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It's high season down under. Let us guide you to Tucson, Bisbee and all the other destinations that have national travel experts humming.

Phoenix gets the pro sports franchises, the big-ticket pop music tours and the presidential campaign visits. So, what does Southern Arizona get? Lately, a heap of national accolades for its culture, tourism and dining. Long admired for its Native-influenced dining traditions, Tucson got the Southern Arizona love fest started in late 2015 by snagging a City of Gastronomy designation from UNESCO – the first U.S. city, so honored by the United Nations-affiliated organization. A few months later, Sunset magazine readers revealed their Southern Arizona love by hanging the title of “Best Small Town in the U.S.” on Bisbee in Cochise County. For good measure, the mining town turned art colony was subsequently named “Best Historic Small Town in America” by USA Today. That’s a lot of praise in a short amount of time, but *PHOENIX* magazine isn’t going to object. Southern Arizona has been one of our favorite travel destinations since we published our first issue 50 years ago. So let us show you what’s down there.

FAIRS AND FAMILY FUN

In February and March, Tucson and its surrounds are a lot like Phoenix – which is to say, there's plenty of things to see and do. Perhaps the most illustrious event in town is the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase (800-638-8350, visittucson.org/events/gem-show) held January 28-February 12. An umbrella of 45 separate shows staged all over town during a two-week period, the showcase is billed as the “biggest gem-and-mineral event of its kind in the world,” having brought such superstars of the lapidary world as the Hope diamond and pieces of moon rock to the Old Pueblo. Free seminars and a Junior Education Area with hands-on activities make the show a big draw for families – not just rock hounds. For a truly unique Tucson family excursion, make like a modern-day Gulliver at The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures (4455 E. Camp Lowell Dr., 520-881-0606, theminitimemachine.org). Created from the personal collection of late miniature collectors Patricia and Walter Arnell, the museum is a shrine to all that is shrunk – Pat’s fondness for miniatures began in the 1930s, when as a young girl she received a set of Strombecker wooden dollhouse



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furniture, and it never abated. Housed in a modern, purpose-built museum building, the 300-plus-piece collection populates permanent exhibits such as *Exploring the World*, which depicts life in other countries, and temporary engagements like *The Art & Science of Portrait Miniatures*. It's kind of a big deal. Perhaps best known for managing tours of the 2,600-acre Aircraft Boneyard, where hundreds of U.S. military and government aircraft are put out to pasture, the Pima Air & Space Museum (6000 E. Valencia Rd., 520-574-0462, pimaair.com) is no one-trick-biplane. The museum boasts more than 300 winged conversation pie-cies on-site, from a Wright Flier to the fearsome SR-71A Blackbird, a sleek, hypersonic

machine which once flew from New York to London in less time that it takes to drive from Phoenix to Tucson – with no traffic, mind you. Such are the mind-boggling aviation tidbits that await the family. For more Tucson-area family recreation ideas – including a list of local hikes and nature excursions like Kachina Hot Springs and Box Springs Campground – check out visittucson.com. The site also includes a stash of hotel and B&B ideas, and a “Beyond Tucson” portal with information about surrounding counties.

CULTURE CULTURES

Located in the Presidio district of Tucson – on the site of an historical Spanish fortress, and near the must-visit Mercado San Agustin craft shop collective – the Tucson Museum of Art (140 N. Main Ave., 520-624-2333, tucsonmuseumofart.com) is a fitting starting point for any cultural exploration of Southern Arizona. Concurrently presenting eight to nine special exhibits at any given time, the museum also boasts an 8,000-piece permanent collection with a focus on modern, Latin American, Native and Western art. *The Art of the American West Collection* alone includes works by Native American artists Maria Poveka Martinez and Fritz Scholder; and contemporary Western artists like Valley legend Ed Mell.

If you don't go to enjoy the Picasso prints or spiraling, Guggenheim-like design of the museum itself, go for the food: TMA's on-site Cafe a la C'Art was ranked one of the top museum restaurant in the U.S. by *Food & Wine Magazine*. Since you're in the area, it would be a shame not to visit Mercado San Augustin, and its pod of one-of-kind shops, including MAST (100 S. Avenia de Convento, 520-495-5920 ilovemast.com), a hybrid home furnishing and wardrobe shop that stocks everything from locally-forged iron bottle openers to hand-painted scarves. Find it and 10 other unique Tucson boutiques at visittucson.org. February is a fine month for culture fiends in nearby Cochise County,

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too. With its terraced layout and funky territorial architecture, Bisbee always makes for a fun walk – and on the second Saturday of every month, strolling the town becomes a real “thing” with the Bisbee After 5 Art Walk (bisbeeafter5.com) through Main Street and its many galleries and shops.

After the walk wraps up around 8 p.m., head over to the Quarry for live music and cocktails, or Screaming Banshee Pizza for craft beer and a wood-fired pie. 2017 marks an impressive milestone for the Cochise Cowboy Poetry & Music Gathering, which celebrates a quarter century of delighting visitors with the sensitive artistic stylings of tough men and rough women. Hosted in the Cochise County city of Sierra Vista, the four-day event (February 1, 3-5) is the Southwest's epicenter for all that's wonderful and Western in poetry, music, storytelling and song. Artists from all over the U.S., Canada, and Australia converge on Sierra Vista for three major stage performances and mini-concerts, including the opening-night



performance by the Red Hot Rhythm Rustlers (Cochise College Sierra Vista Campus, 901 N. Columbo Ave., 520-417-6960, cowboy-poets.com). For more travel ideas in Cochise County – including the historical Old West town of Tombstone and the military history of Fort Huachuca – visit explorecochise.com.

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FOODIES AND WINOS

Miraval Resort & Spa executive chef Brandon Cathey doesn't take the strictures of Native cooking lightly. For instance, when the chef is able to get his hands on a precious, all-too-rare bottle of saguaro blossom syrup – released once a year by the Tohono O'odham tribe after a laborious extraction and refinement process – he makes sure guests at the elite resort in north Tucson (5000 E. Via Estancia Miraval, 855-234-1672, miravalresorts.com) will remember it. “I heard of someone using [the syrup] in a smoothie – that's a terrible waste,” he says. “It's really rare and hard to get. So when we do get our hands on it, we want to do something really cool with purpose and meaning. I might use it for an elderberry-saguaro gastrique over grilled quail and french toast.” That's the kind of rigorous culinary philosophy that visitors will find throughout Southern Arizona. In February, you can tour the whole shebang without leaving downtown Tucson by attending the SAVOR Southern Arizona Food & Wine Festival (saacr.org/savor) on Saturday, February 4. Featuring 75 of the region's finest chefs, wineries, breweries and local food product purveyors – last year's event included Sam Fox's Wildflower, the Tucson Tamale Company and Borderlands Brewing – the festival will be held in idyllic Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way) amid colorful floral blooms. We can recommend the experience (\$65 per person) with the highest degree of confidence. Year in, year

out, our favorite epicurean experience in Southern Arizona is touring its burgeoning wine scene – particularly the 13 wide-flung wineries in the Willcox wine region about 45 minutes southeast of Tucson. Bucolic and low-key, Willcox is built for wine fans in the know – it's where the majority of Arizona's wine grapes are grown, and the seat of its most promising new vintners. It also sports an impressive assortment of u-pick farms, like Apple Annie's Fruit Orchards (2081 W. Hardy Rd., 520-384-2084, appleannies.com), where you can pick up a bushel of seasonal fruits to go with your bottle of Syrah from Sam Pillsbury Wine Company. Visit willcoxwines.com for a listing of wineries and directions.

Apropos of any good meal, end your trip on a sweet note with the 26th Annual Chocolate Tasting (bisbeechocolatetasting.com) in Bisbee on Saturday, February 11. Featuring local chefs and homebakers, it's a slam-dunk for folks with a sweet tooth – and another great reason to venture into Southern Arizona this month. If you don't believe us, just read the press clippings.



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