THE GLORIOUS SONORAN

The Southwest's desert wonderland is at last getting the attention it deserves. Hike, drive, enjoy it now.

The SONORAN DESERT曙光 announces its arrival with the sound of a thousand stirrings. It breaks a silence so complete that you might think nothing short of a sonic boom could dent it. • Sure, coyotes howled during the night, their yips and yowls bouncing off the mountains and across the valley. Owls screeched and bats fluttered above our campsite in the Table Top Wilderness Area in south-central Arizona, about 20 miles off U.S. 8. But the silence of the night always closed back in, reinforcing the illusion of emptiness common to deserts. • The rising sun, still beneath the horizon, begins to light the morning, gradually repainting the sky shade-by-shade.

By Matthew Jaffe • Photographs by Jack Dykinga
and minute-by-minute: from gray to pink to violet on its way to a cloudless midday blue.

The breeze picks up almost imperceptibly, cool at first. A care of a wind. It carries with it a hint of moisture from the light dew that settled, seemingly inconspicuously, over the desert during the night. The wind rumbles the brittlebush and whispers its way though the clustered needles of saguaros, the hallmark cactus of the Sonoran Desert. High on a 40-foot saguaro, a Gila woodpecker insistently calls as it flies about from branch to branch. White-winged doves coo, and a whippoorwill scurries across the gravel. The spindly, 15-foot-tall branches of the ocotillo, bare and dead-looking things under dry conditions, are fully leafed out; bees and hummingbirds sip from the tubular red flowers that blossom at the tips. The sweet melodies of songbirds—curve-billed thrashers and native sparrows—play off the low buzz.

The morning surge lasts maybe an hour, but it stays with you much longer. Any notion of the Sonoran Desert as empty, a wasteland, is forever shattered in this first waking moment, to be replaced by an understanding that this is a kind of dryland Eden.

As David Yezman, a research social scientist at the University of Arizona’s Southwest Center, describes these mornings, “There is no more glorious time or place in the world.”

**The desert different**

The Sonoran Desert stretches some 120,000 square miles from its Arizona heartland into Southern California and Mexico. It includes not only well-known spots, such as Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Saguaro National Park, but also lesser-known areas on its fringes, like the Nature Conservancy’s Ramsey Canyon Preserve, a wooded, watered enclave that hardly seems desertlike. In fact, while the saguaro is the dominant image, the desert actually consists of six distinct plant communities, from vast creosote seas to hidden palm canyons two hours outside of Los Angeles.

It is a rich environment. Half of North America’s bird species, 500 in all, are found here. There are 130 mammal species, including the endangered Sonoran pronghorn and even scattered jaguars. There are 5,000 plants, including 3,500 native species. Look hard enough and you may find 20 amphibians and 30 fish species, in larger streams and tiny oases.

Yet the Sonoran Desert has been misunderstood. “When people go out to a desert, they normally start itemizing what is missing,” says Tucson-based writer Charles Bowden. “What happens over time is that they cease to think something is missing. There’s no absence in the desert. It’s the place where the clutter of life is removed and you can finally see.”

To Bowden and many other desert denizens, the Sonoran Desert is a paradise—not a word usually used to describe deserts. Indeed, at certain times and in certain places, it can be one of Earth’s harshest places. A single, careless misstep can lead to a long, agonizing
A spare world of surpassing beauty: ocellos at Cabeza Prieta N.W.R. (above), Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (top right), and spring poppies (below right).

To give some perspective on the desert's time frame, it takes a saguaro 10 years to grow its first 1½ inches.

A paradise threatened

Paradise, almost by definition, is a delicate place, and the Sonoran Desert is no exception. With Arizona's population at 5 million and growing, urbanization has encroached upon pristine areas around Phoenix and Tucson. As Arizonans turn to the desert for recreation, a careless minority scars the land by taking vehicles off-road. Others, ironically, trifle in saguaros and other cactus destined for new suburban gardens. The fragile biology is also threatened by invasive plant species, such as the aggressive African import buffelgrass, which pushes out native plants and increases fire danger.

The Sonoran Desert is uniquely vulnerable to such pressures. It does not recover quickly. To give some perspective on the desert's time frame, it takes a saguaro 10 years to grow its first 1½ inches.

Nor is the complexity of the Sonoran Desert or the interaction of its species fully understood. When you stop and marvel at the bustle of activity of a Sonoran dawn, you are also witnessing the intricate workings of an ecosystem in operation. At the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, researchers are looking at the migration patterns and other behavior of pollinators: the hummingbirds, bees, moths, and bats that plants such as saguaros depend on to spread...
the glorious Sonoran Desert

their pollen and reproduce. It is a case of mutualism, says Rick Daley, the museum’s executive director. “If bats stop migrating, you don’t have saguaros. If you don’t have saguaros, all the other animals and plants that depend on them will disappear,” he says. “These organisms are critical to the whole environment, and we hardly know anything about their real patterns.”

A once-in-a-generation opportunity

In the face of development pressures, there are growing grassroots and government attempts to provide the Sonoran Desert with additional protections. Pima County’s Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan seeks to balance development with habitat protection for such creatures as the endangered ferruginous pygmy-owl. More ambitious is a citizen proposal to create a 5,000-square-mile Sonoran Desert National Park. The park would include such existing federal lands as Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, and the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range. More than 1.1 million acres of these parcels are already dedicated wilderness. Combined with the Pinacate Biosphere Reserve in Mexico, such a national park would create an ecological preserve of global significance.

Bowden and his longtime hiking buddy, author Bill Bryson, have been instrumental in creating the proposal. Bowden says that for all the development pressures on the Sonoran Desert, there is still plenty left to save. “It’s not just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It’s a once-in-a-generation opportunity,” says Bowden.

The Sonoran Desert National Park would not be a national park in the classic sense. With its 360° perspectives and forbidding expanses, this desert doesn’t lend itself to easy postcard tourism. Still the ephemeral display of its full wildflower glory—those rare times when poppies, lupines, and owl clover spread a blanket of golds and purples across the land—is as spectacular as anything to be found in the national park system.

An important part of the Sonoran Desert experience is its vastness and the knowledge that a place so unspoiled still exists. Humans have long sought the mystical in the desert, and it is still the first thing found here, both 100 miles from nowhere and on a driving loop in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

We found it among the saguaros and palm verdes of the Table Top Wilderness Area—in the middle of nothing and at the center of everything.

“When I’m out in the Sonoran, at first I’m overwhelmed by the size and says Bowden. “By the time I leave, I’m chilled that it’s too small. Its sense of peace should be available everywhere. At first the idea that there’s not going to be a human for another 40 miles is frightening. Then it becomes the greatest comfort in your life.”

Winter brings welcome news to the Sonoran Desert.

SONORAN DESERT TRAVEL PLANNER

**Prime season in the Sonoran Desert is November through April, depending on elevation. Water temperatures can be cooler than you might expect, with January daytime temperatures averaging in the mid to upper 60s, higher elevations can get snow.**

The desert is known for its wildflower bloom; perennial and annuals usually peak between mid-February and mid-April. The Desert Botanical Garden’s wildflower hotline (480-921-5134) is frequently updated in season.

If you can brave the heat, late spring and summer offer blooming cactus and the dramatic monsoon rains.

An indispensable guide for any desert visitor is A Natural History of the Sonoran Desert by Sonora-Sonoran Desert Museum and University of California Press, 2000; $24.95. Hottest of all is the book’s covers, details on individual species and essays that bring the desert alive.

Museum and arboretum

These are superb places to learn about the desert.

**Sonora-Sonoran Desert Museum, Tucson.** This innovative museum takes a comprehensive look at Sonoran Desert natural history. A rare exhibit focuses on the cacti, a showstopping piece with a banded 2-foot-long tail, while another re-creates a Sonoran Desert palaeontology dig. **$9.95, $7.75 ages 6-12; 2001 N. Kinney Rd., (520) 883-1380.**

**Boyle Thompson Arboretum, Superstition: This arboretum 60 miles from Phoenix and 95 miles from Tucson has nature trails through native Sonoran Desert landscapes. $5, 37815 U.S. 60, (520) 689-2811.**

**Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix.** This is an ideal introduction to the Sonoran Desert. A new wildflower trail and pavilion will open on March 10. On April 18 the annual Grand Tour takes place. **$7.50, Papago Park, 1201 N. Galvin Pkwy., (480) 941-1225.**

**Arizona Sojourns**

A good resource for anyone looking for trail options is Hiking Arizona’s Cactus Country ( Falcon Publishing, Helena, MO, 2000; $15.95, 800/882-2665), which details 95 Sonoran Desert hikes.

**NEAR TUCSON**

**Catalina State Park.** The park preserves a luxurious section of the Santa Catalina Mountains foothills. One of the best hikes climbs into the Coronado National Forest, through the jagged peaks and their saguaro forests to Romero Pools. The hike is 3.6 miles round trip, $5 per car. From Tucson, drive 14 miles north on State 77, (520) 288-5798. Supersaguaras State Park. The east and west sides of the park bracket Tucson with unspoiled desert areas. A good hike in the west side (also called the Tucson Mountain District) is on the High Noon Trail off Bajada Loop Dr. north of the Red Hills Visitor Center. The steady 5-mile climb takes in big sections of the Tucson Mountain Range on its way to 4,897-foot Wasson Peak, $6 per car. For Tucson Mountain District information, call the Red Hills Visitor Center, (520) 775-2100. For the Rincon Mountain District (east side), call the Rincon Mountain Visitor Center, (520) 773-5153.

**NEAR PHOENIX**

**South Mountain Park.** Just south of downtown Phoenix, this is considered the largest city park in the world. It has numerous trails and great views. Our favorite is the 3.6-mile round-trip ramble that starts at the Buena Vista Look-out and goes through Hidden Valley to Fat Marion’s Rest. From Southern End of Central Ave. (520) 534-6324.

**Supersaguaras Wilderness.** This mountainous area 40 miles east of Phoenix has a vast network of trails. First Water Trailhead provides some of the best access to the wilderness. You can do an 8-mile loop by combining the Dutchman, Elbek Mesa, and Second Water Trail. Signed trailhead summit is off State 69 about 1.3 miles north of Apache Junction. For information, call the Tonto National Forest’s Mesa Ranger District, (480) 671-3000.

**Other Arizona areas**

**Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.** A visit 90,010-acre refuge adjacent to Organ Pipe is accessed via El Camino del Diablo (four-wheel-drive required), a notorious centuries-old travel route across the Sonoran Desert. For experienced desert travelers only. Required permits available at refuge offices, 161 N. Second Ave., Ajo, (520) 387-6483.

**Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.** The premier destination for exploring the Sonoran Desert habitat, the monument is known for its five different plant communities, as the terrain climbs to nearly 5,000 feet. Of the two graded dirt road driving loops here, we prefer the higher elevation 21-mile Ajo Mountain Dr. A good hike off the drive is the Estes Canyon-Willow Trail Loop at stop 15. The 4.1-round-trip trail climbs about 1,000 feet through diverse vegetation. For more hikes, pick up the “Explorer’s Guide to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument” ($1.50) at the visitor center. The mining town of Ajo, 35 miles north of the monument visitor center, has a distinctive town vibe, as well as restaurants and lodging. For information, contact the Ajo District Chamber of Commerce at (520) 387-7142. $4 per vehicle, $5 camping. About 150 miles from either Tucson or Phoenix take I-10 west south on State 85. Take I-10 west directly to State 85. Give yourself 2½ to 3 hours. (520) 387-9849.

**Ramsey Canyon Preserve.** This Nature Conservancy preserve 90 miles southeast of Tucson is popular with birders (with an especially interesting summer hummingbird population). A trail along its riparian area leads onto the forested slopes of the Huachuca Mountains. Recent restoration work here has enlivened the creek and re-established mimicked structures. Inside the preserve is the Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed & Breakfast, 121 Canyon Dr., Hereford, (520) 578-3010. Ramsey Canyon Preserve is $5 for seven days. Parking is first come, first served, so arrive during summer before it gets hot. Of State 82 south of Sierra Vista, (520) 378-5785.

**California**

**Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.** Representative of the Sonoran’s Lower California subspecies, this 600,000-acre park (the largest state park in the West) east of San Diego is less verdant than the saguaros you may have seen but has some beautiful cacti, including ones with native palm oases. In good years, wildflower displays can be spectacular. Visitor center at 50485 Highway 78, Borrego Canyons Dr., Borrego Springs, (760) 767-4205. Wildflower hotline, (760) 767-0464.