

COAST COAST

SPRING 2012

ARIZONA'S Best-Kept Secrets

TREASURES OF TONTO
NATIONAL FOREST

Blue Highways of MINNESOTA

Exit the interstate
in peaceful
prairie country

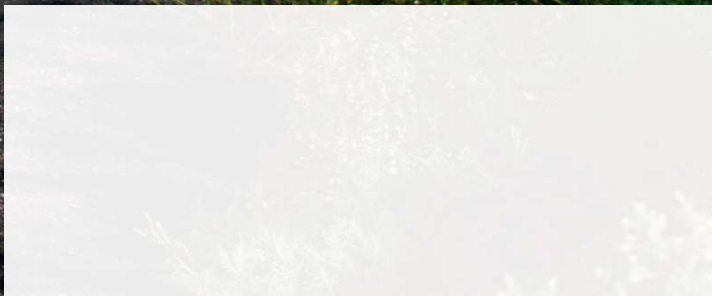
The Other ALABAMA

What's up with California's
Southern-sounding hills?

Where to Stay

- Silver Spur
OREGON
- Bear's Den
OKLAHOMA
- Bass Lake
NEW YORK
- Camp Hatteras
NORTH CAROLINA

CoastResorts.com





Everything Under the SUN

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY FAGAN

Between Arizona's ponderosa pine forests and prickly Sonoran Desert, two sparkling lakes surprise travelers in America's fifth largest national forest

Sometimes the best places to see aren't listed in the glossy brochures at the visitor center but are hidden gems treasured by the locals. Central Arizona has many beautiful spots that draw tourists in huge flocks. However, two lovely lakes tucked into the mountains of Tonto National Forest see few out-of-state license plates. Bartlett and Roosevelt lakes are among Arizona's most precious desert oases, worthy of a detour while traveling through the state.

BARTLETT LAKE

Searching for an Arizona immersion in nature, we found just the spot at Bartlett Lake, 50 miles northwest of Phoenix. Leaving North Scottsdale's posh and ritzy neighborhoods behind, we began the 14-mile descent along the twisting, saguaro-studded road that heads down to the lake. Crossing into Tonto National Forest, the perfectly landscaped front lawns and breezy Starbucks-laced urbanity of Scottsdale seemed to evaporate suddenly in the dry desert air.

The road climbed and fell through craggy terrain, while the haunting calls of quail and gila woodpeckers echoed between the granite cliffs on either side, and our nostrils filled with the tangy smell of thickly growing creosote bushes. The final few miles swept around wide curves and dove down the last mountain turns. Suddenly, Bartlett Lake appeared shimmering in the distance, its glittering bright blue surface cradled by a series of mountain peaks.

The lake was created in the late 1930s when the Verde River was dammed at a point northwest of Phoenix after it flows down from the Prescott area. At the time, the dam was the tallest multiple-arch buttress-style dam in the world. Eight or nine hundred years before the dam was constructed, between the Norman conquest of England and the erection of some of the grandest cathedrals in Europe, the Hohokam people tamed this area, wrestling what moisture they could from the unpredictable water source to make themselves a home in this hot and arid desert environment.

In our time, amid some very long droughts and under pressure from an increasing population, the water level in Bartlett Lake is tightly controlled, with hopes every year for a good spell of rain. During our visit, we found the lake had been deliberately drained to its lowest sustainable level to enable maintenance

work on the bottom portions of the dam. This didn't deter us from launching our kayak, and other boaters were out enjoying the water as well.

The lake is perfect for leisurely wanderings in a small boat. Along the way we watched long-legged herons fishing and raptors flying overhead. The lake had been drained in stages, which created squared off steps of sand. It's an easy trip from the boat ramp around the bend to the picturesque Yellow Cliffs. Once there, we saw many RVs camped along the shore at Bartlett Flat.

We stopped for a picnic at Rattlesnake Cove where a row of tables is shaded by ramadas, offering a pretty view across the lake. Exchanging paddle travel for foot travel, we hiked along a path that runs northward along the shore. Lizards scurried for cover with every crunching footstep. We came across a pair of forest rangers working to thin the overgrowth, staying one step ahead of the ever-present threat of devastating wildfires.

Unlike northern pine forests, there's no evidence of wildfires scorching the Sonoran Desert landscape prior to modern human habitation, and the flora and fauna don't recover well. As a ranger told us, "There is nothing more heartbreaking than watching a saguaro cactus burn." These silent, ancient guardians of the desert sprout their first arms around

age 75, and many of the largest specimens once shared the land with the earliest settlers and the last free-roaming Native Americans.

The natural, divinely inspired desert landscaping that fills the mountainsides and valleys around Bartlett Lake is rugged, colorful and prickly. This land inspires great respect for Native Americans and the first ranchers who warily picked their way through the sharp thorns and venomous bites that protect so many desert inhabitants. We were grateful for the paved road that weaves through it all.



Two saguaros do the tango near Bartlett Lake. Left, Roosevelt Lake, central Arizona's largest waterway.

Taking bike rides to the ends of each asphalt road and out onto the dirt forest roads brought us deeper into the desert where we found two saguaros intertwined, as if dancing with each other. Going deeper still, we found Tonto National Forest's Riverside Campground where RVers had braved the dirt roads to nestle their rigs up against the Verde River's edge.

For a brief taste of civilization, we stopped in at Bartlett Marina and enjoyed burgers and beer dockside where locals keep their boats. Emerging into the desert sun, a line of empty boat trailers filled the parking lot while their cargo zipped about on the lake. Nearby, a group of crazy cyclists stood around gulping water and preparing for the long climb out of the lake and back to reality.

A little further up the road from the lake turnoff, we stopped at Sears-Kay Ruin. This small historic site is essentially the rocky outline of a 40-room compound that housed as many as 100 Hohokam people between 1050 and 1200 AD. Ancestors of the Pima American Indians, these people chose a site perched on a windblown ridge that has sweeping views in all directions.



Standing here in the middle of Tonto National Forest, I found it is easy to shake off thoughts of our modern age. The vast desert views are almost virgin, just briefly interrupted by a few power lines and fewer buildings. It occurred to me that not only did the biggest and oldest saguaros here see the arrival of the white man when they were

saplings, but the vistas that held my gaze were probably much the same as what met the eyes of the ancients as they went about their daily lives on this ridge nearly a thousand years ago.

ROOSEVELT LAKE

Far on the opposite side of Phoenix, about 60 miles northeast of the city, lies another possibly more scenic and certainly more dramatic drive. The Apache Trail winds along State Route 88 between Apache Junction and Roosevelt Dam, taking you through some of the most opulent Sonoran Desert scenery in all of Arizona.

Built to transport people and supplies during the construction of Roosevelt Dam, the road has views that melt from one breathtaking panorama into another as it hugs the sharply curving edges of heart-stopping drop-offs. Some people find this drive a little frightening because the asphalt two-lane road eventually narrows and becomes dirt, and the road's edge falls down sheer cliffs toward the lake below. But it can be easily driven in a car, van or truck (not a large RV), and the rich reward is endless images of vast, pristine land.

From deep in the most remote desert mountains, the Salt River's man-made lakes suddenly emerge. First Canyon Lake and then Apache Lake sparkle into view. Turning one last sharp corner, the imposing Roosevelt Dam appears, pressing back the enormous Roosevelt Lake in a forceful display of engineering triumph. Originally built in 1911 of masonry 280 feet high, the dam was rebuilt in concrete in 1966 and heightened to 357 feet, increasing the

water capacity by 20 percent. Once the largest man-made lake in the world, Roosevelt's shoreline ranges from saguaro- and wildflower-covered hill-sides to wide, muddy marshlands where dead, partially submerged trees make an ideal heron rookery.

Like Bartlett, Roosevelt Lake is a wonderful place to launch a kayak, and we



Bartlett Lake's stair-stepped shoreline. Left, Windy Hill Campground spreads out along a peninsula of Roosevelt Lake.

spent many happy hours paddling around. It's a much larger lake than Bartlett, and we saw several good size powerboats with fishermen aboard. It took us a while to paddle down the lake to the large marina, but once there we saw houseboats as well as sailboats and powerboats. We made a return trip to that end of the lake another day by bicycle. Riding in the bike lane beside brilliant sprays of wildflowers lining the spectacular shore-side road, we came across a lakefront equestrian-only camping area with hitching posts for the horses.

For the RVer, a stay at Tonto's Windy Hill campground is a must. Made up of many campground loops, Windy Hill contains more than 300 campsites. During our visit at peak season in April, several loops were closed, yet we still had no trouble getting a waterfront site once the weekend visitors had gone home. Several loops encircle the edges

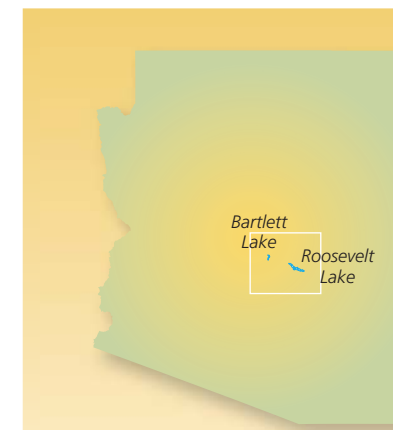
of peninsulas that jut into the water, offering lake access at every site. You can open your RV door to sunrise or sunset over the water—take your pick. Other loops are placed at higher elevations, affording stunning views across the lake to the mountains beyond.

Across the road from Windy Hill is the fascinating Tonto National Monument where ancient cliff dwellings built by the Salado Indians are open for visitors to explore. After trudging up the hill to the base of the cliff dwellings and then climbing up the ladders into the rooms, it took me a few minutes to catch my breath. The people who called this area home from the 1200s to the 1400s must have been rugged, hearty folk. Roosevelt Lake is a long way from the cliff dwellings, and wherever the original river used to run, the steep, hilly walk from home to the river and back to fetch water must have been an

exhausting, all-day affair.

Arizona's Sonoran Desert is full of surprises, even watery ones. Nowhere is it easier to immerse yourself in this spectacular scenery than Tonto National Forest, especially along the shores of Bartlett and Roosevelt lakes. Tonto fills a significant portion of Arizona's land mass, and despite being

desert terrain, it's the fifth largest national forest in the country. Yet even though it lies in the heart of winter RVing territory, its treasures aren't widely known. Relics of early peoples, modern lakeside camping, unique desert hiking and active water play are all on offer here, just a little off the beaten track. 🏍️



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Tonto National Forest

fs.fed.us/r3/tonto

Tonto National Monument

nps.gov/tont

Arizona has four Coast Deluxe Resorts, eight Coast Classic Resorts and 34 Good Neighbor Parks. Consult your 2012 *Resort Directory* or CoastResorts.com for their locations.