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Discovering Sky Islands and Underground Caverns in Cochise County, Arizona

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By **Kühl Editor** on July 19, 2019

Cochise County, the Land of Legends, is the place in southern Arizona to discover a diverse terrain featuring endless grasslands, rolling hills, mountains, rugged sky islands, riparian habitats, and underground caverns. A multitude of outdoor opportunities encourages visitors and locals to connect with the environment. With only a few days in town, Ira and I chose to hike on trails in national parks and preserves and to explore an underground cavern at a state park.

By crisscrossing the county, we were able to see different ecosystems filled with flora and fauna while

simultaneously encountering the county's rich history and tasting local cuisine and wines. Cochise County is recognized for its vineyards that produce top-rated wines.

Our top adventures in Cochise County were at Chiricahua National Monument, Coronado National Memorial, the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve, and Kartchner Caverns State Park.

Chiricahua National Monument

After landing at Tucson International Airport, we drove approximately two hours to [Chiricahua National Monument](#). On our way to the visitor center, we stopped to look at a small family cemetery dedicated to the memories of the Erickson Family. These Swedish immigrants established one of the first permanent settlements in the area and were later responsible for opening a guest ranch.

Their efforts in promoting the region led, in 1924, to the creation of the Chiricahua National Monument. Under President Roosevelt's New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps improved the roads and built trails and structures for this 12,025-acre park that is mostly dedicated to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

At the visitor center, we learned that four biomes merge in this region: the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts, the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Madre ranges. Millions of years ago, volcanic activity followed by centuries of erosion led to the creation of sky islands made of rhyolite, a dense fine-grained rock of volcanic origin. Sky Islands are mountain ranges separated by valleys, grasslands, and desert. At Chiricahua National Monument, these remarkable formations resemble pinnacles or spires.



Spires and columns, Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona

Libby Schaaf, the chief of interpretation and education for the southeast Arizona group of the National Park Service, recommended that we take the winding Bonita Canyon Drive for eight-miles to Massai Point. She told us to look at the ponderosa pines and Douglas fir trees growing on the northern slopes where it was slightly cooler and a bit moister. This, she stated, could be contrasted with the Apache pine and Chihuahuan pine trees standing boldly on the warmer and sunnier southern slopes. Vegetation such as yucca, prickly pear, and agave, and beargrass from the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts also lived in harmony. If we had more than a couple of hours before heading to Bisbee, we would have gladly spent more time on the trails originating at Massai Point.



View from Massai Point, Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona

High winds and a bit of pollution created hazy conditions, but we were able to admire Rhyolite Canyon, the grasslands of the Sulphur Springs Valley, and the distant forested Dragon Mountains, where the Apache Chief Cochise once hid with his people. We walked on a rocky path weaving among the towering columns that looked like clusters of carved totem poles. Lizards kept watching us on nearby rocks as we pranced on the well-marked trail. We failed to see a Chiricahua fox squirrel, a rusty colored animal that is only found in southeastern Arizona.

We also hiked on that portion of the two-hour Echo Canyon Loop Trail nicknamed the Wonderland of Rocks. On our abbreviated trek, we stopped to take pictures of the grottoes covered with lichen, clusters of vertical walls of rocks, and an assortment of fascinating balanced rocks.



Exploring grottoes, Chiricahua National Monument, Arizona

Before leaving the park, we stopped to see the exterior of the Erickson's peach and green colored Faraway Ranch home, which Neil and Emma Erickson purchased in 1887. The house and adjoining land were sold to the National Park Service in 1979. From 1917 to 1970, the Erickson's daughters operated a guest ranch there so they could share the beauty of the area with others. People interested in Arizona history can take a ranger-led tour of the Faraway Ranch House during the designated tour hours.

Coronado National Memorial

The [Coronado National Memorial](#) offers another opportunity to see the rich biological diversity found in sky islands. While options for hiking at this memorial are limited to a handful of trails, ranging from easy to difficult, the variety of the terrain and the amazing views make the trip worth a visit.



Overlook, Coronado National Memorial, Arizona

Two of the trails are part of the Arizona National Scenic Trail system, and one path leads to the opening of the Coronado Cave. The Arizona Trail extends from the Arizona-Mexico border at Coronado National Memorial to the Arizona-Utah border. At the apex of the Coronado Peak Trail, hikers can capture a panoramic view of the San Rafael and San Pedro Valleys along with the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Park maps show access points for the other trails. To help birders identify different species, the memorial's website offers a checklist for the 100 most common birds found onsite.

Like other national memorials that commemorate a person or event, history was the catalyst. In 1941, on the 400th anniversary of Francis Vasquez de Coronado's expedition to the area now known as the United States, the U.S. Congress designated this site as the Coronado International Memorial. It was anticipated that the Mexican government would create a park on the other side of the border similar to the arrangement between Glacier National Park in northern Montana and Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, Canada. When the Mexican park didn't materialize, the name was changed to the Coronado National Monument.

Before driving up the winding road to the Montezuma Pass Overlook, we stepped inside the visitor center to get a crash course on the history surrounding Coronado's expedition. The array of displays and maps help visitors to understand the circumstances surrounding Coronado's unsuccessful search for the Seven Cities of Cibola and the significance of integrating diverse cultures into American society. We were also informed that this site was unlike most memorials which typically promote a monument or statue. The main attraction here was the location of a pivotal event in U.S history.

Ira and I had the pleasure of a private interpretive tour of the Montezuma Pass Overlook area with Park Ranger

Zach Palma. Our rental car was thus spared the rugged terrain of a partially unpaved, steep Montezuma Canyon Road with numerous switchbacks.

As the wind howled, Park Ranger Palma identified the San Pedro River, the San Rafael Valleys, and Sonora, Mexico. By adding more historical details dating back to the time of Christopher Columbus, we had a better appreciation for Spain's desire to conquer other regions after their successful campaigns against the Aztecs and the Incas.

Except for the winding road and a few structures, efforts have been made to maintain the original character of the area where Coronado's expedition traversed. Looking down on the valley, we imagined a caravan of over 300 Europeans, over 1000 Aztec/Mexico allies, a handful of Franciscan priests, dozens of slaves, as well as horses and cattle converging on the land in front of us.



Preserved natural terrain, Coronado National Monument, Arizona

For approximately two years, Coronado's expedition traveled from Compostela, Mexico to Salina, Kansas and then returned to Mexico without accomplishing its mission. Unlike Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro González, who defeated the Aztec and the Incan empires, Coronado was unable to locate and conquer a unified Native American civilization or find storehouses of gold.

Ramsey Canyon Preserve, Huachuca Mountains

Before embarking on our stroll through the heavily wooded preserve located in the Upper San Pedro River basin, I read about the history of this site. In 1963, [Ramsey Canyon](#) became the first place in the United States to be designated a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service. This was more than a decade before [The Nature Conservancy](#) started to protect the preserve.

The main trail follows part of Gardner Ramsey's toll road built in the late 19th century. Back then, the path led from the visitor center to the Hamburg mining area. Even though prospectors searched for decades, the mined ore yielded poor results. Ramsey and other inhabitants of the pristine area altered the ecosystem to accommodate their living and mining needs. After another resident, Dr. Bledsoe, donated 280 acres to The Nature Conservancy in 1974, efforts were made to restore the natural stream bank contours to encourage the growth of the native riparian vegetation.

Today, the 380- acre preserve is proud of its population of 14 species of hummingbirds and the preserve's reputation of being a prime place to observe migratory birds. Posted displays share facts about hummingbirds. Visitors are free to walk at their own pace on the designated paths. Some individuals choose to stop at wooden markers and read the interpretive signs.



*Sandy and Ira, Ramsey Canyon Preserve. Pictured in **KÜHL SUN BLADE HAT**, **SONIA SS SHIRT** and **KONTRA SHORT***

Kate Cox, the Marketing Coordinator for the Cochise County Tourism Council, arranged for our guided tour.

Taylor Hanson accompanied us on our walk and provided insight into the ecological work that is being done to restore the original topography, remove invasive non-native plant species, and also shared anecdotal stories about the people who once lived and worked on the property. We passed by remnants of deserted cabins dating back to the late 19th century and early 20th century. A friendly squirrel vied for our attention.



Friendly squirrel, Ramsey Canyon Preserve, Arizona

Once again, we observed how the vegetation was affected by its location on the canyon wall. Juniper trees, agave, coral bean, and grasses dominated the southern facing slope while a dense forest of oaks, pines, firs, and maple trees consumed the moister northern exposure.

To our surprise, we learned that Arizona has 25 species of native frogs and toads. We passed by a pond where efforts are being made to increase the population of the Chiricahua leopard frog, an amphibian that is listed as an endangered species.

For the third time in just a few days, we observed how four ecosystems merging in one place could produce a unique environment attracting a preponderance of migratory birds.



Wetlands, Ramsey Canyon Preserve

Individuals who are interested in exploring the area further can connect with hiking trails within the [Miller Peak Wilderness](#) of the Coronado National Forest. The steep half-mile Hamburg Trail leads to an overlook with a view of the San Pedro River Valley.

Kartchner Caverns State Park

Before our mid-afternoon flight back to Denver, we had ample time to book a guided cavern tour, explore the outside hummingbird trail and garden, and walk through the discovery center. [Kartchner Caverns State Park](#) is known for the world’s longest stalactite formation and Arizona’s tallest natural column formation.

Monarch and Queen butterflies were in abundance, and purple, yellow, orange and white desert flowers added splashes of color to the mostly green landscape. A few lizards scurried among the rocks, but we didn’t spot any of the indigenous Gila monsters, tortoises or rattlesnakes. Inside, we examined the exhibits highlighting the county’s attributes and history.

Before boarding a tram, our guide, Joe, provided a 25-minute overview of the caverns, including the measure taken to protect the integrity of the caves. We passed through a double door entryway that was specifically designed to regulate the humidity and a second chamber where we felt a slight mist. From the bright Arizona sunlight, our eyes slowly adjusted to the dimmed light that minimizes damage to the rock formations.

Our small group followed Joe on the sidewalk that zigzagged through the chamber. After having just seen the exhibits in the discovery center, I could relate to his explanations of the formations that he was pointing to with his laser.

We stopped at one point to look at the muddy trail that Gary Tenen and Randy Tufts used before the opening of the park. These two adventurers eventually shared their secret with the property owners, James and Lois Kartchner. The Kartchners reached out to the State Parks system so that the public could safely enjoy this natural resource.



Kubla Khan. Photo Courtesy of Kartchner Caverns State Park

On our tour, we saw soda straw stalactites, a massive column called Kubla Khan, and a variety of formations that have been growing for tens of thousands of years. Near the end of the 50-minute underground tour, we were treated to a light, and sound show that enhanced the surrounding space.

From mid-April until mid-October, the Big Room is closed to protect a colony of migratory bats that annually give birth and raise their pups in the cave. The Rotunda and Throne rooms remain open during these months since the bats are no longer attracted to that area.



Shields Formation in Throne Room. Photo Courtesy of Kartchner Caverns State Park

Cameras and cell phone cameras are strictly prohibited, except for the designated photo tours. I’m sharing images provided by the Kartchner Caverns State Park media department.

If we didn’t have a plane to catch, we would have explored the nearby hiking trails.

Cochise County, Arizona

In the southeast corner of Arizona, we embraced the opportunity to introduce ourselves to a totally unfamiliar terrain. Our senses absorbed the sights, sounds, and smells that consumed our visit. By the end of our journey, we had a better appreciation of what the region had to offer. I agree with Albert Einstein: “Look deep into nature, and you will understand everything better.”

Disclaimer: The Cochise County Tourism Council hosted the author’s visit to Cochise County. All of the opinions expressed in this post are her own.

When Sandy Bornstein isn’t trekking in Colorado or writing, she’s [traveling with her husband Ira](#). After living as an international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy published an award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, as a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Among other things, Sandy writes about family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences. All photos by [The Traveling Bornsteins](#).



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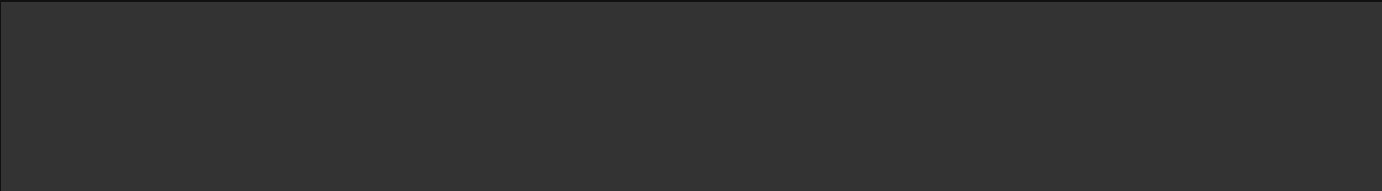
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