cities / Tucson

#arizona
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The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum is a fusion experience: zoo, botanical garden, art gallery, natural history museum, and aquarium. 85% of the museum is outdoors and primarily a walking experience. Near the west entrance to Saguaro National Park.

Sky Island Scenic Byway

Climbing into the mountains northeast of Tucson, the Sky Island Scenic Byway (also known as the Catalina Highway) offers a 27-mile escape from the desert heat, peppered with public lands and stunning overlooks.

- Stop at Windy Point Vista for rock scrambling and panoramic views of Tucson.
- Fish and hike around the calm waters of Rose Canyon Lake, a U.S. Forest Service-managed six-acre oasis. 1.4-mile Trail No. 37 loops around the lake.
- Explore Summerhaven, a pint-sized town surrounded by aspen groves.
- End your drive at Mount Lemmon Ski Valley, the southernmost ski resort in the U.S. The Sky Ride carries visitors almost to the summit of 9,157-foot-tall Mount Lemmon. Visit the Iron Door Restaurant for a lunch of classic chili and cornbread, with pie for dessert.

("Sky Island" refers to the mountains of southern Arizona, emerging from the "sea" of the desert floor.)

From a Roadtrippers guide

Kartchner Caverns State Park: Several cavern tours set off daily (reservations are encouraged), including a helmet and headlamp tour that allows visitors to experience the cave as explorers did in 1974. On terra firma, hike trails, stroll in the Hummingbird Garden, and view native wildlife, like tortoises, lizards, and cottontail rabbits.

NYT: Tucson: A City for Outdoor Lovers

- Catalina State Park (admission from $10 a vehicle): hike the roughly six-mile, round-trip route to natural pools along the Romero Canyon Trail. Free events include birding tours, geology walks and stargazing parties.
- Sabino Canyon Recreation Area offers another entry into the Catalinas ($8 admission) with more than a dozen trails, and electric shuttle buses that offer park tours centered around Sabino Creek.
- Biking is big in Tucson. It is home to a roughly 130-mile system of trails and paved paths for nonmotorized recreation known as the Loop.
- Tucson E-Bike Adventures offers a pedal-assisted tour of Saguaro National Park's rolling eastern section ($159).
- Horseback: a 90-minute sunset ride with Tucson Mountain Stables ($80).
- Tour with the Tucson Bird Alliance
- After-dark adventures include star parties in the northern foothills of the Catalina Mountains at Oracle State Park, an International Dark Sky Park. Closer to the city, Saguaro National Park is an Urban Night Sky Place.
- In the Quinlan Mountains, about 55 miles southwest of Tucson, Kitt Peak National Observatory maintains one of the largest collections of research telescopes in the world.
- An hour's drive up the Santa Catalina mountains, the University of Arizona's Mount Lemmon SkyCenter offers public viewing. Its SkyNights Adventure ($85) starts a few hours before sunset and opens with talks by astronomy experts and a light dinner before culminating in observations of planets, nebulae and distant galaxies through two powerful scopes.

36 Hours: Tucson, Ariz. (2024)

- Sabino Canyon's soaring, saguaro-studded walls and frequently rushing creek make for some of Tucson's most dramatic hikes and shuttle rides.
- Gates Pass, one of the main stretches leading to and from the Desert Museum, makes for transcendent sunset viewing.
- Flandrau Science Center & Planetarium has exhibits that illuminate the University of Arizona's role in space exploration and live-narrated shows that immerse you in the cosmos. There are also "moon trees" sprouted from seeds that orbited in outer space.
- Mount Lemmon SkyCenter is an extension of the University of Arizona's

- Mount Lemmon SkyCenter is an extension of the University of Arizona's Department of Astronomy at the 9,157-foot summit of Mount Lemmon, where you can spend time inside a dome that houses one of its several large telescopes.
- Tucson Museum of Art is home to the Arizona Biennial, in addition to an impressive permanent collection and a cluster of adobe buildings.

Eating

T&L: Plan a trip to Saguaro National Park

- Saguaro Corners, a longstanding (since 1956) spot near the East District. "Great food and an excellent patio." Carne asada fries.
- El Charro Café claims the title of the "oldest Mexican restaurant in Tucson
- Tanias 33 has been serving Sonoran and vegan Mexican food for decades

From T&L's Arizona Guide

- **The Cup Cafe** is a special place for Tucson locals. It's tucked inside the circa-1919 Hotel Congress and plays into the history by serving house-made sweets from an old-school dessert carousel and serving up local-ingredient-heavy breakfast and lunch.
- **Tito & Pep:** With a cute name and even cuter decor, this restaurant and bar bills itself as "Midtown's neighborhood bistro." They live up to the claim by serving a menu of Southwest mesquite-fired cuisine and a hefty cocktail list.
- **Aqui Con El Nene** has long served up dishes from Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, where the owner is from.

Next

18th July 2026

Seattle

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