

Travels with Peggy

Cactus Cycling and Desert-Themed Cuisine

By Peggy Newland

We drive through a “forest” of cholla, barrel, organ, hedgehog and prickly pear at Saguaro National Park West in Tucson, and suddenly, sunlit cacti surround us on Wasson Peak.

“Let’s stop,” I suggest. We park the bikes and stroll along Valley View Overlook Trails. I want to touch the prickled arms of a “big daddy” twenty-footer but refrain because we still have three more days in the Land of Succulents during New England’s frozen “stick season” of late fall/early winter, and I don’t want to spend time picking Saguaro spines from my hands.

“They can live up to 200 years old,” Brian quotes from a guidebook.

This morning, we left early and parked at the base of the national park. Staying at the Lodge On The Desert, we have a perfect homebase of waterfallled pools, hot tubs, lush landscaping, and winding paths to adobe casitas with views of Santa Catalina Mountains. Our room has a gas fireplace and a private patio overlooking cactus and flower gardens and it’s by a trickling stream, so it’s pure relaxation.

It’s 70 degrees here, and there’s not a cloud in the sky. Back home, there’s a forecast for frozen rain and mountain snow.

We zip over to Red Hills Visitor Center and discover that the elevation in this park rises to almost 5000 feet and contains both desert scrub and desert grasslands. Coyote, rattlesnakes, and desert tortoise live in the biotic communities that overlook the Avra Valley to the west and the Quinlan and Baboquivari Mountains to the southwest. A ranger suggests we head down to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum after our guided tour at the center.

“It’s part zoo, botanical garden, aquarium, and art gallery, and you’ll get up close and personal with the rattlesnake, coyote in some of the exhibits and presentations,” she says.

We continue over to the most amazing museum/zoo/garden and stroll among clustered desert gardens full of golden burroweed, white desert blooms of zinnia, marigold, and purple trailing four-o’clock. Baja lavender nightshade and flowering willow offer cooling textures. We pass through different desert landscapes: a riparian corridor of playful otters, beavers, and native fish in wetland settings, a pine-oak woodland section with sleeping bears, gray wolves, and mule deer, some canyons with lolling ocelots and bobcats, rock ledges with bighorn sheep, and a reptile hall of rattlers, tarantulas, and multicolored lizards. We wander into a live rattlesnake show and learn that rattles are made of keratin, and that these vipers love to ambush hunt, waiting hours for small rodents to pass by before striking.

After all this excitement, we load our bikes back into the car and head down to La Chaisteria for a late biker’s lunch of black bean tostadas with fresh guacamole and vegan tacos filled with local herbs and tofu. Then it’s siesta time back at the hotel for margaritas, a pool and hot tub at sunset.

Dinner that night is at a local hot spot: 5 Points Market and Restaurant in Barrio Veijo District. The menu is eclectic and locally curated. I choose a pistachio little gem salad while Brian enjoys eggplant with tahini, cucumber, and sumac. Then it’s a flat iron steak au poivre with celeriac and potato in a pan sauce partnered with my smashed chicken with cilantro rice, lemongrass aioli, and salsa verde. For dessert, we share pavlova of macerated strawberry, whipped cream and fennel oil and delicious vanilla bean brown butter ice cream. We need to load up the energy for the next day’s adventure on two wheels.

El Tour de Tucson is an iconic cycling race into the deserts surrounding Tucson and Brian and I are lucky to get to experience it, even if we plan to ride slowly, and not in racing gear. Hundreds of brightly clad cyclists line up in sections of the start downtown. A band warms us all up before the horn blows.



Brian and I stay in the back of the race with the jovial, less serious cyclists, as we cycle through the downtown streets full of cheering crowds, onto the highways, and eventually toward the fields of cacti and looming mountain ranges on all sides. We stop at every rest area for fresh chips and salsa, oranges, power bars, and cookies as we head toward the rolling ridges near Rincon Mountain District. Then we hoof over to the vast fields of Pima Air and Space Museum’s for views of military fighters, commercial jets, vintage classics, and domestic prop planes. It’s a rewarding, but long day, on the saddle, and lunch at a classic downtown cafe, The Cup, in the Hotel Congress, is an ideal rest. We nosh on Cubanos made of braised pork, smoked ham, cheese, pickles, and chipotle mayo and then have thick slices of three-layer chocolate cake, before going back to nap and soak in the hot tub.

Dinner that night is at Tito and Pep, a Midtown neighborhood favorite. Hip and bright, we sit in a corner lounge surrounded by towering plants and succulents and have difficulty deciding on grilled octopus with salsa macha, posole verde with roasted poblano, grilled trout with guajillo chile, and mesquite grilled pork chops with smoked chile glaze, so we order everything. A local Arizona wine, Deep Sky Viognier, rounds out the palate. Desserts match our dinner indecision so we share a luscious rosemary and orange olive oil cake with tuxardo cherries, and a buttermilk panna cotta with pineapple compote, passionfruit syrup, fresh raspberries, and mint.

On our last day, we have a leisurely Mexican brunch at Buendia Cafe, which is run by a wonderful couple, Julio and Jael Garcia. We choose poblano peppers stuffed with green corn tamale, cheese and culichi sauce and a breakfast burrito packed with bacon, eggs, cheese, and potatoes. Cafe de Ollas are sweet cinnamon coffees that we keep refilling.

Our legs are worn out from cycling the past two days so head over to Tohono Chul Gardens and Galleries to stroll the themed gardens, nature trails, and nature-focused outdoor galleries and sculptures. Lunch is in their garden bistro, and it’s a quiet oasis surrounded by flowering cactus and botanicals. After a swim and siesta in the late afternoon, we head downtown to check out the adobe architecture and the Fourth Avenue District’s walkable neighborhoods before heading to dinner at Charro Steak & Del Rey. Both of us get mesquite grilled steak with braised asparagus and classic mezcal cocktails. A perfect ending to a cycling “freeze-free” zone in cuisine-central Tucson.



Courtesy photos
Top: Lodge on the Desert
Middle: Saquaro National Park
Bottom: Tour de Tucson

If you go

- Lodge On The Desert.** 309 N. Alvernon Way, Tucson.. 502-320-2000. Casita lodging with outdoor patios, pools, hot tubs, and fireplaced rooms. A perfect basecamp in the desert. www.lodgeonthedesert.com
- El Tour de Tucson.** www.eltourdetucson.org. Race or tour yourself through the cactus of Tucson. Join in the fun every November.
- Bike Tucson.** Locations throughout Tucson with quality rentals and friendly staff. Come for the bike races or tour yourself around Tucson on two wheels. www.tucsonbicyclerentals.com
- Tohono Chul Gardens.** 7366 N. Paseo del Norte. Come for the art and cactus gardens and stay for lunch in the garden bistro. Al fresco at its sunniest best. www.tohonochul.org
- Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.** 2021 N. Kinney Rd. Part desert zoo, aquarium, botanical garden and art gallery and all parts fun. Do not miss live shows with rattlesnakes. www.desertmuseum.org
- Saguaro National Park West.** 2700 N. Kinney Rd. Get a desert map and make your hiking plans. The sunsets are amazing. www.nps.gov

Where to eat:

- Buendia Breakfast and Lunch Cafe.** 2530 N. 1st Ave. Come for the stuffed Poblano peppers and don’t miss Cafe de Ollo. Local secret.
- Tito and Pep.** 4122 E. Speedway Blvd. Mesquite-fired cuisine, and bright interiors make for a Southwest perfection. www.titoandpep.com
- Charro Steak & Del Rey.** 188 E. Broadway Blvd. Stack of oysters and grilled steak with downtown urban feel. www.charrosteak.com
- Cup Cafe at Hotel Congress.** 311 E. Congress. Historic venue with classic breakfast and quirky comfort. www.hotelcongress.com
- La Chaisteria.** 1002 W. Congress. St. Vegan, vegetarian, and the best tacos around. www.lachaisteria.com
- 5 Points Market & Restaurant.** 756 S. Stone Ave. Locally sourced cuisine, inventive menu with neighborhood “in the know” vibe. www.5pointstucson.com