

About Tucson, Arizona

Tucson is an international tourist destination because there is so much to do and see, and because of the agreeable climate. It is in Arizona, the Grand Canyon State. The city has a unique and distinct culture, so much so that UNESCO has designated it an international city of gastronomy. For example, Barrio Bread supports small local farms in growing heritage grain species from which they make their bread. Mission Gardens celebrates the 4,000 years that this area has been under cultivation. There is a rich assortment of local restaurants. The large University of Arizona gives the city a cosmopolitan quality.

It may surprise some people to learn that it usually is not hot in Tucson. The altitude is around 2,500 feet (760 meters) which makes it a bit cooler than low desert areas like Phoenix. Because of wide daily temperature swings in the desert, there is a pleasant time of day year round. Even on the hottest summer days it is pleasant around sunrise, and in the winter it is warm in the afternoon. It is most famous as a winter destination, but that is simply because the winter weather is usually milder than in most of the US. However, the best seasons in Tucson are spring and fall. May is typically dry and sunny. On the first of May the average low temperature is 58°F (14°C), and the average high temperature is 88°F (31°C). You may need a light jacket in the early morning, but shorts and a t-shirt in the afternoon.

Another common misconception is that deserts are nothing but sand. Actually there are many types of desert. The Sonoran Desert supports a lot of plant life. In fact, according to one common measure Tucson is not even a desert. Deserts are usually defined as areas where the annual precipitation is less than 8 inches (20 cm.). Tucson averages about 12 inches (30 cm.). However, that is mostly in the form of rain in monsoon storms in late summer. It can go months without a drop of rain, and some of that time there are daily highs over 100°F (37°C) with single-digit humidity. The evaporation rate actually exceeds the rainfall, giving it in effect negative precipitation. It is indeed a desert, but a unique one.

Those conditions have evolved bizarre flora capable of thriving on occasional rainfall and surviving the long dry spells. For example, the signature species of the Sonoran Desert is the saguaro cactus. It can be up to 40 ft high (12 meters) and weigh several tons. The sides are pleated like an accordion, allowing them to swell up with stored water. They support many species, and their edible fruit is a staple of the Tohono O'odham people who have lived here for millennia. There are many other species as well, each with its own special adaptation. This abundant vegetation supports an array of wildlife and birds. After a rain the desert can be carpeted with wildflowers. Saguaro National Park in Tucson preserves a pristine area of desert vegetation.

Another preserve is the Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum, which displays and interprets the wildlife and vegetation of the desert. They characterize this area as a maritime desert, because the Sea of Cortez is relatively nearby, just over 200 miles by car. That affects the Tucson climate.

The Westward Look Resort and Spa, the site of BIOCOMM 2025, is another preserve, a private one. It was fortunate to inherit 80 acres (32 hectares) of unspoiled Sonoran Desert in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains. It began in 1912 as a private resort of a wealthy couple who entertained on a large scale and loved the desert. Its development over the last century has been a natural progression in several phases. Throughout the addition of modern facilities the value of its unique site has been nurtured. Unlike so many other resorts that are golf courses, they have instead developed paths for walkers and horseback riders, and gardens and water features to support wildlife. There is a hummingbird garden, and a butterfly garden.

The nearby mountains that form the backdrop to the resort harbor another fascinating biome known as a “sky island”. The higher elevations rise above 9,000 feet (2,740 meters). The precipitation, and hence the vegetation, change as you climb through several zones, ending in ponderosa pine forests near the top. These areas are isolated from similar mountaintops by the surrounding desert, just as the ocean isolates islands. As a result each one has some unique species. The Catalinas are in a national forest which can be explored by many trails. The Finger Rock Trail and the Pima Canyon Trail both begin near the resort. Mount Lemmon in the Catalinas has a skyway drive up to the higher elevations with many scenic lookouts. Another nearby area of interest is Sabino Canyon, a lush riparian environment where a river flows down through a canyon. A shuttle carries hikers and visitors to several trailheads in the canyon.

Mission San Xavier del Bac is an historic mission church about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from downtown Tucson. It was built by the O’odham people on the Tohono O’odham Nation between 1783 and 1797. It is an outstanding example of Spanish Colonial architecture in the United States.

Kitt Peak National Observatory is located in the Quinlan Mountains 55 miles (88 kilometers) west-southwest of Tucson. With more than twenty optical and two radio telescopes, it is one of the largest gatherings of astronomical instruments in the Earth's northern hemisphere.