



Southern Arizona (A18A)

After a long, brutal Las Vegas winter, with high temperatures only in the 60s and 70s and countless – well, two – rainy days, I needed a break. I thought I'd head to southern Arizona for some fun in the sun as I visited some sites on my list, including a more thorough sightseeing visit to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. But I didn't get the break I expected as it rained five straight days and daytime temperatures were generally in the 30s to 50s.

So although I did get a fair amount of sightseeing in, I gave up on the trip a couple days early (a convenience that results from living so close).



I took off Monday afternoon and went only as far as Kingman, Arizona. That would give me time for seeing my planned stops during Tuesday's drive down to Ajo, Arizona. Stops included Burro Creek Recreation Site, pictured.



I made a short photo stop at Nothing, Arizona, one of a few ghost towns I'd see on this trip. Pictured is all that's left of Nothing's "All Mart".



The All Mart may have confused this trucker.

It wasn't much of a stop. All in all, I'd have to say that there's Nothing to see here.



Further south I spent about an hour exploring part of the Sonoran Desert National Monument.



Gatlin and Fortaleza are two ruins sites near Gila Bend, Arizona. The city took over the Gatlin site, but it's closed as Gila Bend decides what to do with it. There wasn't much to see from the road. So I looked for Fortaleza, which I confirmed is across the Gila River on a reservation. It is now off limits to non-tribal visitors. Private property signs even kept me from getting closer to the river. So I didn't spend as much time in Gila Bend as I had planned on. This is the view I got with 15x optical zoom. Some ruins line the upper left of the small plateau and a few more can be seen on the upper right corner.



The highway to Ajo passes through Barry M Goldwater Air Force Range.



Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, which is on the Air Force Range. In order to visit the refuge, you must sign a waiver in case you get hurt, given the Air Force's activities in the area. I used my planned Gila Bend time to explore the refuge a bit.



Ajo is an old mining town, whose mining money contributed to the construction of a rather fancy town square. The mine is now inactive, but the town seems to survive in part as an artist colony.



Ajo's New Cornelia Mine

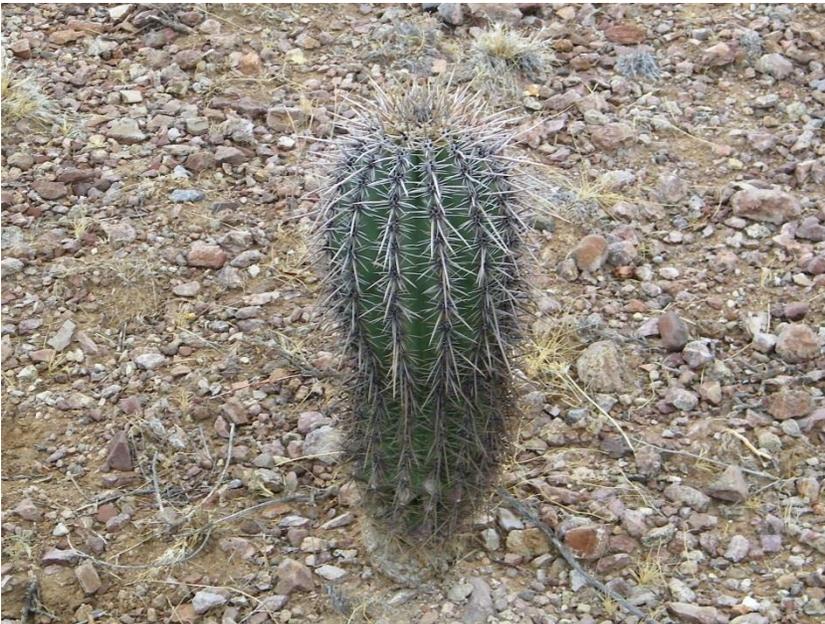
I had visited Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, south of Ajo on the border with Mexico, a couple times in the past, but only for a few hours at a time. I had some places I wanted to explore and a couple hikes to take – starting the day in Ajo would let me get those in.

But for this visit I had mostly overcast skies and periods of rain. And it began raining for the rest of the day as I was leaving the park.

I began with the 28-mile Ajo Mountain Loop Drive.



There are lots of saguaro cacti in the park. They usually don't start forming arms until they're 50 years old or older. Here's how the arms get started.



A young saguaro appears to have a more severe set of spines.



A nice example of an organ pipe cactus, surrounded by several saguaro cacti.



This organ pipe cactus is a bit different. Look at its middle.



This deformity is a "crest". Rather than arranged in a circle, the growth cells that result in a crest are organized in a straight line. Crests are relatively rare, although they also occur in other types of cacti. They are interesting to see, and they're generally harmless to the plant.



Halfway along the loop drive is the Arch Canyon Trailhead. I took this hike. In addition to the usual warning signs about carrying water and the dangers of summer heat and desert critters, signs also warn hikers about encountering illegal immigrants and drug smugglers – the trail is only a few miles north of the border.



Arch Canyon continues beyond the trail.



Some ocotillos (not a cactus) were in bloom even though their branches looked dead.



But at closer look you can see the chlorophyll in the branches. When water is abundant the branches are covered with small green leaves.



A nice example of a Chain Fruit Cholla



The Teddy Bear Cholla gets its name from its cuddly appearance.



A nice variety of cacti, ocotillos, creosote shrubs and other plants at the end of the loop road.



Mexican Jumping Bean shrub along the Desert View Trail, the second trail I hiked during my visit.



Arizona Fishhook Cactus along the Desert View Trail.



The border crossing from Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to Sonoyta, Mexico, seen from a few miles away along the Desert View Trail.



Here's the actual border crossing. It was mid-afternoon when I stopped here to pick up some beverages for the drive to Tucson when a couple school buses pulled up on the US side. Several school kids got off and then walked home across the border to Sonoyta. Leaving Organ Pipe, my first stop was a border patrol checkpoint.

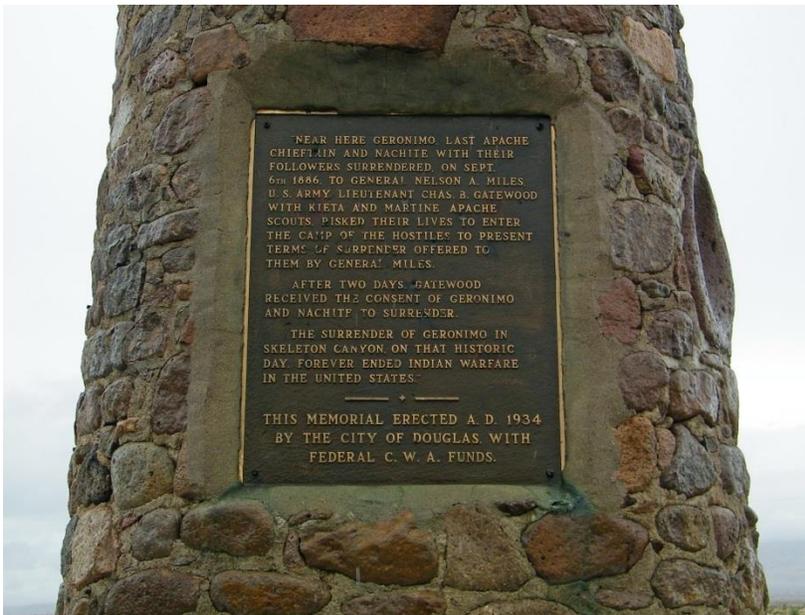
The next day I stopped at a convenience store in border town Douglas, Arizona to get gas. Most of the other vehicles there had Mexican license plates. For all the talk of border security, I don't think that a lot of the talkers really know much about what life along the border is really like.



Fairbank, now a ghost town, once was a railroad hub supporting mining towns like Bisbee and Tombstone, Arizona.



The road through Arizona's remote southeastern corner passes through the San Bernardino Volcanic Field, a landscape marked by a number of cinder cones and craters.



The road also passes a marker that describes the surrender of Geronimo, which generally marked the end of the wars between the U.S. Army and Native American tribes. The actual surrender site was a few miles away in Skeleton Canyon, but that area is now on private property and closed to the public.

With more time to spare, I made an unplanned stop to tour Rodeo, New Mexico's Chiricahua Desert Museum and Apache Museum – more collections than museums. The Desert Museum had a particular emphasis on snakes, lizards, scorpions, spiders and other venomous creatures of the Southwest.



A Red Diamond Rattlesnake



A Baird's Rat Snake



The Gila Monster is one of two venomous lizards found in North America.



The Mexican Beaded Lizard is the other one.



The museum had other snake-related displays, including a variety of snake bite kits and this collection of paintings.

And now I have inspiration for how I might want to decorate my guest bedroom.

Rodeo is one of a handful of very small towns that dot New Mexico's "Boot Heel" area, the extreme southwest corner of the state. I drove across the boot heel, heading towards the town of Columbus.



I was approaching Hachita, New Mexico when the sun briefly came out behind me, illuminating the grassy foreground in this scene.



Columbus is home to New Mexico's Pancho Villa State Park. Pancho Villa's army attacked the city in 1916, the last excursion of foreign troops into the Continental US. After the attack, this area was quickly turned into a large fort – headed by General John J. Pershing, who used it to support his "Punitive Expedition" into Mexico to chase Pancho Villa. Pershing would go on to fame as commander of the American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front in World War I. The park includes a museum, some artifacts and four buildings that survive from the Pancho Villa era.

After a night in Deming, I headed back into Arizona.



Downtown Duncan, Arizona.



Along Arizona's Black Hills National Back Country Byway.



US Highway 191 heads north through the Morenci Copper Mine, the largest copper mining operation in North America.



Compare the size of the mine's dump truck to the pickup trucks parked nearby.



Highway 191 continued north on a very winding road through some snow covered and foggy mountains. It took longer than I had planned on as the posted speed limit was only 25 MPH in many areas.



I stopped at the Springerville, Arizona Heritage Center, which was closed on the Sunday I stopped here last September. It includes a display of information about and artifacts excavated from the nearby Casa Malpais ruins site.



The Casa Malpais ruins are located on a terrace just below the top of this cliff. Access is by guided tour, but alas the tours don't go in winter months.



This cinder cone west of Springerville is found in the Springerville Volcanic Field, one of several volcanic fields that follow the path of a "hot spot" as it moved northeast. Capulin Volcano, which I visited last October in the northeast corner of the state, is found in a volcanic field that marked a more recent location of that hot spot.

After five days of rain and more in the forecast, I decided that I'd head home after a night in Payson, Arizona. Because I live just one state over, I can always return when the forecast looks better.



As I approached Camp Verde, Arizona along Highway 260, I was treated to a nice view of the Mogollon Rim. The Mogollon Rim marks the southern end in Arizona of the Colorado Plateau, an uplifted area around the Four Corners region that includes many of my favorite National Parks and public lands sites.



My last stop of any significance was the town of Ash Fork, Arizona, whose primary surviving claim to fame is its location along the old Route 66. But there isn't much visible of Route 66 culture surviving here any longer.