



Rincon Creek Ranch

There are many reasons to visit this former cattle ranch near Saguaro National Park, including the fully stocked casitas, a nature trail and the toy-like squeaks of Gila woodpeckers in the morning.

KATHY MONTGOMERY

THE SUN WAKES THE DESERT gently. Despite a triple-digit forecast, the emerging sun feels mild, backlighting the fat arms of monsoon-fed ocotillos and giving the rounded tops of paloverdes a soft, brushed look. Even the saguaros look soft, their spiny skins glowing as benignly as peach fuzz. The only sounds are the *whit-weet* of a curve-billed thrasher, the musical wing beats of doves taking flight and the toy-like squeak of a Gila woodpecker. Being able to watch the desert come to life while swaddled in a fuzzy robe, sipping freshly ground coffee, is reason enough to book a casita at Rincon Creek Ranch.

Bill and Gretchen Shirley threw everything they had into creating this Sonoran

Desert sanctuary. In 2010, they bought a 78-acre former cattle ranch bordering Saguaro National Park East and set to work on seven luxury casitas overlooking the park. They've since expanded their land to nearly 100 acres, to preserve the views and the quiet, and constructed a 1.3-mile nature trail that ambles through the property's three habitats: desert, mesquite bosque and pasture.

The Santa Fe-style casitas, painted in rich desert hues, offer full kitchens, fireplaces, laundry facilities and patios. Stocked with whole-bean coffee and fresh eggs from the Shirleys' chickens, they include all the comforts of home. A Mission-style multipurpose building serves as a gathering spot for impromptu

happy hours, with a massage studio, game room and business center.

The one- and two-bedroom casitas have similar floor plans, but Gretchen decorated each with a different theme. The one-bedroom Casa Azul is brightly painted, with Talavera tile accents, while the Appaloosa includes a signature copper tub. The two-bedroom El Ranchito offers the most privacy, with an unobstructed view of Tanque Verde Ridge and a wraparound patio perfectly positioned for sunrise and sunset. The access gate to Saguaro National Park lies within sight, and there are birding lists, trail maps and binoculars in the casitas.

Those looking for an active vacation find trail rides, jeep tours and golf nearby. Shops and restaurants in downtown Tucson are about a half-hour away. But many find no reason to leave. They feel content to enjoy the parade of cardinals, finches and towhees to the feeders, and to watch the sun gently coax open the bloom of a barrel cactus to reveal the colors of a tequila sunrise.

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