



Emily Fagan

By Emily Fagan

When Arizona was a young territory divvying up government responsibilities, Tucson was granted the public university, Phoenix became the capital, and Yuma was left with the territorial prison. Though each city has grown beyond its roots, some elements of those early identities still stick. Yuma never gets quite the same recognition for cultural depth as Tucson, and it doesn't have nearly the clout in state matters as Phoenix. However, it is a favorite among snowbirds, because it has a slightly warmer winter climate and a wonderfully laid back feel. When your town once housed a prison known as the "Hellhole of the West," there is no need to keep up pretenses.

Yuma today offers a myriad of opportunities for visitors. Here are some:

Yuma's Territorial Prison

In the past, the territorial prison was not a place anyone would



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Flame inflates a balloon at the Colorado River Balloon Festival.

want to spend time. Today, however, it makes for an interesting day trip. The prison has become a state park, where a whimsical skeleton dressed as a prison guard greets visitors. Built by the convicts in 1876, the prison housed more than 3,000 prisoners over 33 years. The fearsome nickname it acquired in the late 1800s was no joke. The cells were essentially iron cages covered with thick granite blocks. Thick strips of strap iron made up the cage walls, ceiling and floor, and each cell featured a double cage door. The locking mechanism on each door was accessible only from the outside, and even though a small man might have been able to slip his wrist through the caging, the door locks were well out of arm's reach on the outer walls.

The park's informative video presentation is excellent (if a bit faded from so many showings) as is the museum's extensive presentation of artifacts and fascinating prisoner histories. A walk among the menacing cellblocks sent shivers down my spine. The prisoners were kept six to a cell, in bunks. In time, the prison became overcrowded. Then more than six had to live in a cell, sharing a single chamber pot that was emptied just once a day. This is hard to imagine, given the typical 115-degree summer heat, although the "country club," as the prison was known to non-inmates, did have a ventilation system as well as a hospital and library.

The original beds were wooden, making ideal breeding grounds for bedbugs that feasted on the prisoners at night. Eventually the wardens took pity on the prisoners, burned the beds, and replaced them with iron frames. But pity only went so far. Attempting a breakout, eight escapees were shot and killed as they tried to slip out the front gate. If you stand in the watchtower, it is easy to see how fruitless their effort was; anyone dashing out the gate would have made easy pickings for the guards.

Disruptive souls who got out of line were sent to the "dark cell," a windowless granite room housing a five-foot-square cage. The steel floor of this cage was suspended a little above the ground,



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Glazed tile is decorative feature of homes in Yuma's Old Town.

eliminating the need for a chamber pot. Instead, the floor beneath was cleaned every few months. The only light came from a tiny vent shaft in the ceiling. One man spent 104 days in this cage, after which he became a model prisoner. Two women spent some time in there as well. I'd had enough after only one minute, and that was looking in!

Old Town

The territorial prison is part of Yuma's heritage, but there is much more. Modern visitors will find much historical charm in Old Town, with its lovely adobe brick homes. Adobe walls are exceedingly thick, and the homes are trimmed with beautifully glazed tile. The Mexican influence is unmistakable, and the architecture is referred to as "Anglicized Sonoran." Massive walls keep the intense summer heat outside, and give the windows and doors a deeply recessed, shadowed appearance.

A stop at the Garden Cafe is a must. Outdoor tables are nestled under pretty shade trees and vines, and tucked into terraced nooks and crannies along winding stairs. This unique arrangement gives diners a private, exotic outdoor setting for a relaxed meal. Caged blue-fronted Amazon parrots and sun conure parrots add an occasional tropical squawk to the air.

Lutes Casino is another popular spot. Simple on the outside, the restaurant bursts with nostalgia inside. Old posters and other relics of 20th century American history line the walls, and the chrome and vinyl stools hark back to another era. It is a favorite watering hole with the military stationed at the nearby Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, and there are poignant letters on the walls from soldiers stationed in the Middle East saying how much they miss Lutes' "El Especial" hot dog/hamburger combo platter and the special camaraderie found there. The air base is open for tours at times, but we saved that excursion for a return trip.



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Iron bunk beds housed six prisoners to a cell at the Yuma Territorial Prison.

Colorado River Balloon Festival

Our Yuma visit coincided with the Colorado River Balloon Festival in November. Colorful balloons take to the skies in the crisp early morning air. We wandered over to the festival in the late afternoon to watch the evening Balloon Glow. Every inch of the field was covered with balloons waiting to be inflated. Balloon



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Colorful shops greet visitors in the Old Town district. Mark Fagan

chase vehicles were scattered between the large baskets and immense stretches of colorful material on the grass. Some balloons bore corporate sponsors' names and others belonged to balloon clubs and private enthusiasts. All around us we heard the roar of gas fires as balloonists held one end of each balloon open and aimed a huge flame inside to fill it with hot air. Soon the balloons rose unsteadily off the ground, staggering and shuddering like ghosts suddenly infused with life. The handlers tied the baskets down so they wouldn't drift off into the sky.

Some spectators wandered among the balloons in the field, dwarfed by the towering bubbles of color. Others found seats in the stadium where they could survey the scene from a distance. An announcer kept the balloonists' blasts of hot air synchronized so that all the balloons would glow at once. Too much hot air and the baskets would strain against their tethers, trying to fly. So the glows were kept fairly short, allowing the balloons to stay safely attached to terra firma. This year's balloon festival is scheduled for Nov. 20-22.

Natural Beauty

During the daytime we explored the pretty desert scenery on the outskirts of town. This is not the dramatic Sonoran Desert of the Tucson and Phoenix areas where the famous saguaro cactus rule, but a more muted sub-section of Sonoran Desert called simply the Yuma Desert. The surrounding hills offer a dramatic, craggy and barren backdrop at sunrise and sunset. We hiked into the foothills at the far eastern end of town, passing endless ocotillo cactus as we walked. Their thin branches, tipped with flaming flowers, reached for the sky in broad bouquets. The last half-mile of the hike went almost straight up, leaving our lungs aching. But the view from the top of the surrounding patchwork of green farmlands was worth the trek, and a glance through the guest book at the top made us smile. Everyone noted they were gasping for air by the time they wrote their signature, and all were happy to sit down at last on the park bench and take in the view.

Farmland dominates the eastern end of Yuma. Gazing down from the mountains or driving alongside the farm fields, we felt as though we were looking at the makings for a mammoth mixed green salad. Lettuce, spinach, kale and other healthy greens grow in tidy rows. Fields are harvested in rotation, and a steady stream of laborers work down the rows, transforming mature plants into boxed and labeled produce as they go. By night the crop planes circle incessantly, dousing the fields with fertilizer and pesticides. For us it was a gentle reminder of exactly where our produce comes from, especially when we saw the same labeled boxes at the supermarket.

Despite its desert setting, Yuma boasts some scenic lakes as well. Riding our bikes along the dirt paths lining the irrigation canals, we discovered beautiful Redondo Lake set against some



Fields of lettuce and other crops can be seen at the eastern end of Yuma. Emily Fagan

dramatic desert mountains. A lone boat drifted on a mirror of water. A few miles to the north we came upon Mitty Lake, where marshy shores attract water birds and fishermen appeared to be getting a good catch.

We found that besides warm winter weather, Yuma offers some unique experiences, whether a slice of southwestern territorial history, a colorful balloon celebration or scenic outdoor vistas. ■

Emily Fagan and her husband, Mark, have been full-time RVers since May of 2007. You can read about their travels at their website, www.roadslesstraveled.us.

YUMA WEBSITES

Yuma Territorial Prison: www.azstateparks.com/Parks/YUTE
 Colorado River Balloon Festival:
www.hotairballoon.com/Colorado-River-Crossing-Balloon-Festival
 Lutes Casino: www.lutescasino.com
 Garden Café: www.gardencafeyuma.com

...Calendar of Events Continued from Page 21 with elves serving hot drinks and treats and sharing favorite carols and a Christmas story before Santa climbs aboard. First class passengers will be served hot cocoa with whipped cream in a ceramic souvenir mug. For information, visit www.hebervalleyrailroad.org.

WASHINGTON

19th Century Christmas

Dec. 5 — The Christmas season of 1855 will be depicted at Fort Nisqually in Tacoma's Defiance Park from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with re-enactors representing the workers who lived at the historic site. Fort Nisqually is a restoration of the Hudson Bay Company outpost on the Puget Sound during the fur trade era.

Visitors will enjoy the aroma of ginger biscuits, the sounds of penny whistles and stories told by the re-enactors as they experience the Christmas of a time when the pace of life was slower. For information, visit www.metroparkstacoma.org.

Toy Train Christmas

Nov. 28, Dec. 5, 12, 13, 19, 20 — A variety of toy trains will be set up for the enjoyment of children during this event at the Northern Pacific Railway Museum in Toppenish. Youngsters will be given a short caboose ride from the depot to the "North Pole" to see Santa Claus, and refreshments will include hot chocolate and cookies. The event will be held Saturdays and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information, visit www.nprymuseum.org. ■