

SANTA CATALINA MOUNTAINS

The Santa Catalinas, crowned by 9,157-foot Mt. Lemmon, rise in ragged ridges from the north edge of Tucson to cool forests atop the higher slopes. A paved road, the Catalina Highway/Sky Island Scenic Byway, winds high into the mountains past many vistas and recreation areas. Down below, a tram ride or easy walk takes you into Sabino Canyon, an oasis of greenery beneath rock walls dotted with saguaro cactus. Catalina State Park offers trails and vistas beneath the imposing western face of the Catalinas.

Be aware that mountain lions live in the mountains and canyons! To reduce the danger of attack, hikers should pair up and keep children close at hand.

Hikers can choose among trails totaling over 150 miles in length and ranging from easy strolls to extremely difficult climbs. Much of the hiking lies within the Pusch Ridge Wilderness, which protects most of the western part of the range. Hikers in the wilderness must heed special regulations to protect the desert bighorn sheep by not going more than 400 feet off trail from January 1 to April 30, not bringing in dogs (service animals are ok), and by limiting group sizes to 15 for day use or 6 camping.

The Santa Catalina Mountains topo map shows the main trails, distances, and trailheads; it's sold at Forest Service offices and hiking stores. Volunteers and foresters of the Santa Catalina Ranger District office provide information on the Santa Catalinas at the Sabino Canyon Visitor Center (5700 N. Sabino Canyon Rd., Tucson, AZ 85750, 520/749-8700, www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sat.-Sun.)

History

In 1697, the tireless Jesuit priest Eusebio Francisco Kino visited a Tohono O'odham village near what's now Tucson. He may have been the first to name it, and the high ranges to the north and east, Santa Catarina. Spanish prospectors found gold in Cañada del Oro, and they also reportedly mined gold in the Mine with the Iron Door and silver in La Esmeralda, both lost mines lying somewhere in the range. Raiding Apache discouraged mining until the late 1870s, when Anglo gold seekers began placer operations in Cañada del Oro, tunneling into the hillsides. This canyon and most of the other mining areas lie in the northern part of the mountains.

Mount Lemmon honors botanist Sara Lemmon, who, with her husband John, discovered many species of plants on an 1881 expedition to the summit. As trails into the mountains improved, the citizens of Tucson headed to the hills more often for the cool air and scenery. The highway to the top, built largely by federal prisoners, opened in 1951.

Catalina Highway/Sky Island Scenic Byway

In just an hour, this 40-mile scenic drive from Tucson leaves the saguaro, palo verde, and cholla behind, passes through woodlands of oak, juniper, and pinyon, enters pine forests at about 7,000 feet, then fir and aspen on the cool, north-facing slopes above 8,000 feet. Meadows bloom with wildflowers in spring and summer. Superb panoramas and fanciful rock pinnacles line much of the drive. Up on top, you'll enjoy camping, picnicking, and hiking in the warmer months, skiing in winter. The many vista points and picnic areas along the way offer places to stop but you'll need to bring water. Be sure to fill up with gas before leaving Tucson, as none is available on the Catalina Highway. It's also a good idea to check for road closures due to construction or storms. For highway construction information, call 520/751-9405; for a weather forecast, call 520/537-7510.

The drive begins from the northeast corner of Tucson; head east on Tanque Verde Road, then turn left on the Catalina Highway. After 4.3 miles, you'll enter the Coronado National Forest and the start of the highway's mileposts. If driving, keep an eye out for cyclists who enjoy the challenging ride. Unless you're going straight through to Summerhaven or Ski Valley, you'll need a recreation pass from the Forest Service for use of any roadside parking areas, picnic or camping areas, restrooms, trailheads, or vista points. Travel will be free with a National Parks Pass if it has a hologram or if you have one of the Golden Eagle, Age, or Access passes; otherwise entry is \$5/day, \$10/week, or \$20/year per vehicle. The recreation passes also include same-day visits to Sabino and Madera Canyons. Passes can be purchased from a booth at Mile 5.1 on the Catalina Highway, the entry booth at Sabino Canyon, as well as from Sabino Canyon Visitor Center, Palisades Visitor Center, and some other vendors. Cyclists don't need a pass.

Babad Do'ag, the first signed vista point, is on the right at Mile 2.6. The Tohono O'odham name means "Frog Mountain," which the Santa Catalinas resemble when viewed from the south. All of Tucson Valley lies at your feet from this 3,450-foot perch.

The highway climbs north between the rugged cliffs of Molino Canyon to **Molino Canyon Vista** on your right at Mile 4.3. Two short trails, one paved for wheelchair access, lead to viewpoints of the canyon; the seasonal creek below cascades into pools. Look for the transformation of plants as the Sonoran Desert begins to give way to oaks and grasslands.

Molino Basin, on the left at Mile 5.7, is the first campground on the drive and 18 miles from downtown Tucson. Summers get hot at the 4,370-foot elevation, so it's open only from late October to the end of April. You'll need to bring drinking water; cost is \$10/vehicle for picnicking and camping, though three picnic areas outside the campground are free. Groups can reserve a large ramada for day use or camping with the district office. Hikers can head north or south on the Arizona Trail.

Prison Camp Road, on the left at Mile 7.4, leads to **Gordon Hirabayashi Recreation Site**. Either picnicking or camping costs \$10/vehicle, but you need to bring drinking water. A trailhead on the left just inside the gate and another at the end of the road, one-third mile in, give access to the Arizona Trail and a variety of hiking destinations. Horse corrals are at the end of the road. You'll see foundations and other remnants of the prison camp established in 1930s; prisoners built much of the Catalina Highway, a task that took 18 years to complete. The camp later housed juvenile offenders until it closed and the buildings were razed in the mid 1970s. Interpretive signs tell the story of the camp and its people. The present name honors Gordon Hirabayashi, who challenged the constitutionality of internment and curfew imposed on Japanese-Americans during World War II; the case went all the way to the Supreme Court, but he lost and had to serve a sentence here.

In another mile, you'll pass **Thimble Peak Vista** on the left with fine views west across Bear Canyon—the largest drainage of the Santa Catalinas. **Seven Cataracts Vista**, 0.6 mile farther on the left, takes in a series of cascades. (Note that these are different from Seven Falls, which are about four miles down Bear Canyon.) Cypress and Middle Bear Picnic Areas on the right, then Chihuahua Pine Picnic Area on the left lie tucked in the forest beginning at Mile 11.5. **General Hitchcock Campground**, on the right at Mile 12, was closed at press time; check with the visitor center to see if it has reopened. In another two miles you'll come to **Windy Point Vista** on the left, which provides sweeping panoramas of the Rincons, Santa Ritas, southern foothills of the Catalinas, and the Tucson Valley. The granite pinnacles

here attract rock climbers and camera buffs. **Geology Vista**, a bit farther on the right, offers more pinnacles and good views to the east and southeast.

Rose Canyon Lake lies at an elevation of 7,200 feet amid ponderosa pines; turn left near Mile 17. Its seven acres offer trout fishing and a half-mile lakeside trail, but no swimming or boating. The nearby campground, 33 miles from downtown Tucson, is open Easter weekend to the end of October and has drinking water, interpretive programs, and a \$15/vehicle fee; you can reserve sites and a group picnicking ramada at 877/444-6777, www.recreation.gov. Day use runs \$5/vehicle for parking at the lake or picnicking.

You can see the Galiuros and many other mountain ranges to the east from **San Pedro Vista**, on the right 0.4 mile beyond the Rose Canyon turnoff. **Green Mountain Trail** connects San Pedro Vista with General Hitchcock Campground to the south. Allow three hours for the four-mile (one-way) hike.

Palisades Visitor Center, on the left at Mile 19.9, is open depending on staffing. Inside, you can see exhibits on the many life zones that you're passing through; books and maps are sold. At a trailhead one-quarter mile before the visitor center, you can hike to the top of 8,550-foot **Mt. Bigelow**, a 1.5-mile roundtrip climb of 600 feet. The **Butterfly Trail** also begins at this trailhead, winding through ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and juniper-oak woodlands to Butterfly Trailhead (Mile 22.8), 5.7 miles one way to the northwest; allow 4-5 hours between trailheads.

Groups can reserve nearby **Showers Point Campground** at 877/444-6777, www.recreation.gov. Primitive camping (no facilities) is possible along Mt. Bigelow Road on the right, 1.1 miles beyond Palisades Visitor Center, and at Incinerator Ridge; these areas receive heavy use, however.

Spencer Canyon Campground, on the left at Mile 21.7, offers cool mountain air at an elevation of 8,000 feet; it's 38 miles from Tucson, open May to mid-October, and has drinking water at a cost of \$12/vehicle for camping, \$5/vehicle for day use.

One mile farther at an elevation of about 8,000 feet, you'll pass Sykes Knob and Inspiration Rock Picnic Areas on the left, then Box Elder, Alder, and Loma Linda Picnic Areas on the right. **Aspen Vista Point**, on the right at Mile 23 between Sykes Knob and Inspiration Rock Picnic Areas, overlooks the San Pedro Valley and many hills beyond; a copper mine is visible in the valley.

Control Road (Forest Road 38), on the right half a mile past Loma Linda and one-third mile before the Ski Valley turnoff, offers an adventure for drivers with high-clearance vehicles. The unpaved road bounces steeply down the northeast side of the Catalinas, past Oracle Ridge Mine to Peppersauce Campground (described below). The 21 miles to the campground takes about two hours, then the road continues another eight miles to Oracle. The first nine miles is especially steep and rough—4WD might be handy. Cars may be able to make it one-third mile down the Control Road to a trailhead for the Arizona Trail/Oracle Ridge Trail #1, which winds north down to Oracle in 12.5 miles one way. Winter snow usually closes the road.

Nearing Mile 25, you'll come to a highway junction; turn right 1.5 miles to Ski Valley or continue straight a quarter mile for the village of Summerhaven. The Aspen Forest Fire devastated Summerhaven in the summer of 2003, and the community will take years to rebuild. At press time only one cafe, the general store, and the post office were in business. Mt. Lemmon Cafe (520/576-1234, daily for breakfast

in summer and lunch year-round) specializes in Pennsylvania Dutch cooking and pies, with a large patio as well as indoor seating. The post office is next door.

A half mile beyond Summerhaven, you'll reach Marshall Gulch Picnic Area on the left. (A gate blocks the road in winter, when you'll have to park outside and walk the last bit.) A sign "Aspen Trail #93, Marshall Saddle 2.5," marks the start of the 3.8-mile **Aspen Loop Trail**, which is open about May to October. The trail climbs through an area burned in the Aspen Fire. At Marshall Saddle, turn right down Marshall Gulch and walk 1.3 miles back to the picnic area.

The southernmost ski area in the United States, **Mount Lemmon Ski Valley** (520/576-1400 current ski conditions, 520/885-1181 business office, 520/547-7510 Pima County Sheriff's road condition hotline), sweeps winter skiers and summer visitors from 8,200 to 9,157 feet on a double chairlift. During the ski season, about mid-December to mid-April, skiers have a choice of 21 runs, including "bunny slopes" for beginners. Lift tickets cost \$35 per day (\$30 half day) for adults, \$16 (\$14 half day) for children 12 and under. After the ski season, you can take the Skyride (\$9 adults, \$5 children 4-12) up to enjoy the views and cool forests. The ski area has a rental shop, snack bar, fudge shop, and a gift shop near the lifts. The large decks provide the venue for an October Fest with a German band, dancing, beer, and food on the last two weekends of September and the first two weekends of October. Iron Door Restaurant (across the highway with indoor and outdoor seating, Sat.-Sun. for breakfast and daily for lunch) is renowned for its chili and cornbread.

A hiking trail, open about May to October, goes from the bottom of the ski lift through fir and aspen forests to the summit in 1.5 miles one way. It's unsigned, so ask someone to point out the start. You could also take the Skyride up and walk down.

An all-weather forest road continues past Mt. Lemmon Ski Valley to an infrared observatory near the top of Mt. Lemmon. Except in winter, you may be able to drive 1.7 miles up the road to a trailhead for Mt. Lemmon Trail and other high-country walks. The observatory area is gated.

Peppersauce Campground lies in a shallow canyon of the northeastern foothills at an elevation of 4,700 feet. Large sycamore and walnut trees shade the sites, which have water and cost \$10/vehicle for camping or day use year-round. If all spaces are taken, seek dispersed camping along Forest Road 29 starting opposite the campground entrance. Groups can reserve an area through the district office. From Oracle, head southeast 8.4 miles on Mount Lemmon Road/Forest Road 38.

Peppersauce Cave is an undeveloped limestone cavern 2.2 miles past the campground turnoff on the road from Oracle. Despite the road warning sign, you can usually negotiate this stretch in a car and reach the one-lane bridge, where you'll find parking. Walk about 300 feet up the wash, then bear right along the second well-trod path to the cave entrance. Take at least two flashlights per person and expect to do some crawling in muddy passageways.

Sabino Canyon

Sabino Creek, deep in the southern foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, begins its journey on the slopes of Mt. Lemmon, bouncing down through the canyon and supporting the lush greenery and trees in which deer, javelina, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, birds, and other animals find food and shelter.

At the entrance to the canyon, **Sabino Canyon Visitor Center** (520/749-8700, www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sat.-Sun.) has exhibits, scheduled nature walks, and sales of books and maps. The self-guided, accessible **Bajada Nature Trail** identifies desert plants on a loop behind the visitor center. The parking fee charged here also covers the Catalina Highway; \$5/day, \$10/week, or \$20/year per vehicle unless you have a National Parks Pass (with a hologram) or if you have one of the Golden passes. Sabino Canyon lies 13 miles northeast of downtown Tucson. Take Tanque Verde Road to Sabino Canyon Road, then turn north and drive 4.5 miles to the canyon entrance. An early arrival will beat the crowds. No pets, glass containers, or alcohol are permitted in the canyon.

A road winds up through Sabino Canyon for 3.8 miles, crossing the creek many times. Visitors enjoy birding, picnicking, hiking, swimming and horseback riding. Private motor vehicles are prohibited beyond the visitor center, but you can take a shuttle tram up the canyon. Bicycles cannot enter on Wednesday and Saturday and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the week.

The shuttle leaves the visitor center every half hour 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily (4 p.m. summer weekdays); fares are \$7.50 adults, \$3.50 ages 3-12. Call 520/749-2327 or visit www.sabinocanyon.com to check schedules. The narrated ride lasts 45-50 minutes roundtrip; you can get on and off as often as you choose at any of the nine stops.

The Forest Service provides picnic areas and restrooms, though you'll find drinking water only at the visitor center and the first two stops. Visitors can bring a picnic and spend all day relaxing by the water. Groups can reserve either of the Cactus Ramadas one-quarter mile from the visitor center; contact the district office. Camping is not allowed in the canyon; backpackers must hike at least a quarter mile in from trailheads before setting up camp.

Hikers have a choice of many destinations at the last stop, Stop 9: back to the visitor center via the Phone Line Trail high on the east slopes of Sabino Canyon (5.5 miles one-way), to lower Bear Canyon via Seven Falls (12 miles one-way), up the West Fork of Sabino Canyon to Hutch's Pool (8.2 miles roundtrip), or to Mt. Lemmon's summit (13 hard miles one-way).

Enjoy the special magic of Sabino Canyon on a moonlight ride during full-moon evenings April-June and Sept.-November. Fees are the same as the daytime shuttles, but reservations and prepayment are required, 520/749-2327.

Bear Canyon

This beautiful desert canyon east of Sabino features Tucson's most popular hiking destination—Seven Falls, a series of waterfalls, each with a pool at its base. Some of the pools are large enough for swimming, a great way to cool off in the warmer months, though pools can completely dry up at times.

To reach the falls, you can either hike from the visitor center or take the Bear Canyon shuttle for the first 1.5 miles. Bear Canyon Trail begins just south of the Sabino Canyon Visitor Center, crosses some rolling foothills to Bear Canyon (1.5 miles one-way), then turns up the canyon to Seven Falls (3.8 miles total, one-way). The trail continues 4.3 miles to connect with other trails in the Catalinas. On the hike to Seven Falls you'll cross the creek seven times, make a gentle climb onto the east hillside, then descend to the falls. The water-polished rock surrounding the pools requires care in walking, as it's very slippery. Allow about 4.5 hours for the roundtrip or 3.5 hours from the Bear Canyon shuttle terminus; elevation change is 650 feet. Picnic tables nestle beside Bear Creek and at Bear Canyon Overlook along the way.

Those who wish to skip the first 1.5 miles of hiking can pick up the shuttle bus at the visitor center for the short ride east to Bear Canyon; the canyon scenery doesn't begin until you leave the road, so there's no point in taking this shuttle unless you plan on hiking. The shuttle (no narration) leaves the visitor center every hour on the hour, daily 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; fare is \$3 adults, \$1 ages 3-12. Bicyclists may not ride into Bear Canyon because it lies in Pusch Ridge Wilderness, but they may take the road to the mouth of the canyon and continue on foot.