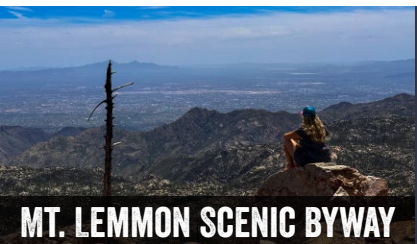


SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK



REID PARK ZOO



MT. LEMMON SCENIC BYWAY



TUCSON BOTANICAL GARDENS



SABINO CANYON

Undoubtedly, the southwest is a huge draw for visitors, but did you know that Tucson is the second-largest city in Arizona? Known for its desert landscape, including the famous saguaro cactus, Tucson boasts vibrant Mexican American culture, food, history, hiking and star gazing. Read along as I share the top 10 reasons to add this must-see destination to your summer travel list.

10 Saguaro National Park splits into two stunning districts on either side of Tucson's cityscape, with both sides providing a different experience. Aside from the 2 million saguaro cacti, Saguaro National Park is also home to other distinctive desert flora, such as the cholla cacti and the ocotillo plant. Some of the most popular activities for visitors at Saguaro National Park include hiking, picnicking, cycling and enjoying a scenic drive through the park. Remember that the east side is paved and more scenic, and the west side is on gravel and submerges you in the cacti. I recommend visiting both sides of this National Park if you have time.

9 An excellent option for a family-friendly attraction in Tucson, the Reid Park Zoo houses more than 500 animals and it takes about two hours to explore the entire facility. The zoo is one of my favorites to explore, primarily due to its size, cleanliness, cost and ability to view the animals. Reid Park Zoo offers a great experience featuring meerkats, elephants, flamingos, feeding giraffes and a walk-in aviary. Be on the lookout for multiple holiday events and nighttime zoo exploring.

8 Also known as the Sky Islands or Santa Catalina, the Mt. Lemmon Scenic Byway is one of the most breathtaking drives tourists can head to in Southeast Arizona. The 60-mile round-trip byway features picturesque mountain views and canyons, and the drive up (and down) takes less than an hour and a half. Mt. Lemmon is one of the highest summits in Arizona, with an elevation of 9,159 feet. There's no end to the outdoor recreational activities you can participate in at Mount Lemmon, from hiking and cycling to skiing and sledding. Mt. Lemmon is also a popular destination for rock climbing, with more than 2,700 climbing routes for climbers of all skill levels to peruse.

7 A beautiful spot right in the heart of town, the Tucson Botanical Gardens is a 5.5-acre garden featuring different areas such as a Zen Garden, Butterfly Garden, Prehistoric Garden, Children's Garden and Xeriscape Garden. Established in 1964, the park features a beautiful gift shop and delicious café and boasts many exhibits throughout the year. It also uses vehicles as plant holders and is home to wonders of nature in Tucson.

6 The Sabino Canyon is a fantastic place to walk or hike. The beautiful scenery and multiple trails are ideal for adrenaline junkies and reconnecting with nature. Also, the significant canyon is a famous recreation spot for tourists and locals. Visitors can make a side trip to Sabino Creek, explore wildlife inhabitants in the area, enjoy waterfalls and swimming holes, and hike up impressive rocky peaks and picnic sites surrounded by massive cacti. You don't have to be an avid hiker to enjoy Sabino Canyon; those looking to stroll will find this just as enjoyable. If you're a photographer or love taking pictures, this is an excellent area for fun nighttime photography.



SAN XAVIER DEL BAC MISSION



ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM



PICACHO PEAK STATE PARK



TUMACÁCORI NATIONAL MONUMENT



COOKIE CABIN

5 This National Historic Landmark is open to the public daily and located on the San Xavier Indian Reservation (remember to be respectful of the place's history when you visit). The current structure is an impressive 226 years old, and it's known as the oldest remaining European structure in all of Arizona. Mission San Xavier del Bac has been an active site for Catholic pilgrimage for years, where visitors flock to pray to Saint Francis and ranks as one of the most impressive churches I've seen in the U.S. and beyond.

4 The 98-acre museum is a world-famous zoo, natural history museum, botanical garden and art gallery, with most attractions outdoors. The museum features 242 desert animals, 56,000 plant specimens, mineral collections and art exhibitions to inspire conservation and promote the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. Consistently ranked at the top of the best museums on TripAdvisor, it's one of the most popular attractions in Tucson, welcoming about 400,000 visitors a year.

3 The state park is a one-hour drive from Tucson, making it the perfect length for a day trip or weekend camping. Picacho Peak is a photographer's dream, and if you happen to catch it in March, the hills come alive with breathtaking lupine, poppy and ocotillo blooms. Picacho Peak State Park is recognizable by its incredible Picacho Peak, a 1,500-foot (457m) rock structure formed through volcanic flow erosion. Not only a natural beauty, Picacho Peak is also a historic landmark. In 1862, the Battle of Picacho Pass occurred, going down in history as Arizona's most significant civil war clash. Picacho Peak State Park hosts five hiking trails, ranging from easy to complex, to entertain hikers of all skill levels.

2 More than just adobe, plaster and wood, these ruins evoke tales of life and land transformed by cultures meeting and mixing. Transport yourself through time by walking the mesquite-lined paths and exploring the architecture of this Spanish colonial mission. This ranks as one of my all-time favorite National Monuments. The moment you walk in, you're transformed back in time. The National Parks have done an incredible job of making visitors feel like they are in a history book. You can end your visit by stopping in the beautiful gift shop, strolling the gardens and bringing a snack for a little break at one of the many scenic picnic areas.

1 If you take the trip up Mt. Lemmon to 9,000 feet elevation, be prepared to stop at the small town of Summerhaven atop the peaks and feast your eyes and stomachs on the best cookie you'll ever taste. The cookies are the size of dinner plates and incredibly delicious, rivaling any cookie I've ever had. Bonus, you can start with their amazing homemade pizza. This is an absolute do not miss fun treat with gorgeous outside seating. You'll be happy you made the trip.

Tucson, Arizona, may not be the obvious choice at the top of many vacation destination wish lists; however, I hope after reading this top 10 list it will not go overlooked when thinking about an Arizona vacation. Tucson is a vibrant community, offering visitors a year-round outdoor playground to explore, play, dine and relax. Ultimately, Tucson is perfect for nature lovers, history buffs, foodies and kids. Get ready for your next vacation here and start thinking about things to do in Tucson.