

Top Regional Attractions to Hit This Year in Tucson, Part One

Written by Alyssa DeMember



Whether you're new to "the Old Pueblo" or have been a die-hard Tucsonan your whole life, there is plenty that contributes to this richly cultural, fascinating city. From the luxurious Catalina Foothills to the north, to the affluent East side, to the serene West and eccentric downtown and Central Tucson, resolve to make 2017 a year of exploration in this eclectic city. Hit all the landmarks you've always been meaning to visit and open yourself up to new experiences. Here's part one of our 2017 Tucson must-do list.



Mt. Lemmon

The highest point of the Santa Catalina Mountains, Mt. Lemmon is a well-loved destination for hiking, skiing, camping, stargazing and good old-fashioned exploring. Because it is at a higher elevation, it can get pretty chilly, so prime seasons for hiking are late spring, summer and early fall. And the drive up the mountain is gorgeous as you go from desert landscape to scenic forest roads with towering evergreens decorating the rolling hills. About half way up is Windy Point, where desert begins to meet forest—stop here for beautiful views and great photo ops. Try the Butterfly Trail, about a five to seven-mile hike and gaze at magnificent views of San Pedro Valley and Alder Canyon. Seasonal wildflowers mark the path as well.

In the winter months, visitors can also check out Ski Valley at the summit. The slopes aren't gigantic, but lift tickets are more affordable than most other spots (and for Tucsonans, it's only about an hour and a half's drive north).

Of course the tiny subdivision of Summerhaven near the top of the mountain is a joy to visit at any time of year. An adorably quaint, comfortable community, Summerhaven, at 8,000 feet above sea level, is lined on either side of the road with big, luxurious looking cabins, many of which are available to rent for a few nights. Stop in the Mt. Lemmon General Store for various Arizona/Tucson souvenirs and homemade fudge, or sit down in the cozy Cookie Cabin for a warm, giant-sized cookie and a nice cup of hot cocoa.

mtlemmon.com, skithellemmon.com

La Fiesta de los Vaqueros (Tucson Rodeo)

The rodeo is a big deal in Tucson (it's almost like a holiday). Tucson Unified School District schools even close for two days to attend this event. La Fiesta de los Vaqueros began in 1925 as a three-day cowboy competition and has since grown to become a nine-day festival with nearly 60,000 attendees every year.

The country-loving occasion runs from Feb. 18-26 this year and has professional and junior rodeo competitions, barn dancing, barrel racing, food, drinks and shop stands with a variety of merchandise. Feb. 19 is "Pink Day," where fans, cowboys and cowgirls alike wear pink in support of breast cancer research. The Tucson Rodeo Parade is on Feb. 23, where more than 200 floats are on display along the one and a half-mile parade starting at Park Avenue and Ajo Way.

tucsonrodeo.com

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Tucson Festival of Books

Held on the University of Arizona campus, the Tucson Festival of Books (March 11-12) is a glorious celebration of stories spread across more genres than you can possibly imagine. Stands upon stands of book vendors are spread out along the UA Mall, including antique books, used treasures and “lost books,” classic novels, contemporary page-turners and everything in between.

From locally to internationally recognized authors in attendance every year, there are panels and workshops to suit every book lovers’ interests, as well as chances to meet and chat with your favorite writers. There are also a variety of activities for children to take part in, like the Young Author and Artist Contest.

tucsonfestivalofbooks.org

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum

The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum offers a glimpse into the incredible wildlife of the Sonoran Desert. A zoo, botanical garden, art gallery, natural history museum and aquarium all wrapped into one, visitors can see 230 species of animals and 1,200 different types of plants as well as an extensive rock and mineral collection.

Stroll through two miles of desert paths and look for animals like Gila monsters, cactus wrens, desert tortoises, coyotes, javelinas, great horned owls and dozens more. The museum also offers educational programs for children and adults, art exhibitions and other events.

desertmuseum.org



Tucson Meet Yourself

Tucson Meet Yourself is a wondrous three-day cultural festival of international food, music and dance in downtown Tucson. Every October, dozens of vendors and more than 100,000 visitors gather every year for this celebration of countries and cultures. It truly is a wonderful representation of the strong sense of community within Tucson as individuals from countless backgrounds join together to enjoy each other’s company.

Try the aebleskiver (Danish pancake balls) with raspberry jam and icing sugar, snag a Sonoran hotdog (a Tucson staple) or venture out and try a Vietnamese hotdog. In addition, visitors can taste tons of other eclectic foods like Spanish gazpacho and Peruvian salchipapas (sausage fries). Try everything from European to Native American to Asian to Caribbean and more. With about 50 or more food vendors every year, as well as more than 500 different folk artists, musicians and dancers, there are countless ways to experience the action.

The festival also puts a big focus on sustainability, with “green stations” located throughout the event offering trash, recycling and compost bins for waste.

tucsonmeetyourself.com