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With airline mergers constantly in the news (ours included), it's easy to forget that size alone isn't enough to lead this industry. No one who flies is waiting for a bigger airline; they're waiting for one that's committed to making flying better. To that end, we've taken a look at every part of the experience - from buying a ticket to getting your bags - and dedicated ourselves to constantly improving it. That's an ambitious goal, especially at a time when air travel is under pressure from all sides, but the challenges of this industry have always been its fuel; that was true at Kitty Hawk, and it's true today. So while we're proud to offer over 5,500 flights a day, we won't rest until each one of them is as convenient, comfortable, and hassle-free as possible.

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EXCURSION

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SPRINGS**
summer fun
with the horses

LAS VEGAS
gambling, shows,
& blackouts

**YOSEMITE
VALLEY**
jaw-dropping
nature & views

**BRYCE
CANYON**
land of the
hoodoos





the **GRAND CANYON**
isn't the only attraction in
A R I Z O N A

There is an endless number of ways to pronounce "Tucson."
But there is also an endless number of things to do in Tucson.

Written by Lucas Peterson
Pictures by Ganapathy Kuma



The scenic Bear Canyon Trail in beautiful, picturesque Sabino Canyon

The change, and how quickly it came, took me by surprise. One minute we were in the heart of Tucson, Ariz., among the restaurants, coffee shops and businesses you'd expect in a metro area of more than a million people. Scarcely 15 minutes later it was as if we were hundreds of miles from civilization. Surrounded by the muted bronze and sage colors of the desert, my cousin Melanie Kuhlman (and her three children) and I took in the silence, the desert brush and towering saguaro cactuses that stretched 20 or 30 feet into the air. One of the best things about Tucson, I discovered, is how easy it is to leave Tucson. That's not a knock against the city — I mean it.



The Tucson Arizona Temple

The Old Pueblo, as the city is sometimes called, is a special place. Unlike many major urban centers, whose bragging rights are that you don't have to leave the city limits to find what you want, Tucson is a place that encourages you to explore. Yes, there is beautiful public art throughout, as well as a Unesco-recognized culinary scene. But within easy access are breathtaking mountainscapes, desert kitsch and outstanding wildlife-viewing opportunities. Tucson is worth a visit for any traveler, regardless of means, but I'm happy to say I kept well within my modest budget when I visited last month.

"It's a city that doesn't feel as big as it is," said my uncle Brian, an avid outdoorsman and decades-long resident (and Melanie's dad). Melanie compared the city to Phoenix, which is just two hours away: "We preserve our beautiful, natural desert landscape," she said. "If you look around Phoenix, there are a lot of green lawns. People have ..." She paused: "Grass."

The civic predilection toward conservation was apparent at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum,

just 10 miles outside the city (\$21.95 admission for adults, \$8.95 for kids ages 3 to 12). The museum, which encompasses nearly 100 acres, aims to challenge the traditional concept of what a museum can be by creating a mutually symbiotic relationship with the surrounding desert. Founded in 1952, it's a bit of everything rolled into one: a zoo, a botanical garden and a place to hike — 85 percent of the museum is outdoors.

It happens to be a great place to take kids but is fun for all, regardless of age. I walked around the grounds with my cousin and her young ones, enjoying the surprisingly lush and diverse species of desert flora: saguaros, brittlebush and the teddy bear cholla cactus, which looks cuddly but is deceptively prickly. (Don't touch it. Seriously.) We saw wolves, bighorn sheep, prairie dogs and even a mountain lion.

While west of the city, I hiked in Saguaro National Park. That is where I really came to appreciate the saguaros and understand why they're called the guardians of the desert. They're massive, green columnar structures with multiple arms and sharp spines, able to grow as tall as 60 feet. They look like what a child might produce if you asked for a drawing of a typical cactus.

More great hiking opportunities await in the northeastern outskirts of the city at Sabino Canyon Recreation Area (\$5 for a day pass). I went out one morning with Melanie, her husband, Erik, and their

“Tucson is a place that encourages you to explore.”

“Southern Arizona has a style of Mexican food all its own.”

kids, and trekked along Upper Sabino Canyon road, forging into the Pusch Ridge Wilderness and intertwining with the Sabino Creek. We passed mesquite trees with their long, tentacle-like roots as well as creosote bushes, which give off a distinct, earthy desert smell after a rain. A trolley will take you up the length of the road (\$10 for adults) but we hiked the length of it, and back, a distance of about 7.5 miles.

Of course, there's plenty to do within the city, too. I was lucky enough to be in town at the same time as the Tucson Rodeo, an annual tradition that began in 1925. After paying \$25 for a bleacher ticket, I took in some barrel racing, in which competitors on horses run a timed course around a series of barrels — then noticed the crowd grow eager with anticipation as the bull riding began.

"And there's the Copenhagen smile," said one of the announcers, referring to the lopsided cheeks of someone working on a plug of chewing tobacco. One by one, the riders came out, and one by one, they fell. A bull named Mr. Hot Shot tossed his rider like a rag doll in about two seconds; a rider named Chance Strong had a little more luck, lasting nearly four seconds on a bull named Atomic Drop. To garnish a score, though, a rider must last a full eight seconds. Finally, Nate Perry from Elk City, Okla., was up to the challenge, to whoops from the crowd, he lasted the full eight.



Mouth-watering, fresh Mexican-style tacos



Saguaro cacti against a dazzling sunset

Cacti fun facts

1 Some cacti species can live up to 300 years.

2 A saguaro cactus can store up to 200 gallons of water.

3 The thick liquid inside cacti is drinkable.

4 Cacti spines protect them from animals and prevent them from losing water.

5 Some cacti can live up to a year without water.

I've somehow managed to not talk about the food in Tucson yet — unforgivable, given the sheer volume and quality of its Sonoran-influenced cuisine. Southern Arizona has a style of Mexican food all its own, one distinguishing characteristic being the use of homemade flour tortillas. The flour tortilla, unfairly maligned by some, is elevated to an art form in Tucson: a stretchy, chewy, yielding halo that goes perfectly with both tacos and burritos.

Get your fix at Tania's Flour Tortillas and Mexican Food, a modest restaurant in the Drexel Heights area west of the airport. My plate of carne asada was very excellent — juicy and smoky — and came with rice and refried beans (\$9.89). The best part, though, were the tortillas — two big ones about 18 inches in diameter that clearly had just come freshly off the smoky, burning, steaming grill.

Also close to the airport is Aquí Con El Nene (there's another location in north Tucson), a brick-and-mortar that specializes in a taco yaqui (\$5.50), a type of

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