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Immigration concerns and budget woes have kept state legislatures busy. Eco-initiatives are a bright spot.

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From cliff dwellings to Old West towns, we show you the best places for historic exploration.

THE WAY OF LIFE 518

Shhh... Race, polygamy, immigration – all that stuff you're not supposed to talk about? Find it here.

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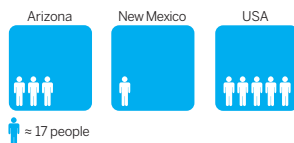
Waiter? There's a green chile in my soup. Can you please tell me what's going on?

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Everything you need to get up to speed on books, film, music, dance and architecture.



population per sq km



Southwest USA Today

It's All Politics...

Tourism officials in Arizona are surely not pleased by headlines in recent years. One of the biggest issues facing the state is illegal immigration. About 250,000 people crossed illegally into Arizona from Mexico in 2009. Although that was a 50% decline from a few years earlier, the state passed law SB 1070 in 2010, requiring police officers to ask for identification from anyone they suspect of being in the country illegally.

What's happening on the ground? Across the Southwest, the number of arrests for illegal border crossings has dropped. Is the ongoing recession making the US less attractive? Perhaps it's the beefed up US Border Patrol. The number of border patrol agents jumped from 10,000 in 2004 to more than 20,700 in 2010. Agents have a very visible presence in southern Arizona: there are checkpoints, and you'll likely see their green-and-white SUVs whizzing down two-lane backroads.

Fiscal woes are the other political hot potato. States are slashing spending, and in Arizona and Utah state park budgets have gone under the knife. Many in Arizona are operating on a five-day schedule, closing on Tuesday and Wednesday; in Utah, state parks have cut the number of rangers. In May 2011, Nevada's unemployment rate was 12%, which was higher than the national average. Luxury condominiums in Vegas sit empty and mountain resort properties in Colorado are experiencing declines in business.

Despite state park budget woes, the Southwest's national parks are faring OK. Attendance was up in Grand Canyon National Park in 2010, and the park welcomed 4.38 million recreational visitors, making it the second-most-visited national park in the US (behind Great Smoky Mountains). Zion National Park ranked eighth.

» Population of AZ, NM, UT, NV & CO: 19 million

» Regional unemployment rate June 2011: 8.9%

» US unemployment rate June 2011: 9.2%

» Cost of marriage license in Nevada: \$60

» Sprinting speed of a roadrunner: 15mph

Dos and Don'ts

» Do tip everyone in Vegas.

» Don't smoke inside a building without asking first. Non-smoking laws are increasingly common, and many people are strongly against secondhand smoke in their homes.

» Do leave a 15-20% tip for your waiter when served a meal.

» Don't take pictures on Native American land without first asking permission.

» Do make sure you know what time zone you're in when crossing states.

Top Movies

127 Hours (2010) Aron Ralston's harrowing experience in Utah's red-rock country.

Thelma & Louise (1991) Dead in Dead Horse State Park? Pshaw. The duo lives to celebrate the movie's 20th anniversary in 2011.