **Rillito River Park Trail** (from Craycroft Rd. to I-10; 800/638-8350), which winds 11 miles along a mostly dry riverbed on the north side of town. Rent from **Cycle Tucson** (from \$50 a day; cycletucson.com)—it delivers and picks up rentals, plus provides helmets and gloves.

SPOT ROADRUNNERS

South of Tucson in **Tubac Presidio State Historic Park** (closed Tue-Wed; \$3; off Burruel St.; 520/398-2252), birders can enjoy early-morning walks and might spy a roadrunner. Relive history at the park's **Anza Days** (Oct 17-18), celebrating the 1775 Anza Expedition with dancers and talks.

SADDLE UP A HORSE

Maybe it's the Old West influence or the ranching heritage, but it feels right to be on horseback in Tucson. **Arizona Horseback Experience** (from \$80 for 3 hours; reservations required; horsebackexperience.com), south of Tucson in Sonoita, makes learning the art of riding easy for beginners with daylong, guided trail rides. Start with the Horsemanship 101 class (from \$175).

Worth the calorie splurge!

In business since 1922, **El Charro Café** (\$; 311 N. Court Ave.; 520/622-1922) is credited with inventing the chimichanga, a hefty burrito stuffed with meat or veggies, then deep-fried and topped with cheese and mild sauce. Order it with *carne seca*, lean beef loin marinated in garlic, lime juice, and spices, then sun dried and shredded to perfection.

STROLL AMONG SAGUARO

Throughout Tucson and the surrounding area, look for saguaro, those spiky columnar Arizona natives. Found in the Sonoran Desert around Tucson, these majestic plants live to be several hundred years old and blossom each spring. To see them, explore **Tucson Mountain Park** (off Gates Pass Rd.; 520/877-6000), known for its scenic overlooks, and the **Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum** (\$13; 2021 N. Kinney Rd.; desertmuseum.org), a 21-acre natural habitat for wildlife and plants.

SIP A MARGARITA

At chef Don Felipe Valenzuela's **Zivaz Mexican Bistro** (\$; 4590 E. Broadway; 520/325-1234), treat yourself to a signature vermilion hibiscus margarita. Then dine on light, healthful entrées such as *pescado ajillo*, sautéed mahi and mushrooms marinated in a spicy guajillo sauce, or the salmon asado, grilled salmon marinated in achiote.

LOOK TO THE STARS

Tucson becomes even more spectacular at night. Thanks to an average of 350 cloudless nights a year, it's a terrific spot to stargaze. **Steward Observatory** (933 Cherry Ave. on the University of Arizona campus; www.as.arizona.edu) designs some of the most advanced telescope mirrors used by astronomers today. Plan to visit during the free Monday evening lecture series (7:30 p.m. Oct 12 and 26), which is followed by stargazing through a 21-inch telescope.

Where to stay

Stargazers who prefer the intimacy of a bed-and-breakfast should check out **Casa Tierra Adobe Bed and Breakfast Inn** (from \$150; two-night minimum; casatierratucson.com), located on 5 acres of the Sonoran Desert. Use the telescope out by the hot tub for a cozy night under the stars. —DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER