

Understand Southwest USA

SOUTHWEST USA TODAY506

Climate change, gay rights, immigration and the legalization of recreational marijuana use in Colorado – all are hot topics.

HISTORY508

The Southwest's unique landscape has lured adventurers and dreamers for centuries. And the landscape is intricately tied to its history.

THE WAY OF LIFE 516

Race, religion, lifestyles and sports illuminate the cultural landscape.

NATIVE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST520

A visit to a Pueblo or reservation adds cultural and historical context to a Southwest journey.

GEOLOGY & THE LAND 527

The Southwest's unique appearance? You can thank oceans, sediments and a continental mash-up, all shaped by rivers, wind and rain.

SOUTHWEST CUISINE535

Everything you need to know about regional food and drinks, from *huevos rancheros* to Navajo tacos to margaritas.

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE539

Get up to speed on Southwest-themed books, films, music and dance, plus eye-catching buildings.

Southwest USA Today

Marijuana sales, gay marriage and natural disasters are all hot topics. In 2012 recreational use of marijuana was legalised in Colorado and in 2013 New Mexico became the 17th state to legalize gay marriage. Arizona wasn't so gay-friendly, passing a bill – later vetoed by the governor – allowing businesses to refuse service to gay couples for religious reasons. Climate-related unease continued, stemming from cataclysmic flooding in Colorado's Front Range, devastating fires in Arizona and New Mexico and an ongoing drought across most of the region.

Best Books

The Grapes of Wrath (John Steinbeck; 1939) Dust Bowl migrants follow Route 66 west to California.

Desert Solitaire (Edward Abbey; 1968) Essays about the Southwest and industrial tourism by no-holds-barred eco-curmudgeon.

Bean Trees (Barbara Kingsolver; 1988) Thoughtful look at motherhood and cross-cultural adoption in Tucson.

Blood & Thunder (Hampton Sides; 2007) Traces the life and adventures of mountain man Kit Carson, who traveled across the Southwest

Best Films

Stagecoach (1939) Monument Valley may be the true star of this John Ford western drama.

Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid (1969) – Follows the adventures of two real-life outlaws who hid out in Utah.

Thelma & Louise (1991) Two gal pals run from the law and into stunning Southwest scenery.

The Hangover (2009) – It's a bachelor party gone wrong – or right – in Las Vegas.

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

It's All About Politics...

Arizona's legislature has crafted two highly controversial pieces of legislation in recent years. In 2010 Arizona lawmakers passed a stringent anti-immigration law requiring police officers to ask for ID from anyone they suspected of being in the country illegally. Sections of the law have been struck down by the courts as unconstitutional, but law enforcement officers can still ask for papers. Immigration remains a hot-button issue, and border patrol agents have a very visible presence in the southern parts of the state. In 2014 the state legislature drafted a bill that would allow business owners to refuse service to gay customers based on the owner's religious beliefs. At the urging of various corporations and sports franchises, Governor Jan Brewer vetoed the measure.

New Mexico took the opposite approach to gay rights, and in 2013 the State Supreme court confirmed the right of gay couples to marry. But the Land of Enchantment is not free of controversy. In Albuquerque there have been 37 police shootings that led to the deaths of 23 people in the last five years. Concerned citizens held demonstrations to protest the shootings in the spring of 2014, and one of these gatherings escalated into a riot.

In Nevada, rancher Cliven Bundy grabbed the spotlight when federal officials tried to impound 900 head of his cattle, an action stemming from Bundy's alleged failure to pay federal grazing fees and fines. But when Bureau of Land Management officials arrived to collect the animals, they were met by Bundy supporters armed with semi-automatic weapons. The BLM backed down, deciding not to ramp up the conflict. Later, conservative pundits, who initially supported Bundy's anti-federal rhetoric, quieted down as his public comments were criticized for being racially tinged.