



ODE TO THE ROADS

A scenic drive, whether you do it on Sunday, Monday or any other day of the week, isn't about getting from Point A to Point B. It's about the people, places and things that you meet and see and experience along the way. That's what makes *Travels With Charley*, *Blue Highways* and *On the Road* such classics, and that's what we were after when we sent three writers and three photographers out on three of Arizona's best back roads.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following road trips are enjoyable any time of year, but because Arizona does, in fact, have four seasons, you'll want to check the weather and road conditions before heading out. Also, what you see in winter may not be what you see in summer. One more thing: In the interest of maximizing the number of observations along the way, we had our writers and photographers travel separately. Each had unique experiences, which is why the photos and the narratives don't always overlap. Collectively, they covered a lot of ground. Here are their stories.

PORTAL TO PATAGONIA

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK LIPCZYNSKI

Portal Store, Café and Lodge is the only storefront in Portal. It's the picture of a country store, with wooden screen doors, an ice machine and a phone booth. Owner Mitch Webster worked here when he was a kid. Now, he runs the place with his wife, Loni. The building, he says, was purchased from a Sears Roebuck catalog and assembled in 1927, '28 or '29. "There's confusion about that."

The store carries everything from hummingbird earrings and nature guides to wine and canned goods. A display of cobblers sits near the register, next to spiral-bound phone books.

"No one liked the regular phone book," Mitch explains. "This town's pretty ambitious. So they created their own. Kind of like they created their own fire department. They don't get any tax money. They just donated money and built it."

Mitch tells my husband and me the town founders named Portal while sitting on the bench in front of his store.

"Portal was just an entry into Paradise," he says. "Paradise was the big mining town," which is just up the road about 5 miles.

These days, Portal Lodge attracts naturalists of all stripes who come for the area's diversity, plus a surprising number of nature-film crews.

"Sometimes, we have two or three film crews," Mitch says. "We have to keep them separated, because what they're working on is proprietary."

That's where Barney Tomberlin comes in.

"Barney takes some one way. I take some the other way," Mitch says.

You can find Barney in the back-room café for breakfast three or four days a week. "Just tell him my usual," he tells the waitress, who charges it to his tab.

Barney wears a T-shirt spattered with pictures of insects. He bats at a fly as he explains how he parlayed a survey job with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish into a business collecting bugs and snakes for universities and natural-history



museums. He keeps 40 species on hand. He also does a lot of rattlesnake relocations.

There are hunters who see a snake and want to kill it, because they've done that all their lives, Barney says. "We don't do that here. Most of us just want to put it off the road."

Barney excuses himself to grab a fly swatter. "Sorry," he says. "I can't stand flies around. If I get this, he'll either leave or he'll be dead."

On our way out of Portal, my husband and I take a short detour onto Foothills Road to glimpse white domes in astronomy village, where people have built observatories adjacent to their homes, then head for Paradise, only to find there isn't much there. It's now home to just four full-time residents, according to Jackie Lewis at the George Walker House (bed and make-your-own breakfast), who welcomes birders to her feeders.

Our time for Paradise is short, so we push over Onion Saddle into Pinery Canyon, where blackened sticks from the Horseshoe 2 fire contrast strikingly with a blaze of wildflowers. Past Chir-

BELOW: "This classic sits outside the Portal Peak Café like a marquee, and it has the café's logo painted on the driver's-side door," Lipczynski says. "The little town of Portal itself looks as though it hasn't changed much since that car rolled off the assembly line. I like places that look as though time stands still there. This is where I started my road trip. It seemed appropriate to kick it off with a shot of a car."

CAMERA: CANON EOS 5D MARK II; **SHUTTER:** 1/320; **APERTURE:** F/4; **ISO:** 100; **FOCAL LENGTH:** 45 MM



icahua National Monument, the landscape changes from forest to prairie, giving way to fields of corn and modest homes with American flags and pickup trucks. By late afternoon, we pass through downtown Douglas, looking like a 20th century movie set, then head to Bisbee for the night.

Once famous for its eccentrics, Bisbee feels more upscale than funky, with luxury suites, high-end boutiques and contemporary restaurants.

The most colorful character on Main Street is the "Killer Bee Guy," Reed Booth, who sells honey from hives people paid him to remove. Wearing a camo hat and T-shirt, he keeps up a steady patter outside his tiny shop, a former stairwell.

"Get a free taste of honey, honey! Have fun buzzing around!"

Nearby Lowell feels more like the Bisbee of old. Sitting at a curvy Formica counter at The Breakfast Club, we contemplate pies with mountains of whipped cream and a busboy with piercings and bright-red lips tattooed on his neck.

Lowell has a retro feel with its old, brick buildings and 1940s- and '50s-era cars lining the street. This suburb of Bisbee was once a sizeable mining town. All that's left is a block of Erie Street. The theater marquee advertises Mile High Enterprises. The display cases

ALONG THE WAY

Portal

1. Tour the Faraway Ranch House at Chiricahua National Monument, www.nps.gov/chir

2. Grab a cup of joe at Hotel Gadsden in Douglas, 520-364-4481, www.hotelgadsden.com

3. Find a treasure at Finders Keepers Antiques in Bisbee, 520-432-2900, www.fkeepers.com

4. Commune with Mother Nature in the Ramsey Canyon Preserve, 520-378-2785, www.nature.org

5. Eat something fresh and healthy at Canela Bistro in Sonoita, 520-455-5873, www.canelabistro.com

6. Eat something not so healthy (fried chicken) at Sonoita Mercantile, 520-455-5788

7. Explore the Patagonia Walking Trail, 888-794-0060, www.patagoniaaz.com

Patagonia

RIGHT: "After I left Portal, I drove over the Chiricahua Mountains on a precarious, unmaintained road that, at some points, turned so sharply and came so close to the edge of a sheer drop-off that I had to slow to a crawl," Lipczynski says. "It was a beautiful but treacherous drive that curled around and up and down for 20 miles at an average speed of about 20 miles per hour. That makes for a long ride, but luckily the views were fantastic. I stopped frequently to get out and look around." **CAMERA:** CANON EOS 5D MARK II; **SHUTTER:** 1/640; **APERTURE:** F/4; **ISO:** 200; **FOCAL LENGTH:** 45 MM



LEFT: "During my trek through the Chiricahua Mountains, I stopped many times to soak up the untamed natural beauty and to stretch my legs," Lipczynski says. "At one point, a deer darted out in front of my vehicle some distance ahead. I thought it would make a nice addition to the series of photographs I was making on my road trip."

📷 CAMERA: CANON EOS 5D MARK II; **SHUTTER:** 1/1250; **APERTURE:** F/4; **ISO:** 200; **FOCAL LENGTH:** 280 MM

OPPOSITE PAGE: "A weather balloon caught my eye soon after I rolled into Sierra Vista," Lipczynski says. "I drove back roads trying to get a closer look at the balloon and came to a point at the end of a road where I couldn't go any farther. A barbed-wire fence paralleled the road. I kept the car running as I got out to get some shots of the balloon, keeping in mind that other vehicles might arrive and want to get through. By getting low to the ground with my camera, I was able to use some of the groundcover in the foreground to help isolate the balloon. I used the barbed-wire fence to break up the frame and add some tension to the composition."

📷 CAMERA: CANON EOS 5D MARK II; **SHUTTER:** 1/1600; **APERTURE:** F/4.5; **ISO:** 200; **FOCAL LENGTH:** 45 MM

in the old five-and-dime stare vacantly, and the pool hall, "Pool, Snooker, Libations, est. 1940," is boarded up.

But a man lifts weights inside the Lowell Gym, "a private club" with its vari-speed belt massager displayed in the window. A karate studio posts a current class schedule. Across the street, a dog tied to a rusting 1950s Studebaker truck stands in the center of a blue plastic wading pool, lapping water.

Signs for Gulf and Harley-Davidson hang from the storefront behind. Jim Danylko leans against the doorframe wearing a sleeveless T-shirt. He tells us the dog's name is Wateo, and that she's wolf and coyote. Jim's former girlfriend, a Navajo, owned the wolf mother.

"She went into heat and the coyote got her," he said. "I think it had a little dog in it, because I don't think wolf and coyote will breed. Not sure how that works."

Jim came to Lowell in 1994 from Tucson. His shop, Arizona Thunder, does motorcycle repairs.

"When I moved here it was totally dead," he says. "There was a VFW bar on the other side of the street. I can't think of anything else."

It helped when The Breakfast Club opened in 2005. "The buildings started getting bought up and people started doing stuff with them."

Jim and two other residents bought and hung old signs advertising Indian Motorcycles and Greyhound. He found old gas pumps inside the building and put them out front.

"That Texaco sign was already up," he says, ges-

turing across the street. "We took from pictures and tried to find the right ones. We just kinda put the stuff back out."

Back on the road, we head out State Route 80, passing a roadside shrine and a defunct motel flying a pirate flag. A string of fat cottonwoods lining the San Pedro River marks our approach to Sierra Vista. We pass the Buena Performing Arts Center, advertising country music night, and the world's first McDonald's drive-through, originally built in 1975 to serve soldiers from Fort Huachuca who couldn't enter stores wearing fatigues. Then we head south on State Route 92 to spend the night in Hereford.

The next morning, we head to Coronado National Memorial, which is thick with grasses and blanketed with wildflowers. Pausing at Montezuma Pass, with its sweeping views of the "Devil's Highway," we brave the bumpy gravel road descending into the San Rafael Valley.

This is the landscape that author Jim Harrison once called "preposterously beautiful," with oaks and yuccas dotting a sea of tall grasses blowing in waves, and thunderheads, like drifts of whipped cream, piling up overhead.

About 14 miles from Montezuma Pass, we stop at Parker Canyon Lake, taking advantage of the rest facilities and lime-green marina store before continuing on paved State Route 83 for the remaining 28 miles into Sonoita.

Taking a slight detour through Elgin, we tour some of the area's wineries, arriving at Sonoita



ABOVE: "I stopped in Douglas to scope out the border situation," Lipczynski says. "I unintentionally hung out across the street from a ballet studio, waiting for something to happen as an instructor led a group of little ballerinas into class. I forged on, thinking I might swing back to get some shots of actual dancing. Later, I approached the dance studio and caught a glimpse of a young lady peeling back the curtain to look at me. In the fraction of a second that it took me to put my camera up, she disappeared. Apparently, she told a friend I was outside, because another little girl did the same thing, and I got the shot I wanted." **CAMERA:** CANON EOS 5D MARK II; SHUTTER: 1/320; APERTURE: F/4.5; ISO: 200; FOCAL LENGTH: 85 MM

LEFT: "This was the first thing that piqued my interest when I rolled into Sierra Vista," Lipczynski says. "The sign marked a trailer park on the edge of town. I made a mental note to return to photograph it after I wandered around town. To my benefit, it was a spectacularly cloudy day, adding more meaning to the message on the sign. The irony of the photograph is that the physical condition of the sign and the message that it conveys are in conflict with each other. That tension makes it interesting to me." **CAMERA:** CANON EOS 5D MARK II; SHUTTER: 1/250; APERTURE: F/8; ISO: 200; FOCAL LENGTH: 45 MM

Vineyards in time for "Lunch at the Winery." Sonoita, the state's oldest winery, feels the most exciting, with its kitschy wine-themed gift shop.

But the most ambitious tasting room belongs to Kief-Joshua Vineyards, a huge Tuscan affair with travertine floors, granite counters and a glass chandelier. At odds with this setting, winemaker Kief Joshua Manning looks like a college kid, with sideburns and a backward ball cap. He carries a baby wallaby, wrapped in a Cabbage Patch blanket, that sleeps in a crib with a pouch.

Driving into Sonoita, SR 83 is clogged with cars and people headed for the Labor Day Rodeo. Women push strollers. Men in plaid shirts tote toddlers with too-big cowboy hats, while teenage girls in too-short shorts sport Tony Lama boots.

Just 12 miles past, Patagonia feels like another planet. Skeletons sit behind the wheel of a VW bus outside the Dia de los Muertos Museum, the word "truth" is stenciled on the door of the Velvet Elvis Pizza Co., a pig adorns the wall of the Politically Incorrect Gas Station, and what appears to be a private home displays a sign saying "Camel Parts."

Inside the Wagon Wheel Saloon, the namesake wheel dangles a prop plane fashioned from beer cans. We sit at the bar, across from a taxidermied coyote howling in an illuminated shadow box.

Tonight is "Karaoke with Rikki Tikki" and the bar is full.

A muscle-bound man sipping from a saguaro-themed margarita glass and a man in a ball cap drinking Bud Light compete for the attention of a blonde with a shoulder tattoo. There's a woman wearing tie-dye, a timid-looking lady in a scarf and a man in a cowboy hat. A guy wearing a thick gold chain glares at us. The woman next to him empties a packet of sugar into her mouth and washes it down with beer.

"I'm a solo jukebox waiting for someone to push the buttons," Rikki Tikki says with a little eye roll.

A woman sitting alone sings *Lost in Love* from her seat. The timid-looking woman belts out Bob Dylan. Gold-chain guy takes the microphone, then loses his nerve.

When Rikki sings *Amarillo by Morning*, cowboy-hat guy gets up to two-step with a platinum blonde. Then a man with silver hair and glasses that recall the 1950s sings *El Rey* in Spanish. People whoop and laugh, and everyone in the joint joins in.

The next morning, we mean to have breakfast at the Ranch House in Sonoita, hoping to meet the waitress who tells dirty jokes to retirees from Green Valley. But the only place serving breakfast is the gas station. The Fuel Stop is out of gas, but we eat pancakes loaded with pine nuts at a table decorated with an inflatable palm. Then, having filled up, we head home.