

Quintessential Arizona

by SAM LOWE

To commemorate Arizona's 100th anniversary, *Highroads* asked readers to submit their ideas of the best things to do and see in the state. Thank you for your submissions. You nailed it! In fact, you made the process of selecting Arizona's 100 favorite things to see, do and enjoy a little easier because by overwhelmingly choosing the Grand Canyon, you reduced the assignment to picking only 99 others. The gorgeous gorge is so magnificent and well known that it always comes in among the top 10.

This is the first of four articles featuring the subject, and highlights the 25 items that most represent Quintessential Arizona. They are in no scientific order. Future stories will cover Urban Arizona, Historical Arizona, and Festive Arizona.

1 Grand Canyon

The state's awe-inspiring landscapes were particularly favored by those who replied. In that category, the Grand Canyon probably inspires the most jaw-dropping excitement because it is vast, scenic and filled with vibrant colors that change every minute from sunrise to sunset. The Canyon is included on almost every Seven Natural Wonders of the World list and attracts more than five million tourists every year. Many of those who come to look and admire will stay at El Tovar, another treasure on the South Rim. The former Harvey House celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2005.





2 Canyon de Chelly on the Navajo Reservation also received high marks from readers, many of whom reflected on quiet times they spend gazing at the huge sandstone formations that dominate the scenery. Spider Rock draws the most attention because of its size (almost 900 feet tall) and the legend that says the Spider Woman lives on top of the rock and swoops down on misbehaving children. Visitors are required to hire local guides to tour the bottom of the canyon, but the view from the road that circles the perimeter above is equally spectacular.



3 Monument Valley

Monument Valley, about an hour's drive from Canyon de Chelly, is another favorite among those who enjoy the sculptures created by nature. The towering monoliths rise from the red desert sands in the form of mitens, columns and wind-swept mesas, chiseled against clear blue skies and unlimited horizons. An overnight stay at The View, a Navajo-owned hotel opened in 2009, affords a rare photo opportunity when the sun rises between the formations.

PHOTOS © THINKSTOCK



Kartchner Caverns

6/7

Antelope Canyon and Kartchner Caverns

Antelope Canyon and Kartchner Caverns, other natural artworks, received frequent mention. Antelope Canyon, located near Page, features swirling designs carved into the multi-hued sandstone by wind and rushing flood waters. When the sun is overhead, the rays illuminate the walls and create a palette of unbelievable colors.

Kartchner Caverns, near Benson, contain delicate laces, spindly tubes, stalagmites and stalactites, all fashioned by mineral deposits left by water that has been dripping underground for millions of years. Now a state park, the caverns were left untouched by humans until the 1970s.



Rainbow Bridge

8

Petrified Forest and Painted Desert

A twosome of natural wonders is also a bargain, some voters noted. The Petrified Forest and the Painted Desert are in the Petrified Forest National Park so a single ticket gets admission to both. The forest contains the world's largest exposure of petrified trees, scattered across an eerie landscape on both sides of Interstate 40 near Holbrook; the brilliant tones of the Painted Desert range from purple to red, and from gray to yellow, and are best viewed and photographed at sunset.

9

Meteor Crater

An unearthly act of nature impressed some voters because it blasted Meteor Crater into Arizona's surface. The crater exploded into being a long, long time ago when a 77,000-ton meteorite slammed into the desert east of Flagstaff while traveling at an estimated 43,125 miles per hour, creating a 570-foot depression over 4,145 acres.

4/5

Rainbow Bridge and Tonto Natural Bridge

Nature also carved a pair of enormous spans that got voter attention. Rainbow Bridge is now easily accessible by boat from Lake Powell; the Tonto Natural Bridge, one of the world's largest, is a state park north of Payson.

PHOTOS © ELLEN BILBREY; THINKSTOCK

10 Sedona and Oak Creek Canyon
Sedona is a popular destination for both out-of-state visitors and Arizonans alike because of the red rocks and Oak Creek Canyon. The rocks are sandstone; they're red because sandstone is porous and when water carrying dissolved iron drains through it, mineral is left behind in the form of iron oxide, which is red. Some slightly resemble things other than rocks so they bear names like Snoopy Rock, Bell Rock and Cathedral Rock. Oak Creek Canyon takes a leisurely stroll through red rocks and pine forests, accompanied by the soothing ripple of Oak Creek. Highway 89A, a twisting road that meanders slowly through the canyon, invites passersby to drive slowly and enjoy the splendor of it all.



Red Rock Crossing, Sedona

11 Copper Mines
A couple of manmade holes were also recommended by those who voted. One is the open pit copper mining operation at Morenci; the other is the now-abandoned Lavender Pit in Bisbee. Both are wide enough and deep enough to hold a football stadium with plenty of parking.



13 Saguaro Cacti
A common image of Arizona is the stately saguaro that stands sentry duty over the deserts, and many readers said it should be included as a state icon. Saguaros can grow to more than 60 feet tall and weigh as much as 10 tons. Many of these giants populate the Saguaro National Monument near Tucson.

12 Bisbee, Oatman and Tombstone
Mining was also the reason why Bisbee, Oatman and Tombstone sprang into existence. They were top vote-getters and remain major tourist destinations due to their historic backgrounds. Oatman draws particular attention because it's the only town in the country where wild burros roam the streets looking for munchies handed out by visitors.

14 Arizona Deserts
Saguaros are native to the desert, and Arizona has plenty of desert. In fact, it's the only state in the union that has four deserts within its boundaries, and readers think that makes them special enough for consideration. The Sonoran and Chihuahaun deserts occupy much of the southern parts, the Mohave skirts the west and the Great Basin stretches across the northeast.

15 High Country
In direct contrast, many responders cast votes for Arizona's High Country, a vast forested area that stretches from Flagstaff to the eastern border and contains the world's largest stand of ponderosa pine. Part of that span is the Mogollon Rim, a foreboding escarpment with a name that most non-Arizonans mispronounce. (It's "muggy-yon," not "mo-go-lon.")



Grand Falls ...A once-a-year spectacular event

16 Grand Falls occurs when winter rains and snowmelt cause the Little Colorado River to roar over rock terraces near Cameron.

17 Mountains The High Country also contains many of the state's mountains, from the San Francisco Peaks east to the White Mountains. But some voters pointed out that there also are mountains in the deserts, including the Superstitions east of the Valley of the Sun, the Bradshaws up and around Prescott, the Pinals near Globe-Miami and Superior, and the Santa Catalinas and Rincons that surround Tucson. Individual peaks named were Mount Humphreys at Flagstaff, Mount Graham at Safford and Tucson's Mount Lemmon.



Havasu Falls

18 Havasu Falls Arizonans are also water-friendly folks. One common suggestion for the list was Havasu Falls in the Grand Canyon near the isolated village of Supai. Hard to get to but worth the trek, the falls are near-pristine as they plunge into an aqua pool.



Lake Powell

Arizona Waters

Calmer waters also got votes. Lake Mead and Lake Powell are prime areas for paddle wheel and house boats. The Colorado River, which creates both lakes, also attracts speedboats and water skiers along the state's western boundary, and thrill-seeking rafters into its turbulent rapids as they race through the Grand Canyon.



San Xavier Mission

20/21

For maps and directions to reach any of these destinations, visit AAAaz.com/travel and follow the Maps and TripTiks® tab.

San Xavier Mission and Tumacacori

A few latter-day manmade structures made the list. San Xavier Mission, also known as the White Dove of the Desert, maintains its original splendor centuries after being erected by missionaries and Native Americans near Tucson. Tumacacori, located south of Tubac, hasn't survived the elements quite as well, but it's still impressive.

22 Indian Reservations

Today, Arizona is home to 23 Indian reservations and most of them now actively invite and welcome visitors, a fact not overlooked by *Highroads* voters. Many have relatively new museums that explore their histories; others offer guided tours to normally off-limit areas.

23 Indian Ruins

The Indian ruins that abound across the state received plenty of support from readers. Some, like Wupatki near Flagstaff, and Tuzigoot and Montezuma's Castle in the Verde Valley, are easy to reach. So is the Big House (Casa Grande) at Coolidge. Others, like Betatakin and Keet Seel on Navajo Mountain and Tonto near Globe, require some effort, but the rewards upon getting there are ample.

24 Mohawk Valley

Some voters found serenity in the Mohawk Valley, a non-touristy area in Yuma County. Jagged blue mountains rise starkly against the horizon and the Gila River bed wanders through fertile land to an 80-year-old schoolhouse in Roll.

25 Nature Preserves

And finally, the nature preserves that attempt to keep things the way they used to be, and probably should always be, were considered worthy of inclusion. They save wetlands and grasslands from human and non-native encroachment and provide a restful environment for nature lovers. The two most often mentioned are the Hassayampa Preserve at Wickenburg and the San Pedro National Conservation Area near Sierra Vista.

And in our next issue of *Highroads*: Urban Arizona.

SAM LOWE is a freelance writer who has been writing about Arizona for more than 35 years.