

Organ Pipe Cactus

National Monument
Arizona
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Kathleen Norris Cook

Exploring a Desert Landscape

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument celebrates the life and landscape of the Sonoran Desert. In this wilderness of plants and animals and dramatic mountains-and-plains scenery, you can drive a lonely road, hike a backcountry trail, camp under a clear sky, or just soak in the warmth and beauty of the Southwest.

Planning Your Visit

The visitor center has information, publications, maps, exhibits, and slide shows. Park rangers can help you plan your visit. Schedules of talks, guided walks, and other programs are posted in the winter. When you are ready to begin your desert explorations, you will find scenic drives and hiking trails just short distances away (see *descriptions and maps below*). If you visit between October and April, expect sunny days in the 60s and 70s°F and occasional light rains. From May through September temperatures often exceed 105°F and brief, violent thunderstorms sometimes occur. Nights are considerably cooler than days year-round.

Scenic Drives

Two scenic loop roads—the Ajo Mountain Drive and the Puerto Blanco Drive—penetrate desert country. Both are winding, up-and-down graded dirt roads. Passenger vehicles can travel them easily, but if you are driving a motor home more than 25 feet long, you should not travel these unpaved roads. Even some small motor homes have difficulty, so check with a ranger first. Trailers are not recommended on these roads. Guidebooks are available at the visitor center and at the start of both drives. When on the road: carry emergency tools; take drinking water and extra water for your vehicle; stay away from flooded areas; and never drive off the road.

Ajo Mountain Drive (21 miles) winds along the foothills of the Ajo Mountains, the highest range in the area. Outstanding desert landscapes and impressive stands of organ pipe cactus are among the highlights of this tour. The drive takes about two hours.

Puerto Blanco Drive (53 miles) circles the colorful Puerto Blanco Mountains and passes through a startling variety of scenery. Around

one corner you will find the desert oasis of Quitobaquito, while around another you'll find a true Sonoran Desert environment, with saguaros, organ pipe cacti, and elephant trees. This trip takes half a day.

Besides these two roads, there are a few unimproved dirt roads that go farther into the backcountry. Some lead to historic sites with windmills, ranch houses, abandoned gold and silver mines, and other remnants of the past. Sometimes these roads are passable only by 4-wheel-drive vehicles. Check on road conditions at the visitor center.

Walks and Hikes

Several trails offer close looks at the beauty of the desert. The best hiking months are October through April. Your pets, if leashed, may be taken on two trails (see *below*). Otherwise, pets are not allowed on trails or in the backcountry. When hiking, take one gallon of water per person per day. Avoid overexertion and overexposure to the sun. Watch out for the many desert plants with spines and thorns. At night carry a flashlight and watch for rattlesnakes. Remember, snakes are protected here. Do not harm them. Crosscountry hiking in the open desert can be enjoyable, too, but first discuss your planned route with a park ranger.

Visitor Center Nature Trail (0.1 mile roundtrip)

An introduction to the desert and its plants. It can be negotiated by wheelchairs. A guide pamphlet is available at the trailhead.

Campground Perimeter Trail (1 mile roundtrip)

An ideal leisurely walk at the start or end of your day. Pets are permitted.

Desert View Nature Trail (1.2 miles roundtrip) A circular route leading to vistas of Sonoyta Valley and the pink granite Cubabi Mountains in Mexico. Trailside signs describe features along the way.

Palo Verde Trail (2.6 miles roundtrip) Trail connects the campground and the visitor center and is highlighted by views of the rugged Ajo Mountains. Pets are permitted.

Estes Canyon-Bull Pasture Trails (4.1 miles roundtrip) A strenuous climb to a high plateau

where ranchers once wintered cattle. Hikers are rewarded with grand views.

Victoria Mine Trail (4.5 miles roundtrip) A hike over rolling terrain to the monument's richest and oldest gold and silver mine.

For more information on hiking trails purchase *The Explorer's Guide to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument* at the visitor center.

Camping and Picnicking

The monument campground, open all year on a first-come, first-served basis, has water, restrooms, grills, tables, a dump station, and an amphitheater, where evening programs are presented in the winter. Camping fees are collected. Fires are permitted in grills, but wood gathering is prohibited. Private campgrounds are located in Lukeville and Why. If you prefer primitive camping, you can stay at a backcountry campground. Pick up a camping permit at the visitor center. Picnic areas are on the Ajo Mountain Drive and Puerto Blanco Drive. Most have tables and pit toilets, some have shade, but only the visitor center picnic area has water.

Area Lodging and Services

Motels, gasoline, groceries, trailer parks, laundries, and other services are in Lukeville and Why. Ajo, Arizona, and Sonoyta, Mexico, have a wider range of lodgings and services.

Visiting Mexico

U.S. Customs officials in Lukeville can assist you with information on tourist cards, car permits and insurance, and other matters pertaining to traveling to Mexico.

More Information

Write: Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Route 1, Box 100, Ajo, AZ 85321-9626. Call: 520-387-6849. Internet: www.nps.gov/orpi.

Please recycle this brochure at the visitor center if you do not wish to keep it.



A Guide to Desert Communities

The Sonoran Desert embraced in the park exhibits an outstanding variety of plants. The reason: two distinctly different vegetative zones of the Sonoran Desert converge here. From the west comes the Lower Colorado Subdivision, and from the east, the Arizona Upland Subdivision. Within these subdivisions are five major plant communities, each with its own mix of vegetation. Differences in topography, soils, and climate determine where each occurs. Nature is not as exact as the map above suggests; communities do mingle with one another. Besides these two dominant subdivi-

sions of the Sonoran Desert, plants of a third vegetative zone, the Central Gulf Coast Subdivision, grow here too. This subdivision is found only in Mexico, but a few plant species typical of it—elephant tree, senita cactus, and limber bush—do grow in Organ Pipe. Primarily Mexican species, these plants are at the northern limit of their range. Senita Basin is the best place to see these unusual plants.

Collecting or disturbing plants, wildlife, rocks, or artifacts is prohibited by federal law.

LOWER COLORADO SUBDIVISION

The hottest, driest part of the Sonoran Desert.

Creosote Bush/Bursage Community Widely spaced creosote bush and bursage make up 80 percent of the plants in this valley.

Mixed Scrub Community This community of brittlebush, triangle bursage, and foothill palo verde grows on dry volcanic slopes.

Saltbush Community Only plants with a tolerance for silty, salty soil—primarily saltbush—inhabit this valley community.

ARIZONA UPLAND SUBDIVISION

The most luxuriant part of the Sonoran Desert.

Mixed Cactus/Palo Verde Community The greatest variety of cacti grow in this community of the bajadas, or low-lying gravel slopes. Organ pipe, saguaro, prickly pear, and cholla thrive. The dominant tree here is palo verde.

Jojoba/Evergreen Scrubland Community This community exists where rainfall is most abundant—in the canyons of the Ajo Mountains. Jojoba, agave, rosewood, and juniper grow here.



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A Desert Full of Life

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument exhibits an extraordinary collection of plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert. This is a showcase for creatures who have adapted themselves to the extreme temperatures, intense sunlight, and little rainfall that characterize this Southwest region. Foremost among the desert dwellers who have mastered this harsh environment are the cacti. Altogether 26 species inhabit the monument, including the saguaro, and, of course, the monument's namesake, the organ pipe cactus.

The organ pipe is a large cactus found rarely in the United States, although it is common in Mexico. The monument encompasses the bulk of its U.S. population. Like its fellow cacti, and other desert inhabitants, the organ pipe is tuned to the rhythms of the sun and the infrequent rains. A glutton for heat and light, it grows on south-facing slopes where it can absorb the most sun. This location is critical during winter months, when severe frosts can kill the cactus. But when it blooms in the heat of May, June, and July, the organ pipe waits until the sun goes down to open its tender lavender-white flowers. Other types of cactus bloom at night, too, but many also bloom during the day, exposing their flowers to the sun. Day or night, the summer display of many different cactus blooms is one of the desert's flashiest spectacles, as the brilliant flowers of yellow, red, white, and pink bring color to the landscape. It is a show upstaged only by the springtime explosions of gold poppies, blue lupines, pink owl clover, and other annuals after a wet winter.

Less conspicuous than the plants are the animals of the desert. Many of them, including elf owls, kangaroo rats, most snakes, and jackrabbits, are creatures of the night. They hide in cactus holes, underground burrows, or other cool and shaded spots during the day. Other animals, such as bighorn sheep, most birds, and most lizards, prefer daylight to darkness. But these animals also may seek mid-day shade. They tend to restrict their activity to early morning and late afternoon during the heat of summer, when air temperatures can reach 118°F and ground temperatures occasionally soar to a scorching 175°. Coyotes and javelinas are even more adaptable, active at any time of day or night that is not too hot.

To deal with the lack of water to drink, desert animals must have some way to conserve body moisture. The best example of an efficient desert water manager is the kangaroo rat. It ordinarily drinks no water and eats mostly dry food. It gets some moisture from even the driest seeds, and adds this to the water formed in the process of food metabolism. But the kangaroo rat's survival depends primarily on reducing water loss. Its urine is highly concentrated and its feces are almost completely dry. It even reclaims through its nose much of the water otherwise lost in breathing.

Like other desert dwellers, human beings, too, have had to adapt or suffer the consequences. Prehistoric nomads relied on scarce

springs and seeps in their travels. Later desert wanderers—Spanish explorers, missionaries, and others—sometimes entered this unforgiving environment unprepared. Many followed an almost waterless route called El Camino del Diablo—"the Devil's Highway"—as they headed west. Unmarked graves along the route are grim reminders that some did not finish their journey. In the early 1900s ranchers and miners expanded human occupation of the desert by finding and developing new water sources. Today, just as before, visitors learn quickly about thirst, heat, cactus, and rattlesnakes and find ways to safely enjoy the desert on its own terms.

Now, as a protected area, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument allows the life of the Sonoran Desert to flourish under nearly ideal wilderness conditions. The monument is an outstanding natural preserve where one of the Earth's major ecosystems survives almost unspoiled. Recognizing its significance, the United Nations in 1976 designated the monument as an International Biosphere Reserve. Conservation and scientific research, including studies of human impact on the desert, will be invaluable in protecting the life of the desert.



Organ Pipe Wildlife

Shown here are just some of the Sonoran Desert plants and animals that inhabit Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Look for wildlife throughout your travels.

Plants

The plants shown here commonly occur in one or more of the six Sonoran Desert plant communities found in the park. See "A Guide to Desert Communities" on the opposite side of this folder for more information on the park's plant communities.

- 1 Saguaro
- 2 Ocotillo
- 3 Brittlebush
- 4 Organ pipe cactus

- 5 Engelmann prickly pear
- 6 Teddybear cholla
- 7 Creosote bush
- 8 Paloverde
- 9 Saltbush
- 10 Senita cactus
- 11 Mesquite
- 12 Chainfruit cholla
- 13 Gold poppies
- 14 Elephant tree

Animals

- 15 White-winged dove
- 16 Gila woodpecker
- 17 Gila monster
- 18 Western diamondback rattlesnake
- 19 Desert tortoise
- 20 Javelina
- 21 Gambel's quail
- 22 Roadrunner
- 23 Cactus wren
- 24 Coyote
- 25 Redtailed hawk

Illustration by Robert Hynes