

STATE SECRETS



The stalagmites of Kartchner Caverns are not a secret. Not even close. The park's hummingbird garden, however, is more or less undiscovered. It's a hidden gem, and so are some of the other unknowns at Arizona's 31 state parks and natural areas. They're all worth experiencing, but if we were putting together a bucket list of a dozen things to do this year, this would be it.

By KATHY MONTGOMERY

1.

MOONWALK AMONG RED ROCKS *Red Rock State Park*

See Sedona in a new light on one of Red Rock State Park's popular moonlight hikes. The easy, two-hour interpretive hikes begin at dusk. Naturalists lead hikers along the juniper- and piñon-pine-forested trails of this 286-acre nature preserve to a viewing point in time for sunset, when Sedona's famous red-rock formations deepen and glow with the fading light. Distant coyotes yip and howl as the moon rises like a beacon over Cathedral Rock, spilling light onto Oak Creek. It's a marvelous light for a moondance. Hikes are held during the full moon from April through October. Reservations are required. Information: 928-282-6907 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/rero

A woman who met David Gowan when he was in his 80s remembered him as a grouchy old man and a bit of a mooch. Whatever his failings, we owe him the discovery of the natural travertine bridge

2.

FLEE THE HEAT *Tonto Natural Bridge State Park*

northwest of Payson that is one of Arizona's best-loved treasures. The prospector stumbled across Tonto Natural Bridge while running from Apache Indians in 1877. He eluded them by hiding inside a cave in the 400-foot-long tunnel under the bridge. Today, the Gowan Trail marks a steep descent from the surrounding valley to an observation deck with an inspiring view of the bridge, cooled with mist from a waterfall cascading more than 100 feet from the top. Spring makes a good time to troll the tunnel, a tricky scramble across sometimes slippery boulders.

Sunlight streams in from the openings, illuminating tranquil pools. Droplets fall like raindrops. It makes for one cool escape. Information: 928-476-4202 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/tona

3.

CURE WHAT AILS YOU *Roper Lake State Park*

The Safford area contains a number of natural hot springs, where water heated underground returns to the surface. The reputed healing properties of springs like these spawned a string of day spas in the area that take advantage of the mineral waters, which are naturally heated to between 96 and 100 degrees year-round. For an alternative to these commercial establishments, you can drown your sorrows in the natural stone hot tub at Roper Lake State Park. With restrooms and changing facilities nearby, the open-air tub is located on the Mariah Mesa nature trail. Think of it as your path to recovery. Information: 928-428-6760 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/rola



TOM DANIELSEN



4.

**MAKE A
STAR TREK**
*Lost Dutchman
State Park*

Arizona has some famously dark skies, which are an astronomer's dream. But it's not always easy or practical to get to those remote locations. Lost Dutchman State Park, at the base of the Superstition Mountains, makes a nice compromise. It's close enough to Phoenix for a quick evening of stargazing. It's also just far enough, and the desert air just forgiving enough, for the stars to really shine. Summer is the best time to see the Milky Way, which glows ribbon-like from north to south. That's also when

Scorpius the scorpion, that most desert of constellations, becomes visible, having chased Orion the hunter from the sky.

*Information: 480-982-4485
or [www.azstateparks.com/
parks/lodu](http://www.azstateparks.com/parks/lodu)*

5.

CAVE IN *Kartchner Caverns State Park*

If you've somehow resisted this crown jewel of the Arizona state parks system, yield to the impulse to visit. This pristine, living cave draws visitors from all over the world, and with good reason. Kartchner's stalactites and stalagmites are generally described with superlatives like world's longest (soda straw), Arizona's tallest and most massive (column). Reviewers use words like "spectacular," "breathtaking" and "most extraordinary." What too often fails to get mentioned is the park's beautiful setting at the base of the Whetstone Mountains south of Benson. Picnickers and campers watch monsoons roll across the landscape in summer or relax in the hummingbird garden, the air thick with the tiny, jewel-like birds in spring and fall. Information: 520-586-4100 (information), 520-586-2283 (reservations) or www.azstateparks.com/parks/kaca



PAUL GILL

6.

MAROON YOURSELF *Cattail Cove State Park*

As far as campgrounds on Lake Havasu go, the one at Cattail Cove State Park is among the nicest. Located about 15 miles south of Lake Havasu City, the campground occupies a scenic spot with views of California's Whipple Mountains. With a four-lane boat ramp and buoyed-off swimming area, it's just far enough from Lake Havasu City to create a quieter, family friendly community. But let's face it, sometimes you don't want to see quite so much of your fellow man. For even more privacy in a natural setting, try one of the park's primitive campsites. Accessible only by boat, the sandy, tree-shaded sites scattered along the east shore might not be as remote as Gilligan's Island, but once you're there, your cares will cast away. Information: 928-855-1223 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/caco



GEORGE RAYMOND

DAVID ELMS JR.



7.

FLOAT YOUR BOAT *Verde River Greenway State Natural Area*

The 170-mile Verde River is one of Arizona's natural beauties.

The state's only federally designated Wild and Scenic River is host to rare and endangered plants and animals, including Arizona cliff rose, river otters and Southwestern bald eagles. The Verde River Greenway State Natural Area protects 6 miles of this important natural resource between the Tuzigoot and Bridgeport bridges. The best way to explore it is to get on the water. The state provides paddle maps for canoeing the waterway — the maps include detailed directions and a description of what you'll find along the way. As the name suggests, the state has kept the area in its natural state, so there are no facilities. But you can find camping, restrooms and day-use areas at the adjacent Dead Horse Ranch State Park in Cottonwood.

Information: 928-639-0312 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/veri



RANDY PRENTICE

9.

PAY YOUR RESPECTS *Homolovi Ruins State Park*

This state park's Anasazi pueblos are considered sacred to the Hopi people. But Homolovi Ruins State Park also contains the site of a 19th century Mormon settlement. Led by Lot

Smith, the pioneers built Sunset Fort there and established the first post office on the Little Colorado River, which operated from 1876 to 1887. What remains is a small cemetery, marked with a historical marker. The headstones tell their sad tales, among them that Lot Smith, the last to leave in 1888, lost three children in just over three years, two of them within months of each other. Sunset Cemetery also includes the graves of babies who did not live long enough to be given names. Photograph or sketch the markers, but don't make rubbings, which can wear away the stones.

Information: 928-289-4106 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/horu

8.

GO OLD SCHOOL *Tubac Presidio State Historic Park*

True or false: When you tell your kids you used to walk 5 miles to school — uphill both ways, of course — they roll their eyes. Most likely the answer is true. Some things kids have to learn for themselves. That's why the "Day

in the 1885 Schoolhouse Program" at Tubac Presidio State Historic Park is so cool. For one day, kids can attend an 1885-era class at the Old Tubac School. They prepare by making individual chalkboards and fashioning lunch pails from coffee cans and wire. On class day, the bus drops students off far enough away from the one-room adobe schoolhouse to "walk" to school (though, sadly, not 5 miles and not uphill). There, they recite the Pledge of Allegiance to a flag with 38 stars, play marbles at recess and study period textbooks. It might be the only day they don't give you any lip. The prescribed punishment for "quarreling" in 1885 was five lashes. Don't roll your eyes. It's true.

Information: 520-398-2252 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/tupr



RANDY PRENTICE

GEORGE H.H. HUEY

10.

TAKE YOUR PICK

Slide Rock State Park

These days, Slide Rock State Park in Oak Creek Canyon is best known for its natural water slide, but before it became nature's theme park, Slide Rock was a working apple farm. The apple orchards that Frank Pendley began planting in 1912 feature the poetic-sounding Maiden's Blush, Rome Beauty and White Winter Pearmain varieties. The orchards are especially lovely in the spring, when fragrant white blooms blanket the more than 300 trees. Some years, when the fall harvest is exceptionally bountiful, rangers open the orchard to the public for picking.

Information: 928-282-3034 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/slro

11.

INDULGE YOUR INNER COWBOY

Catalina State Park

Nothing says "Western" like a saguaro. The tall, stately succulents grow only in the Sonoran Desert, a swath of land stretching from Central Arizona into

Mexico. Maybe that's why they're such a staple of Western films and TV shows. With 5,000 saguaros lining its foothills and canyons, Catalina State Park just might be the best place to feed your Lone Ranger fantasies. Located at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson, the park offers miles of equestrian trails leading into the adjacent Coronado National Forest. An equestrian center provides a staging area for horse owners, with plenty of trailer parking. In need of a steed? The nearby Pusch Ridge Stables can put you in the saddle. Just don't stay in it too long or you'll soon be walking like John Wayne.

Information: 520-628-5798, www.azstateparks.com/parks/cata or www.puschridgestables.com



DAVID ELMS JR.

12.

MAKE MERRY

Riordan Mansion State Historic Park

During the holidays, historic Riordan Mansion in Flagstaff decks its halls with wreaths, garlands and all the trappings of Christmas that the Riordan family might have used 100 years ago. The staff tries to reproduce the towering fir tree captured in an old family photo. Students from a local Catholic school make the tree ornaments, things like popcorn garland, and green-and-red paper chains. Tour guides explain the traditions behind the decorations. By lighting candles in the windows, Catholic families like the Riordans hoped Joseph and Mary, looking for a spot to lie down, would see the glow and choose their home. The flowers of the poinsettias represent the star of Bethlehem. The Yule log, brought in on Christmas Eve, was kept burning for 12 hours. If it didn't light on the first try, it meant trouble ahead.

Information: 928-779-4395 or www.azstateparks.com/parks/rima