

# Tucson, Arizona Enjoy the Sonoran Desert

Oh, no, a desert; that's not for me! It sounds sooo...hot...dry...lifeless...stark...dominated by sand dunes that nomads cross on camels.

But, if you visit Tucson between early-March and mid-May, you'll experience a very different kind of desert: daytime temperatures in the 80s (26-31C) with low humidity; a rocky environment that's covered with vegetation, including wildflowers and cacti in bloom; plentiful wildlife that's easily observed; and mountains in every direction. October is also a good time to visit.

This three-day guided tour will take you to eight very enjoyable attractions:

- a beautiful circa-1700s Spanish mission that still serves the local Native American population
- a world-renowned natural history museum, zoo and botanical garden, all in one place
- a national park that exists only to display and protect the Giant Saguaro cactus

Pathfinder Newsletter

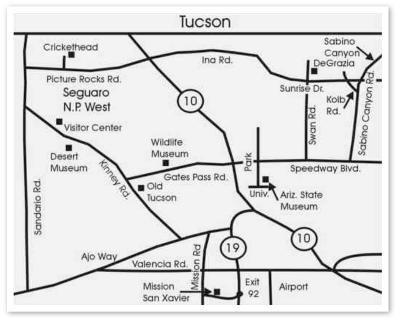
Spring 2008

Guided Tours of Cities, Towns, and National Parks in the American West

by the Authors of Seven Perfect Days in Colorado and Seven Perfect Days in Northern California

- an Old West Movie studio, where gunfighters, stuntmen, barroom dancers, and purveyors of magic elixir still prevail
- a classy museum that displays insects, animals and birds from around the world
- a gallery that displays the works of Ted DeGrazia, southwestern painter extraordinaire
- a narrated tram tour and hike in a special canyon in the Santa Catalina Mountains
- a close look at Native American culture and artifacts.

If you reserve well in advance, you can stay at the Crickethead Inn Bed & Breakfast where you'll have an exceptional, up-close-and-personal experience in the desert.



## The Day Before Day One

To get to our first attraction from Tucson International Airport, drive west on Valencia Rd., then south on Interstate 19 to Exit 92, and follow the signs to the mission.

The Mission San Xavier del Bac is the northernmost of a series of missions that were established by Jesuit missionaries in the 1600s and 1700s. It's considered the finest example of Spanish Colonial architecture in the United States, and is a National Historic Landmark. The

mission was constructed over a period of 14 years by the Papago Indians and Franciscan friars, who took over the mission in 1768. San Xavier still ministers to the local Native Americans, the Tohono O'odham ("desert people"), who prefer that name to Papago ("bean eaters"), which was given to them by Caucasians. The mission is on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation.

This structure is a gem, both outside and inside. Called "The White Dove of the Desert," San Xavier's external architecture is a beautiful blend of Moorish, Byzantine and late Mexican Renaissance styles. [See the photograph on page 1.]

Inside, you'll be especially impressed by the ornateness of the altar background—which is mostly painted and gilded on flat plaster walls. The beautiful white, vaulted ceiling is similarly painted. There is no marble or mosaic here, as in the great European cathedrals. The statuary is striking, and visitors are encouraged to touch the reclining image of St. Francis Xavier, the patron saint of the mission. The most recent restoration of the interior took place over a five-year period in the 1990s and was done by an international team of conservators, whose work is portrayed in a fascinating 25-minute film that runs continuously.

Be sure to browse the interesting historical exhibits in the mission's small museum.

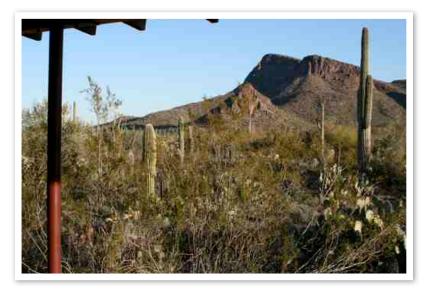
If you've opted to spend the next several nights at the Crickethead Inn, the map on the preceding page will help you negotiate the approximately 30 miles (48 km) from the San Xavier Mission to the B&B.

Wanting to have an authentic desert experience during our latest visit to the area, we searched the B&B websites referred to below, under "Where to Eat and Sleep in Tucson," and learned that the Crickethead is one of only two accommodations actually *in* the Sonoran Desert on the west side of the Tucson Mountains. (The other, Casa Tierra, is more upscale, nearly twice the cost, has one-fourth the property, is in a "neighborhood" rather than the open desert, and provides no hiking access into the desert.) We were very pleased with our choice. If you prefer non-desert accommodations, you should be able to find what you want via www.visittucson.org/visitor/about/visitorcenter/.

The best route to take to the Crickethead Inn is: Mission-Ajo-Kinney-Sandario-Picture Rocks. On Kinney, you'll pass several of the attractions that you'll be visiting during the next couple of days. Alternatively, take: Mission-Valencia-Ajo-Sandario-Picture Rocks. Avoid arriving at the Crickethead after sunset; finding the driveway and B&B can be difficult in the dark.

#### A Unique Desert B&B

You've probably heard it said that to more fully appreciate another country, you should get close to the land and the local people. The **Crickethead Inn B&B** provides such an opportunity: it's located on 20 acres (8 hectares) of authentic, unspoiled desert, and its owner has lived in the area all his life. Used as a base from which to explore the Tucson area, staying at this B&B is a great way to



deepen your desert experience. For the best scenery, ask for a room in the guesthouse.

Imagine sitting at the kitchen table watching coyotes, quail, gray foxes, and javelinas come to the B&B's water hole to drink.

Imagine taking an early morning walk from your room, past 40 kinds of cactus, toward a beautiful mountain ridge in adjacent Saguaro National Park (see the photo, above).

And imagine being in the middle of a sunset that's straight out of *Arizona Highways* magazine, with saguaro cacti silhouetted against a blazing red sky. (See the photo on page 1.)

You'll find this comfortable B&B to be a bit unusual. Built by the owner, Mike Lord, it's unpretentious and largely hidden by the desert growth around it. Inside, you'll find furniture, musical instruments and mementos from Indonesia, where Mike and his Balinese wife, Wayan, visit every summer. You'll also find that their hospitality, the huge stone fireplace, the sleeping

rooms, and the breakfasts are very welcoming and above the norm as B&B's go. It is a bit of a drive to get to restaurants in the evening.

Simply put, we consider the Crickethead Inn to be an attraction unto itself.

[If the Crickethead Inn is full, the closest accommodations are the Red Roof Inn and Comfort Inn near the junction of Ina Rd. and Interstate 10.]

#### Day One

We've often said that the Grand Canyon and the **Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum** are, by themselves, worth the trip to Arizona. At the one, you can see the most awesome landscape in the United States; at the other, you can have a desert experience that's second to none.

Plan to spend the full day at the Desert Museum. There's plenty to hold your interest, and if you do it in a leisurely manner, you'll be richly rewarded.

[For the hours of operation, address, telephone number and website—for this attraction and all others mentioned in this article—see "To Learn More About the Attractions in or Near Tucson," at the end of this newsletter.]

Following the map on page 2, drive west on Picture Rocks Road to Sandario, then south to Kinney and east to the museum.

This is best described as a natural history museum—a mostly-outdoor place that displays the Sonoran Desert at its finest. In its 21 acres (8.5 hectares), you'll see more than 300 animal species and 1,200 kinds of plants. There are almost two miles of loop trails that take you to:

- a close-up look at mountain lions, bobcats, coati, a Mexican wolf, white-tailed deer, prairie dogs, coyotes, javelinas (pig-like animals), bighorn sheep, otters, lizards, and other animals in realistic desert, grassland, mountain, and stream-side environments
- a desert garden and a cactus garden, which contain more than 100 species of cacti and other desert plants [see if you can identify the prickly pear, cholla, barrel, saguaro, and organ pipe cacti, the ocotillo, and the paloverde and mesquite trees]
- snakes and invertebrates, all safely displayed behind glass
- an overlook of the Avra and Altar Valleys, with Mexico in the distance
- a large outdoor aviary where you can observe 40 species of native birds
- a hummingbird aviary where you can see the elusive birds up close, both in flight and resting on branches
- a demonstration of raptor free flight, in which Harris' hawks are released by their handlers to fly without restraint (10:30 and 1:30, November through March)
- a limestone cave, with stalactites, stalagmites, and a 75-foot caving experience oriented to children
- a fascinating display showing the earth's formation and evolution beginning five billion years ago
- an excellent collection of native minerals and gemstones
- and much more.

On most days of the year, you can show up at the Orientation Ramada, and enjoy a free,  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -hour guided tour by a museum docent (9, 9:30, 1, 1:30 mid-October through mid-April, and 8:30, 9, 10:30 mid-April through mid-October).

Or, you can pick up a self-guiding tour map when you pay your entrance fee and explore the museum completely on your own.

The last time we visited the Desert Museum, we enjoyed the "Walk With a Keeper" program that takes you behind the scenes to learn about the museum from those who care for the animals. It's available, for an extra fee, only on Thursday mornings. You can learn about the walk at <u>http://www.desertmuseum.org/visit/keeperwalk.php</u>.

The museum's Ironwood Terrace Restaurant, open 10-3 every day, is an excellent place to have lunch. It has lots of variety and serves very tasty food. We particularly like their turkey, ham and other wraps.

If you finish early at the Desert Museum and want to do something else, see the following text on Saguaro National Park. (The Red Hills Visitor Center is nearby; it closes at 5:00, but the park is open until sunset.)

By the way, the Sonoran Desert extends across southern Arizona to southeastern California, south into Mexico's Baja peninsula, and east to the state of Sonora.

### Day Two

Today, we recommend three activities: Saguaro National Park, Old Tucson Studios (best time to arrive: before 11:00), and the International Wildlife Museum. If you love to hike, the national park provides a wonderful opportunity to get a close-up look at the unspoiled Sonora Desert and its signature cactus. All three of these attractions are unique and very enjoyable.

Saguaro National Park has two sections: the Rincon Mountain District, east of Tucson,



and the Tucson Mountain District, west of town. Since you're west of the Tucson Mountains, we suggest heading to the Red Hills Visitor Center, which you've already driven by twice yesterday while on the way to and from the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

Be sure to watch the excellent 15-minute slide show, titled "Voices of the Desert." It's narrated by local Tohono O'odham Indians, who describe the physical and spiritual importance of the desert to them.

From the exhibits and books in the visitor center, and from the adjacent cactus garden (has interpretive signs), you'll learn much that should be helpful during your hike.

There is a sign here that succinctly captures the general environment that you'll see in the park: "The Sonoran Desert can be described as '*a desert jungle*,' because more than 200 species of animals and 600 species of plants live here."

Here are some interesting facts about the most famous of those plants, the saguaro cactus:

- The Giant Saguaro (pronounced suh-WAH-roh), is the universal symbol of the American West. Depending upon local conditions, a saguaro grows an average of about one to three inches per year, sprouts its first "arm" at about 75 years, and can grow to about 50 feet, or the height of a five-story building. Saguaros sometimes live more than 200 years.
- One theory about the saguaro's arms (perhaps fanciful, since no one knows for sure) is that when the wind pushes on one side of the cactus, it sprouts an arm on that side to provide balance. Then, when the side with the arm gets too heavy, another arm grows on the opposite side.
- The interior of the saguaro is a woody, cage-like structure (called "ribs") that supports the plant's huge weight and expands when the cactus is able to take in water during the rainy seasons in July-August and December-January. (Southern Arizona gets less than 12 inches of rain per year.) The expansion is also made possible by the plant's exterior structure: its accordion-like pleats.
- The exterior holes that you'll see were probably caused by Gila or Gilded Flicker woodpeckers; they serve as nesting places and homes for a variety of desert birds.
- The saguaro's roots are less than six inches deep, but are spread as wide as the plant is tall, to catch any available moisture.
- The saguaro blooms in late April, May and June, and has white flowers that bloom after sunset...and die the next day! The saguaro's fruit ripens in June and July.
- The survivability of saguaros is slight: Of the approximately 40 million seeds that a saguaro yields in its lifetime, just *one* seed might produce a plant that grows to old age. As for hiking, we suggest that you ask the personnel in the visitor center for their trail

map. There are about ten trails to choose from, some short and some long. The three short trails we recommend are: the Valley View Overlook Trail (.8 mi., 1.3 km), the Signal Hill Petroglyphs Trail (.5 mi., .8 km), and the Desert Discovery Trail (.5 mi.). Much will depend upon the time you have available and your general fitness. *For longer hikes, be sure to carry a quart of water per person*.

**Old Tucson Studios** – This place is fun, even if you're not a fan of western movies. Known as "Hollywood in the Desert," Old Tucson is now primarily a theme park. It has been used since 1939 to film more than 400 movies, television shows and commercials. Among them are "Rio Bravo," "McLintock," "Tombstone" and "The Outlaw Josie Wells." A few of the stars who have filmed here are John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Elizabeth Taylor, Kurt Russell and Leonardo DiCaprio. Old Tucson is still an active film set.

You'll receive a map of the site when you pay at the entrance. It will list the times for the five regular shows, the two documentaries and the Old Tucson Historic Tour. This will allow you to easily plan your time.

For example, if you arrive before 11:00, you'll be able to see the 15-minute "Great Tucson Bank Robbery" on the street in front of the bank; the 20-minute "Miss Kitty's Can-Can Review" in the Grand Palace Saloon at 11:30; the 10-minute "Miracle Elixir Show" on the street at 12 noon; and the 15-minute "Hollywood Hijinks" stunt show in front of the mission at 1:00.

In between, there's plenty of time to explore this 1880's Western town, have a delicious mesquite-grilled barbecue lunch at **Big Jakes**, and view the Reno locomotive, which has been used in more than 100 films and TV programs.

Hour-long and half-hour-long trail rides are also offered here, on Old Tucson's 40 acres (16 hectares) of property. It's another great opportunity to see the desert up close, with the horse sidestepping the cacti for you. By reserving in advance (520-437-8280) and declaring the trail ride at Old Tucson's entrance, you'll qualify for a discount on your general admission ticket.

Our final activity for the day offers another unique experience. To get to the International Wildlife Museum, drive east, over the mountains, on Gates Pass Road. It is to the west side of the mountains that locals come in the evenings to view the sunsets. Observing the reddish glow on the mountainsides and the saguaro cacti silhouetted against the brilliant red sunset is truly a stunning and memorable experience.

You'll find the **International Wildlife Museum** on the left side of the road, just after completing your descent of the mountains.

You will not believe the size of the insects, butterflies and moths, from around the world, in the museum's first room! And their colors—many intense and iridescent—are simply eyepopping. For the most part, we have nothing like them in the United States. The manner in which they are displayed is exceptional, and the exhibits that follow, elsewhere in the museum, attest to this being a first-class operation.

The other highlights of the museum are: the superb dioramas that depict animals in their natural settings; the Birds of Paradise, and other kinds of birds and their eggs; the realistic displays of predators in action; the giant display of bighorn sheep, mountain goats and various other mountain-inhabiting creatures; and the very large McElroy Hall, which displays all manner of four-legged animals standing tall or hanging on the wall. In that room, if you want to be awe-

struck, stand beside the Polar Bear and its cousin, the Brown Bear. "Majestic" would be a good word to describe them.

Also, in the Prehistoric Exhibit, stand next to the Irish Elk (not Irish and not an elk) that stands six and one-half feet at the shoulder (2 meters) and has  $11\frac{1}{2}$  -foot-wide antlers (3.5 meters). Try to imagine, as a cave man, how you would bring down this largest deer to have ever lived.

The museum also has hands-on exhibits, which chil-



dren especially love, and plays seven different movies about our Earth and its creatures.

#### Day Three

To get to our next attraction, drive east on Picture Rocks, Ina, and Sunrise to Swan, and then turn left (see the map). You'll find the DeGrazia gallery on the right, within a mile (1.6 km) of Sunrise Dr.

The 13-room **DeGrazia Gallery in the Sun** features the work of artist Ettore "Ted" De-Grazia, son of Italian immigrants. His father worked in the copper mines of eastern Arizona. DeGrazia earned three degrees at the University of Arizona in Tucson, including a Master of Arts.

DeGrazia got his first public recognition as an artist in *Arizona Highways* magazine in 1941. He then traveled to Mexico to work with famous muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. DeGrazia's big break—and international fame—came when his painting, "Los Niños," was chosen to appear on a 1960 UNICEF greeting card. (There's a framed print of "Los Niños" hanging in the gift shop.)

DeGrazia produced some 15,000 oils, watercolors, lithographs, sculptures and ceramic items. Many are on display in the gallery. The common theme for his works is the cultures of the Southwest. Most of his paintings have vibrant colors and tend toward the abstract. Many are charming or whimsical, some are serious. His paintings of Indians, children and burros are especially endearing. Some paintings, such as "Los Niños," bullfighters, Indians on horseback (see the photo on page 1), and a Mexican trumpeter exhibit palpable action.

Adjacent to the gallery is DeGrazia's Mission in the Sun, a chapel which he designed and built, with the help of Native American friends, in honor of Padre Kino and Mexico's patron saint, our Lady of Guadalupe. (Eusebio Kino, a Jesuit priest, introduced Christianity to 20 villages in Sonora, Mexico and Southern Arizona between 1687 and 1711.) The chapel has a ceiling slot that's open to sky, and is adorned with DeGrazia's murals.

The DeGrazia Gallery in the Sun complex is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

For lunch, we recommend the **Sunrise Coffee House** in the strip mall at the southwest corner of Sunrise Drive and Kolb Road (specifically, 6878 E. Sunrise, Suite 160, 520-529-8155). We especially enjoy their gyros sandwich. To get there, drive east on Sunrise to Kolb (see the map).

Of course, you've noticed the range of mountains, the Santa Catalinas, on your left as you've driven this far. After lunch, drive a short distance on Sunrise to N. Sabino Canyon Road, turn left and follow the signs into the foothills of the Santa Catalinas to the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area parking lot.

Steep-sided and car-free **Sabino Canyon** is easily one of the premier oases in the Sonoran Desert. Approximately 1.25 million people visit the canyon each year to ride the tram, hike, bike, jog, walk, study nature, and take photos. Tram-ride reservations are only needed for large groups.

This is an all-afternoon activity—if you do more than simply ride the tram. The round trip tram ride by itself takes about 45 minutes. So if that's all you care to do, you'll have time for another activity—which, as we suggest below, might be a visit to the Arizona State Museum. Or, you could take a one-hour drive to the top of Mount Lemmon, which is described on the back of the Sabino Canyon map that you'll receive when you purchase your tram tickets.

Our suggestion is that you ride the tram to Stop 9 at the top of the canyon (3.7 mi., 6 km), and then take a stroll back down the road, enjoying the scenery in a more leisurely manner. The elevation gain from the visitor center to Stop 9 is only 500 feet (152 meters)—from 2,800 feet (853 meters) to 3,300 feet (1,005 meters)—so the descent is gradual and comfortable. If there is

water in the creek, be prepared to remove your shoes occasionally, as Sabino Creek sometimes overflows the nine stone bridges that were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps between 1933 and 1938. Because the creek level is dependent upon rain or snow runoff, it's dry much of the year.



You can, of course, get back onto a descending tram at any regular stop. The trams run approximately every 30 minutes. There are restrooms at the Visitor Center and at most stops. Only the Visitor Center and Stops 1 and 2 have water fountains.

You could hike to the top of the canyon, but the advantage of riding the tram (in addition to it requiring less effort) is that the drivers provide a narration that nicely describes the plant and animal life (and

sometimes, the geology) along the way. While it's true—as a result of your visits to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and Saguaro National Park—that you'll be able to recognize some of what you'll see, there is other plant life that may be unfamiliar, such as the graceful ocotillo and the cottonwood, paloverde and Mexican blue oak trees.

If you are a more adventurous hiker, you can make the descent of the canyon via the Sabino Creek Trail or the Phoneline Trail, which are shown on the map that you'll be given at the ticket counter. In that case, carrying a quart of water per person would be a good idea.

To get from Sabino Canyon to the **Arizona State Museum**, drive south on Sabino Canyon Road/Kolb to Speedway Blvd., then west to Park and south to University. Parking is available one street west at Tyndall and Second, and Tyndall and Fourth, or at Euclid and Second.

The museum has two buildings, but all exhibits are located in the building on the left, just inside the main entrance to the University of Arizona at Park and University.

Established in 1893, this is the largest and oldest anthropology museum in the Southwest. It has an extensive and outstanding display of baskets, pottery, ceremonial clothing, jewelry, beadwork, textiles, dolls, masks, minerals, and prehistoric artifacts of the Apache, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Hopi, Pima, Southern Paiute, Seri, Yaqui, the Pai Peoples, and other Native American cultures. Its collection (mostly stored) includes 20,000 pottery specimens, more than 150,000 archeological artifacts, 250,000 photographic prints and negatives, a reference library of 70,000 volumes, and one of the largest Navajo rugs ever woven.

In addition, the museum conducts ongoing excavations of prehistoric Hohokam and Hopi groups, conducts research on cliff dwellings, and compiles documentary histories of current Indian cultures.

Beyond the attractions mentioned in this newsletter, there are others in Southeastern Arizona that may interest you, if you have additional time: Kit Peak Observatory, Tubac Presidio State Historic Park, Tumacacori National Historical Park, the historic towns of Tombstone and Bisbee, the Pima Air & Space Museum, and the Titan Missile Museum. For more information, contact the Tucson Visitor Center as shown below.

\*\*\*\*\*

Where to Sleep and Eat in Tucson [The telephone area code for Tucson is 520.] Crickethead Inn Bed and Breakfast, 9840 Picture Rocks Rd., Tucson, AZ 85743, 682-7126, www.cricketheadinn.com. Restaurants recommended by the Crickethead (and us) include Roma Caffe (Italian), 4140 W. Ina Rd., 744-2929, and La Parrilla Suiza (Mexican), 4250 W. Ina Rd., 572-7200. The best website for hotels, motels, B&Bs, and restaurants in the Tucson area is operated by the Tucson Visitor Center, 100 S. Church Ave., Tucson, AZ 85701; 520-624-1817 or 800-638-8350, www.visittucson.org/visitor/about/visitorcenter/; open Mon.-Fri. 9-5, Sat.-Sun. 9-4. For additional bed and breakfast accommodations try www.arizona-bed-breakfast.com, www.bbonline.com, www.bedandbreakfast.com, and www.listbb.com. Your B&B host or front desk person will gladly recommend nearby restaurants.

To Learn More About the Attractions in or Near Tucson: [The area code for Tucson is 520.] Tucson Visitor Center, 100 S. Church Ave., Tucson, AZ 85701; 520-624-1817 or 800-638-8350, www.visittucson.org/visitor/about/visitorcenter/; open Mon.-Fri. 9-5, Sat.-Sun. 9-4. Mission San Xavier del Bac, 1950 W. San Xavier Road, Tucson, AZ 85746; 294-2624, www.sanxaviermission.org; open every day of the year, 8-5. Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, 2012 N. Kinney Rd., Tucson, AZ 85743; 883-2702, www.desertmuseum.org; open every day of the year, 7:30-5 March through September and 8:30-5 October through February (no entry after 4:15). Saguaro National Park (West), 2700 N. Kinney Rd., Tucson, AZ 85730; 733-5158, http://www.nps.gov/sagu/ and http://www.saguaro.national-park.com/; the park is open 7 A.M.-sunset, the Red Hills Visitor Center is open 9-5. Old Tucson Studios, 201 S. Kinney Rd., Tucson, AZ 85735; 883-0100, www.oldtucson.com; trail ride reservations 437-8280; open daily 10-6. International Wildlife Museum, 4800 W. Gates Pass Rd., Tucson, AZ 85745; 617-1439, www.thewildlifemuseum.org; open Monday through Friday 9-5, and Saturday and Sunday 9-6. DeGrazia Gallery in the Sun, 6300 N. Swan Rd., Tucson, AZ 85718; 299-9191, www.degrazia.org; open daily 10-4. Sabino Canyon Recreation Area, 5900 N. Sabino Canyon Rd., Tucson, AZ 85750; 749-2861 (reservations 749-2327), www.sabinocanyon.com; summer hours, July through mid-December, Monday-Friday 9-4, weekends and holidays 9-4:30; winter hours, mid-December through June, daily 9-4:30. Arizona State Museum, 1013 E. University Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85721; 621-6302, www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/; open Monday-Saturday 10-5 and Sunday 12-5.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Bill and Celia Ginnodo** are residents of Arlington Heights, Illinois. They have traveled extensively in the American West, including Arizona. They are the authors of *Seven Perfect Days in Colorado: A Guided Driving Tour* and *Seven Perfect Days in Northern California: A Guided Driving Tour*, which can be seen at <u>www.pridepublications.com</u> and on Amazon.com.

Additional issues of *Pathfinder Newsletter* may be seen and printed at <u>www.traveltheamericanwest.com</u>.

Text, maps and photographs copyright © 2008 by Pride Publications, Inc.