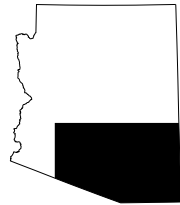


Southern Arizona



Bienvenido la frontera. Welcome to the Borderlands, folks. South of I-10, you are in the USA and somewhere...else. Not Mexico, per se. The towns, land and culture are all undoubtedly influenced by the Mexican state of Sonora, but it's too easy to say it is a mix of two countries. In a way, southern Arizona, the Border Zone, is a sum of many parts and a land all its own.

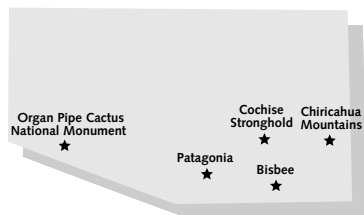
In the walls of the white missions that dot the desert are traces of Spanish architecture from the Iberian peninsula; the airy courtyards in large villas hearken back to Moroccan *riad*s (houses); adobe apartment houses trace their muddy foundations to the building styles of Native Americans; the wailing passion of *norteno* music from Sonora, Mexico, the twangy fiddle of outlaw country music, the rock and growl passion of Native American red rock from the reservations...this is a land of many pores, and much osmosis between different cultures.

And it is *beautiful* here. The impossible sunsets are coaxed down by yipping coyotes, and then the sky bleeds and the horizon grows, so you lose a sense of yourself, and of time. In fact, the weird mountains of the Dragoons and Chiricahuas feel like landscapes lost in time; their valleys hide histories of the Indian Wars, cowboys and the Mountain Giant spirits of the Apache.

This is a strange, surreal and lovely land, and while there are some banal retirement communities marring its surface, look past them to the artists and eccentrics, and to the mountains and desert that mark the transition space between the USA, Mexico and the Native Americans who preceded everyone else.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Best Secret Party**
Partying it up in **Bisbee** (p276) and walking off your hangover the next day in some art galleries.
- **Best Historical Sleep**
Camping in the shadows of the Apache Wars in **Cochise Stronghold** (p282).
- **Best Hidden Serenity**
Getting lost in the small-town charm that **Patagonia** (p265) exudes.
- **Best True Grit Cowpoke Experience**
Driving to the border through the red desert, cactus-studded wonderland of **Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument** (p258).
- **Most Dali-esque Slice of Nature**
Having your mind blown by the surreal rock formations of the **Chiricahua Mountains** (p281).



TUCSON TO PHOENIX

Most people barrel through from city to city along I-10 in a couple of hours. You can, too, but at least stop off the side of the road for the nice view of Picacho Peak. Or take the scenic route down Rtes 77 and 79 for a view of some true desert landscape.

PICACHO PEAK STATE PARK

Picacho Peak is pretty impressive by any standard, but it's especially noticeable given the dusty nature of the drive from Phoenix to Tucson. Rising 1500ft out of the desert, it's a lumpy rock face that is especially beautiful in March, when the approaches are blanketed in yellow poppies, and late spring, when the cacti bloom.

There's a pretty **state park** (☎ 520-466-3138; <http://azstateparks.com/Parks/PIPE/>; I-10 exit 219; vehicle/bicycle \$7/3; ☎ 5am-10pm) here with a **visitor center** (☎ 8am-5pm) that acts as a nature learning center and a jump-off point for trails onto the mountain. If you're fit, you can walk to the peak of the mountain via a rugged trail that includes cables and catwalks placed for your hiking convenience. From the flat summit, there's a good view out west over some sparsely gorgeous desert landscape. **Camping** (campsites with/without hookups \$20/15) is available at 85 first-come, first-serve plots, which are all reasonably comfortable.

CASA GRANDE RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT

The 'Big House' is all that remains of a major Hohokam Indian city that once covered a full square mile and was one of the major population centers of the prehistoric Southwest.

Casa Grande (☎ 520-723-3172; www.nps.gov/cagr; 1100 W Ruins Dr, Coolidge; adult/child \$5/free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is essentially a solid block of building that upthrusts out of the desert like a yellow sandy tooth. About 30ft or 40ft high, it is built of mud walls several feet thick that have withstood centuries of erosion and the unfortunate attentions of local vandals. The mud was made from caliche, the rock-hard soil of the area that is the bane of the modern gardener.

A huge amount of work went into building Casa Grande, which is the largest Hohokam structure standing today. The whole shebang would have required a lot of centralized political control and excellent infrastructure and

engineering skills on the part of the Hohokam. To prevent further erosion of the site, Casa Grande has been capped by a large metal awning built in the 1930s, an effective, if incongruous, preservation tool (keep your eyes peeled for the owls that like to roost in the awning beams). You cannot enter the building itself, but there is a nice visitor center with the usual helpful National Park Service (NPS) rangers if you have questions. Inside is a model of what the place may have originally looked like; free ranger-led 30-minute tours are available between November and April.

Casa Grande is in the blink-and-miss-it town of **Coolidge**. There are a few strip malls and the intriguing **Golden Era Toy & Auto Museum** (☎ 520-723-5044; 297 W Central Ave; admission \$5; ☎ hours vary), a dusty building that sits across the street from an abandoned department store with a nice old-time deco facade. Filled with old toys and the detritus of days past, the museum feels like a bittersweet monument to the glory days that have since passed Coolidge by.

Cheap motels and chains line Florence Blvd, west of exit 194. The ruins are about 70 miles northwest of Tucson. Leave I-10 at exit 211 and head north on Hwy 87 toward Coolidge and follow the signs. Don't confuse the monument with the modern town of Casa Grande, west of the I-10.

FLORENCE

About 20 miles east of Coolidge, Florence, founded in 1866, is one of Arizona's oldest Anglo towns. It also happens to be pretty as hell – this is a perfect example of small-town revitalization done right. Businesses are clustered around a fancifully done-up **Main Street** (www.florencemainstreet.com), with an old-timey druggist, old-timey restaurants and an old-timey drive-through liquor shop setting the scene.

Besides being attractive and pleasant, Florence's claim to fame was housing the Arizona State Prison, which replaced Yuma's notorious jail in 1909. The **Pinal County Historical Society Museum** (☎ 520-868-4382; 715 S Main St; admission free; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) provides you with likely all the information you will ever need on the history of the jail, plus some cute if underwhelming exhibits on the local history of Pinal County (motto: 'A helpful kind of county').

Florence's Main St is perfect for a stroll around sunset; top off a nice day of small-