

Looking for the sun? Try Tucson

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Looking for a sunny escape from winter? Tucson, Arizona's winter daytime temperatures range from the low 50s to the high 70s, so now is a great time to visit. Here are a variety of fun and interesting Tucson activities ideas that are guaranteed to fill you with sunshine.

— Enjoy a bicycle tour through Tucson's historic neighborhoods:

Get rolling! Learn about the Old Pueblo's people and places from a knowledgeable guide as you cruise the quiet streets of Tucson's colorful barrios. This fun tour lasts approximately three hours and covers 9-10 miles of flat terrain through downtown Tucson. www.tucsonbiketours.com

— Experience butterfly magic at the Tucson Botanical Gardens, surrounded by many rare and exotic butterflies:

Reader's Digest named The Tucson Botanical Gardens the best secret garden in America. This urban oasis of five-plus acres with 16 specialty gardens surrounds visitors with beauty and inspiration. Family fun activities include the seasonal, live tropical Butterfly Exhibit, Butterfly Magic, the Thornville Garden Railway and the Children's Discovery Garden.
www.tucsonbotanical.org/

— See raptors in free flight at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

Watching great horned owls, prairie falcons, red-tailed hawks, peregrine falcons and other raptors whiz by so close that you feel the brush of their feathers. All birds in the demonstration are native to the Sonoran Desert and fly completely untethered. The presentations take place in the open desert, not in an amphitheater.

The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum is a world-renowned zoo, natural history museum, and botanical garden where you will experience interpretive displays of living animals and plants native to the Sonoran Desert region. Note: Be sure to arrive at the museum at least 20 minutes prior to the presentation to walk to the demonstration area. Presentations are at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., through April 2. www.desertmuseum.org

— Have a star-gazing experience at the top of Mount Lemmon.

Learn the constellations, observe interesting atmospheric phenomena and look through Arizona's largest public viewing telescope. Most of humanity has not seen the universe as clearly as you will be able to using the center's outstanding 32-inch Schulman Telescope.

Ninety minutes from Tucson, at an elevation of 9,157 feet, the University of Arizona's Science Sky Center offers a rare opportunity to view the wonders of the cosmos. The SkyNights experience is offered nightly throughout the year for small groups of seven to 20 people. Children ages seven and older are welcome. <http://skycenter.arizona.edu/programs/public/skynights>

— Visit the "Sistine Chapel of North America," the Mission San Xavier del Bac.

This active Franciscan mission, founded in 1692 by a Jesuit, is located on the Tohono O’Odham Indian Reservation. The pristine exterior and intricate interior have undergone careful restoration and garnered national attention in recent years. Enjoy a docent tour to learn about the priceless interior artwork, which is being restored and preserved. www.patronatosanxavier.org

— Explore the Pima Air and Space Museum.

A must for airplane buffs, the museum offers walking and bus tours that include five indoor exhibit hangars, with two dedicated to World War II. View more than 300 historical aircrafts, from a Wright Flyer to a 787 Dreamliner at one of the largest non-government funded aviation and space museums in the world. www.pimaair.org/visit/plan-your-visit

— Get up close to the nation’s largest cacti.

Take a hike in Saguaro National Park and experience the majesty of these enormous cacti, which are protected in the park. Enjoy many diverse programs, including sunset and night walks, bicycling loops, parents and tots walks, lizards, flowers and more. The park is located on either side of Tucson. Interpretive programs are free, but park entrance fees apply. www.nps.gov/sagu

— Explore the food scene in Tucson:

Tucson recently became the first city in the US to be honored with UNESCO’s Capital of Gastronomy designation. The city has a deep and multicultural food history and one way to experience that is to participate in a Tucson Food Tour. www.foodtourtucson.com

Many hotels offer water park-like fun, including pools, slides, fountains and lazy rivers. In addition, here are some other interesting and even unusual possibilities linked to specific hotels and resorts.

At Miraval Resort and Spa, an all-inclusive destination desert oasis, guests select among many diverse self-discovery and development activities. For example, don a beekeeper suit and learn about bees from a resident expert.

Or explore your creativity and experience healing in their equine program. Zip line through the fresh desert air in their adventure and challenge course or just relax at the award-winning Life in Balance Spa.

www.miravalresorts.com

At the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa, located just west of Tucson, guests can begin each day by participating in a traditional Native American ceremony. This Sonoran Desert experience is designed to inspire you to see your life from a higher perspective.

At the end of the day, as the sun sets over the desert, all guests are invited to participate in a complimentary Tequila Toast on the terrace.

www.jwmarriottstarrpass.com

Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch Resort, perched on a hill north of Tucson, is a member of Historic Hotels of America and included in the National Registry of Historic Places in Arizona. This jewel started as an elite girl's school in the 1920's and has been restored and expanded, while retaining its original elegance and beauty. Famous guests include Clark Gable, John Wayne, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.

Present day guests can enjoy a massage after a desert horseback ride or explore the fine choices of wine from the extensive wine cellar linked to their two restaurants. www.haciendadelsol.com/

So whatever your interests, you'll be able to enjoy a sunny winter break just a short flight away. Tucson and sunshine are waiting to welcome you.

Flights are available from San Francisco directly to Tucson. For complete tourism information go to: www.visittucson.org/