

Organ Pipe Cactus

National Monument
Arizona

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Kathleen Norris Cook

Exploring a Desert Landscape

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument celebrates the life and landscape of the Sonoran Desert. Here, in this desert wilderness of plants and animals and dramatic mountains-and-plains scenery, you can drive a lonely road, hike a backcountry trail, camp beneath a clear desert sky, or just soak in the warmth and beauty of the Southwest.

Planning Your Visit

The visitor center, your best source of park information, has books, brochures, maps, exhibits, and slide shows. Park rangers are there to talk over plans and interests with you. Schedules of guided walks, talks, and other programs are posted in the winter. When you are ready to begin your desert explorations, you will find scenic drives and hiking trails just short distances away. (See descriptions and maps below.) If you visit between October and April, you can expect sunny days in the 60s and 70s°F and occasional light rains. From May through September temperatures often exceed 105°F and brief, violent thunderstorms sometimes occur. Nights are considerably cooler than days year-round.

Scenic Drives

Two scenic loop roads—the Ajo Mountain Drive and the Puerto Blanco Drive—penetrate desert country. Both are winding, up-and-down graded dirt roads. Passenger vehicles can travel them easily, but if you are driving a motorhome more than 25 feet long, you should not travel these unpaved roads. Even some small motorhomes have difficulty, so check with a ranger first. Trailers are not recommended on these roads. Guidebooks are available at the visitor center and at the start of both drives. When on the road: carry emergency tools; take drinking water and extra water for your vehicle; stay away from flooded areas; and never drive off the road. The 21-mile **Ajo Mountain Drive** winds along the foothills of the Ajo Mountains, the highest range in the area. Outstanding desert landscapes and impressive stands of organ pipe cactus are among the highlights

of this tour. The drive takes about two hours. The 53-mile **Puerto Blanco Drive** circles the colorful Puerto Blanco Mountains and passes through a startling variety of scenery. Around one corner you will find the desert oasis of Quitobaquito, while around another you'll find a true Sonoran Desert environment, with saguaros, organ pipe cacti, and elephant trees. This trip takes half a day.

Besides these two roads, there are a few unimproved dirt roads that go further into the backcountry. Some lead to historic sites with windmills, ranchhouses, abandoned gold and silver mines, and other remnants of the past. Sometimes these roads are passable only by 4-wheel-drive vehicles. Check on road conditions at the visitor center.

Walks and Hikes

Several trails offer close looks at the beauty of the desert. The best hiking months are October through April. Your pets, if leashed, may be taken on two trails (listed below). Otherwise, pets are not allowed on trails or in the backcountry. When hiking, take 1 gallon of water per person per day. Avoid overexertion and overexposure to the sun. Watch out for the many desert plants with spines and thorns. At night carry a flashlight and watch for rattlesnakes. Remember, snakes are protected here. Do not harm them.

The trails, from shortest to longest, are:

- Visitor Center Nature Trail** (0.1 mile round-trip) An introduction to the desert and its plants. It can be negotiated by wheelchairs. A guide pamphlet is available at the trailhead.
- Campground Perimeter Trail** (1 mile round-trip) An ideal leisurely walk at the start or end of your day. Pets are permitted.
- Desert View Nature Trail** (1.2 miles round-trip) A circular route leading to vistas of Sonoyta Valley and the pink granite Cubabi Mountains in Mexico. Trailside signs describe features along the way.
- Paloverde Trail** (2.6 miles round-trip) A connecting trail between the campground and

the visitor center highlighted by views of the rugged Ajo Mountains. Pets are permitted. **Estes Canyon-Bull Pasture Trail** (4.1 miles round-trip) A strenuous climb to a high plateau where ranchers once wintered cattle. There are grand views of the surrounding terrain. **Victoria Mine Trail** (4.5 miles round-trip) A hike over rolling terrain to the monument's richest and oldest gold and silver mine.

Crosscountry hiking in the open desert can be enjoyable, too, but first discuss your planned route with a park ranger.

Camping and Picnicking

The monument campground, open all year on a first-come, first-served basis, has water, restrooms, grills, tables, dump station, and amphitheater, where evening programs are presented in the winter. Camping fees are collected. Fires are permitted in grills, but wood gathering is prohibited. Private campgrounds are located in Lukeville and Why. If you prefer primitive camping, you can stay at a backcountry campground. Pick up a camping permit at the visitor center. Picnic areas are on the Ajo Mountain Drive and Puerto Blanco Drive. Most have tables and pit toilets, some have shade, but only the visitor center picnic area has water.

Area Lodging and Services

Motels, gasoline, groceries, trailer parks, laundries, and other services are in Lukeville and Why. Ajo, Arizona, and Sonoyta, Mexico, have a wider range of lodgings and services.

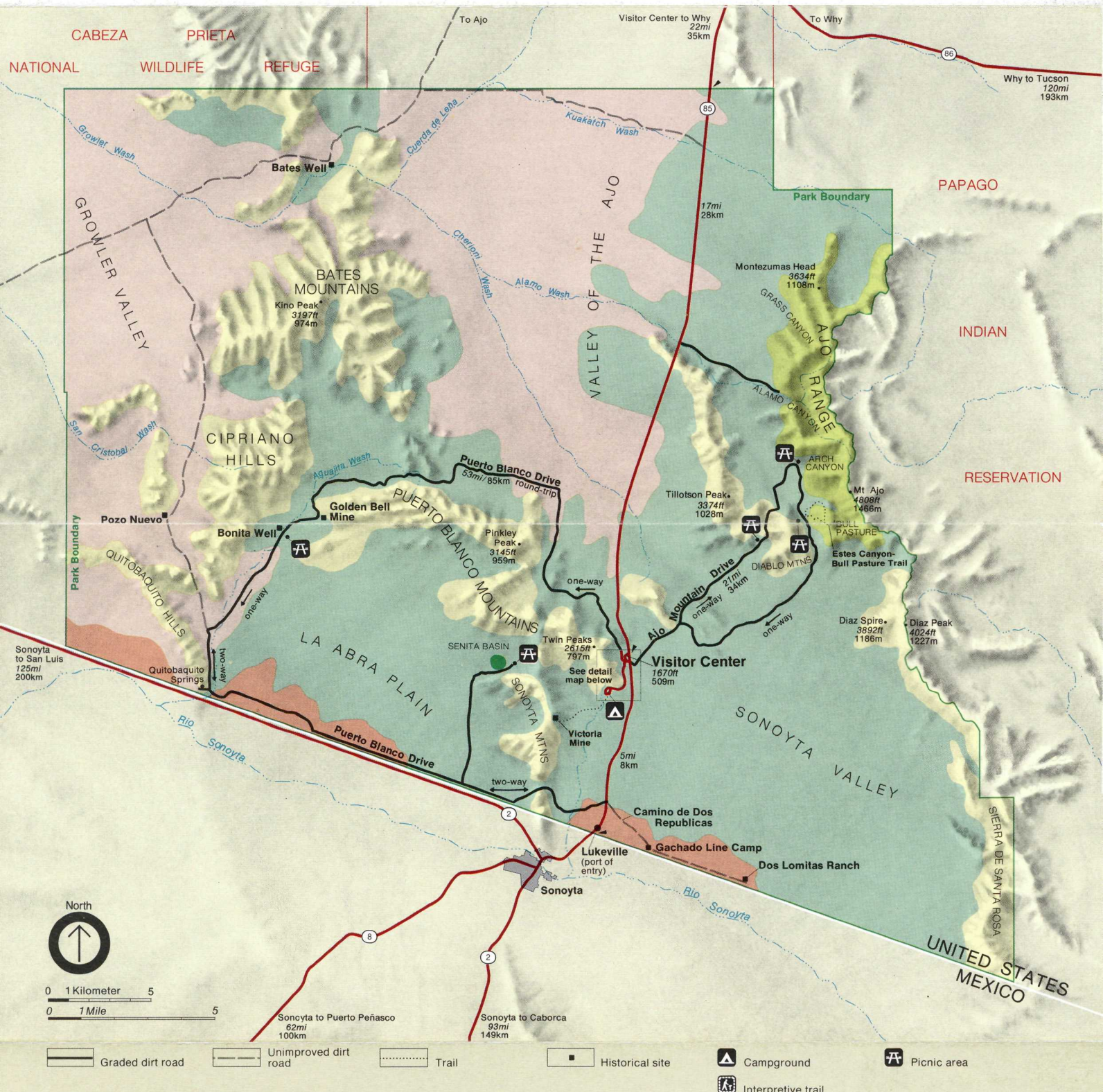
Visiting Mexico

U.S. Customs officials in Lukeville can assist you with information on tourist cards, car permits and insurance, and other matters pertaining to traveling to Mexico.

Park Information

For information write: Superintendent, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Rt. 1, Box 100, Ajo, AZ 85321; or call (602) 387-6849.

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A Guide to Desert Communities

The part of the Sonoran Desert embraced in the monument exhibits an outstanding variety of plant life. The reason: three distinctively different divisions of the Sonoran Desert converge here. From the west comes the Lower Colorado division; from the east, the Arizona Upland division; and from the south, the Central Gulf Coast division. Each adds to the diversity you see in the monument. But the complexity does not stop there. Even within these divisions there is variety. Six major plant communities can be recognized, each with its own special mix of vegetation. Differences in topogra-

phy, soils, and climate determine where each occurs. Nature is not as exact as the maps here suggest; the communities do intermingle somewhat with one another.

LOWER COLORADO DIVISION

The hottest, driest part of the Sonoran Desert.

Creosotebush/Bursage Community Widely spaced creosotebush and bursage make up 80 percent of the plant life of this valley community.

Mixed Scrub Community This community is recognized by its mix of brittlebush, triangle bursage, and

foothill paloverde. It commonly occurs on dry volcanic slopes.

Saltbush Community

Only plants with a tolerance for silty, salty soil—primarily saltbush—inhabit this valley community.

ARIZONA UPLAND DIVISION

The most luxuriant part of the Sonoran Desert.

Mixed Cactus/Paloverde Community

The greatest variety of cacti grow in this community of the bajadas, or low-lying gravel slopes. Saguaro, organ pipe, prickly pear, and cholla thrive. The dominant tree sharing this habitat is paloverde.

Jojoba/Evergreen Scrubland Community

This community exists where rainfall is most abundant—in the canyons of the Ajo Mountains. Jojoba, agave, rosewood, and juniper grow here.

CENTRAL GULF COAST DIVISION

The most exotic part of the Sonoran Desert, with Mexican plant species rare in the United States.

Elephant Tree/Senita Cactus Community

This community, which includes the elephant tree, senita cactus, limberbush, and organ pipe, occurs in pockets of the monument such as Senita Basin.



A Desert Full of Life



Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument exhibits an extraordinary collection of the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert. This is a showcase for creatures who have adapted themselves to the extreme temperatures, intense sunlight, and little rainfall that characterize this Southwest region. Foremost among the desert dwellers who have mastered this harsh environment are the cacti. Altogether 26 species inhabit the monument, including the saguaro, and of course the monument's namesake, the organ pipe cactus.

The organ pipe is a large cactus found rarely in the United States, although common in Mexico. The monument encompasses the bulk of its U.S. population. Like its fellow cacti, and other desert inhabitants, the organ pipe is tuned to the rhythms of the sun and the infrequent rains. A glutton for heat and light, it grows on south-facing slopes where it can absorb the most sun. This location is critical during winter months, when severe frosts can kill the cactus. But when it blooms, in the heat of May, June, and July, the organ pipe waits until the sun goes down to open its tender lavender-white flowers. Other types of cactus bloom at night, too, but many also bloom during the day, exposing their flowers to the sun. Day or night, the summer display of many different cactus blooms is one of the desert's flashiest spectacles, as the brilliant flowers of yellow, red, white, and pink bring color to the landscape. It is a show staged only by the springtime explosions of gold poppies, blue lupines, pink owl clover, and other annuals after a wet winter.

Less conspicuous than the plants are the animals of the desert. Many of them, including elf owls, kangaroo rats, most snakes, and jackrabbits, are creatures of the night. They hide in cactus holes, underground burrows, or other cool and shaded spots during the day. Other animals, such as bighorn sheep, most birds, and most lizards, prefer daylight to darkness. But these animals also may seek mid-day shade. They tend to restrict their activity to early morning and late afternoon during the heat of summer, when air temperatures can reach 118°F and ground temperatures occasionally soar to a scorching 175°. Coyotes and javelinas are even more adaptable, active at any time of day or night that is not too hot.

To deal with the lack of water to drink, desert animals must have some way to conserve body moisture. The best example of an efficient desert water manager is the kangaroo rat. It ordinarily drinks no water and eats mostly dry food. It gets some moisture from even the driest seeds, and adds this to the water formed in the process of food metabolism. But the kangaroo rat's survival depends primarily on reducing water loss. Its urine is highly concentrated and its feces are almost completely dry. It even reclaims through its nose much of the water otherwise lost in breathing.

Like other desert dwellers, human beings, too, have had to adapt to survive, or suffer the consequences. Prehistoric nomads relied

on scarce springs and seeps in their travels. Later desert wanderers—Spanish explorers, missionaries, and others—sometimes entered this unforgiving environment unprepared. Many followed an almost waterless route called El Camino del Diablo—"the Devil's Highway"—as they headed west. Unmarked graves along the route are grim reminders that some did not finish their journey. In the early 1900s ranchers and miners expanded human occupation of the desert by finding and developing new water sources. Today, just as before, visitors learn quickly about thirst, heat, cactus, and rattlesnakes and find ways to safely enjoy the desert on its own terms.

Now, as a protected area, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument allows the life of the Sonoran Desert to flourish under nearly ideal wilderness conditions. The monument is an outstanding natural preserve where one of the Earth's major ecosystems survives almost unspoiled. Recognizing its significance the United Nations in 1976 designated the monument as an international Biosphere Reserve. Conservation and scientific research, including studies of man's impact on the desert, will be invaluable in protecting the life of the desert.



Organ Pipe Wildlife

Shown here are just some of the Sonoran Desert plants and animals that inhabit Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Look for wildlife throughout your travels.

Plants

The plants shown here commonly occur in one or more of the six Sonoran Desert plant communities found in the park. See "A Guide to Desert Communities" on the opposite side of this folder for more information on the park's plant communities.

- 1 Saguaro
- 2 Ocotillo
- 3 Brittlebush
- 4 Organ pipe cactus

- 5 Engelmann prickly pear
- 6 Teddybear cholla
- 7 Creosotebush
- 8 Paloverde
- 9 Saltbush
- 10 Senita cactus
- 11 Mesquite
- 12 Chainfruit cholla
- 13 Gold poppies
- 14 Elephant tree

Animals

- 15 White-winged dove
- 16 Gila woodpecker
- 17 Gila monster
- 18 Western diamondback rattlesnake
- 19 Desert tortoise
- 20 Javelina
- 21 Gambel's quail
- 22 Roadrunner
- 23 Cactus wren
- 24 Coyote
- 25 Redtailed hawk

Illustration by Robert Hynes