

*Monday, January 30th - Sunday, February 5th*

Topiary Gardens in the style of Kahlo! Saguaro's marching into the distance! Worm Salt! Awesome art from ancient central and south American cultures! Welcome to Tucson.



*Saguaros on the Douglas Spring trail.*

The first afternoon in Tucson I decided to check out the Tucson Botanical Gardens. They are near where I was staying and were featured a Frida Kahlo themed exhibit. They didn't have much of her art up, instead had exhibits talking about her art and life and then noting how the plants they had tied in. The show was a fun way to showcase local (and further south) flora in the context of what Kahlo was familiar with, painted, and kept around her

home.





*"Frida, Pink/Green Blouse" by Nickolas Muray, 1938.*



*I think these are “Bearded Cacti”.*



*Recreation of the Kahlo/Rivera garden at the Blue House.*

The exhibit was different than I expected and I ended up really liking it. Fun way to show plants with a different context.





*Spiky!*

The next day was hiking the Douglas Spring Trail on the east side of Tucson.



*The Saguaro march over the hill.*





*If you don't see this and shout, "cholla!" you clearly haven't been reading enough of my blog.*



*Afternoon hike.*

I can't recall how warm the temperature was, maybe in the mid-80's? But it felt really hot. I'm sure part of it was simply I'm out of shape, and hadn't yet re-acclimated to being in the desert, but it felt quite warm especially considering it gets 30 degrees warmer in the summer. The locals have differing reactions when asked about the summer, some shrug it off and say it's basically like winter in other parts of the country; you don't go outdoors much (although access to a pool or getting out early helps). Others just claim it's miserable.





*Tucson from the ridge above.*



*Palo Verde! These green barked shrubs are all over; I learned the name from a fellow hiker.*



The next day I went downtown in the first of many vain attempts to see the contemporary art museum (MOCA). No notice on their website, nothing in their voicemail, no notice on the door, but they were closed. I eventually learned from a person at the bar that they were between exhibits and closed for a couple of weeks. I never did get to see the place, but did visit multiple times trying to figure out if they were open or what. The experience did not leave me a fan.

Instead, I took the opportunity to wander a few blocks to downtown and poke around. There was a small barber on my way, but they were closed too (was starting to look like a theme). I found another in the heart of downtown, who could fit me in but had an hour wait. Perfect! Next door was a bar serving flights of mezcal and other Mexican beverages. "I'll take the mezcal flight, please!" "Great, that's normally served with worm salt, is that ok?" <blink> <blink>

So the salt is apparently salt, tree bark, chili and some ground up worm (a kind that grows on agave? Don't quote me on that). Apparently it's traditional, a claim I'm always cautious about in a random American bar. I'm a vegetarian these days, but that's mostly for health reasons, and when that clashes with my habit of "try weird stuff" the weird often wins. So of course I got the salt. I wasn't hugely impressed with what it added to the mezcal itself, but it was still kind of fun. And turned into a long chain of nearby fellow bar patrons saying, "wait, what is that?" and eventually (warily) ordering some for themselves (this happened three times).

The mezcal was enjoyable; my understanding is that tequila is a specific type of mezcal, kind of like bourbon is a specific type of whiskey. The flavor profiles of tequila and mezcal are very similar to me, although mezcal can be pretty varied.



*Finger Rock Trail*



On Thursday it was time for another hike, this time north of the city up the trail to Finger Rock. The trail is long and goes straight up a mountain, I just hiked up for a while and turned around. Both times I went hiking in Tucson, I'd try to estimate things so I'd return before sunset, and both times I turn around only to encounter an older desert woman powering up the trail. What are they doing up in the mountains at night?



*Hug me, Saguaro!*





*Saguaro skeletons are just as weird and lovely as the living ones.*









What struck me most about the trail was how much moisture there was. Maybe due to recent rains; the creek running down the canyon had a lot of water in it and there was plenty of brushy scrub around. After spending a couple of weeks around Joshua Tree area this seemed downright lush!



*Did you know that tarantulas molt?*

On Saturday it was time to visit the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum! There's an exhibit just inside the doors with lots of snakes and spiders and fun little animals. This female tarantula has just shed her exoskeleton so she can grow bigger! Super cool.



*If you wander through the cave you'll come across these giant bat ears you can put on to increase both your hearing and natural sense of style.*





*What a piece of work is man! (Mexican wolves).*



*Rainbow Hedgehogs...*





*Big Horned Sheep!*





*Silver Torch Cactus*



*Hermit Crab in a transparent shell: genius!*



*Outside the museum; there's a pistol range nearby but sometimes you just can't hold it that long!*



After a day learning about the desert it was time to quickly tour the Tucson Museum of Art.



*Effigy Figurine & Vessel in Form of Squash - Chorotega Culture, 500-800, Nicaragua.*

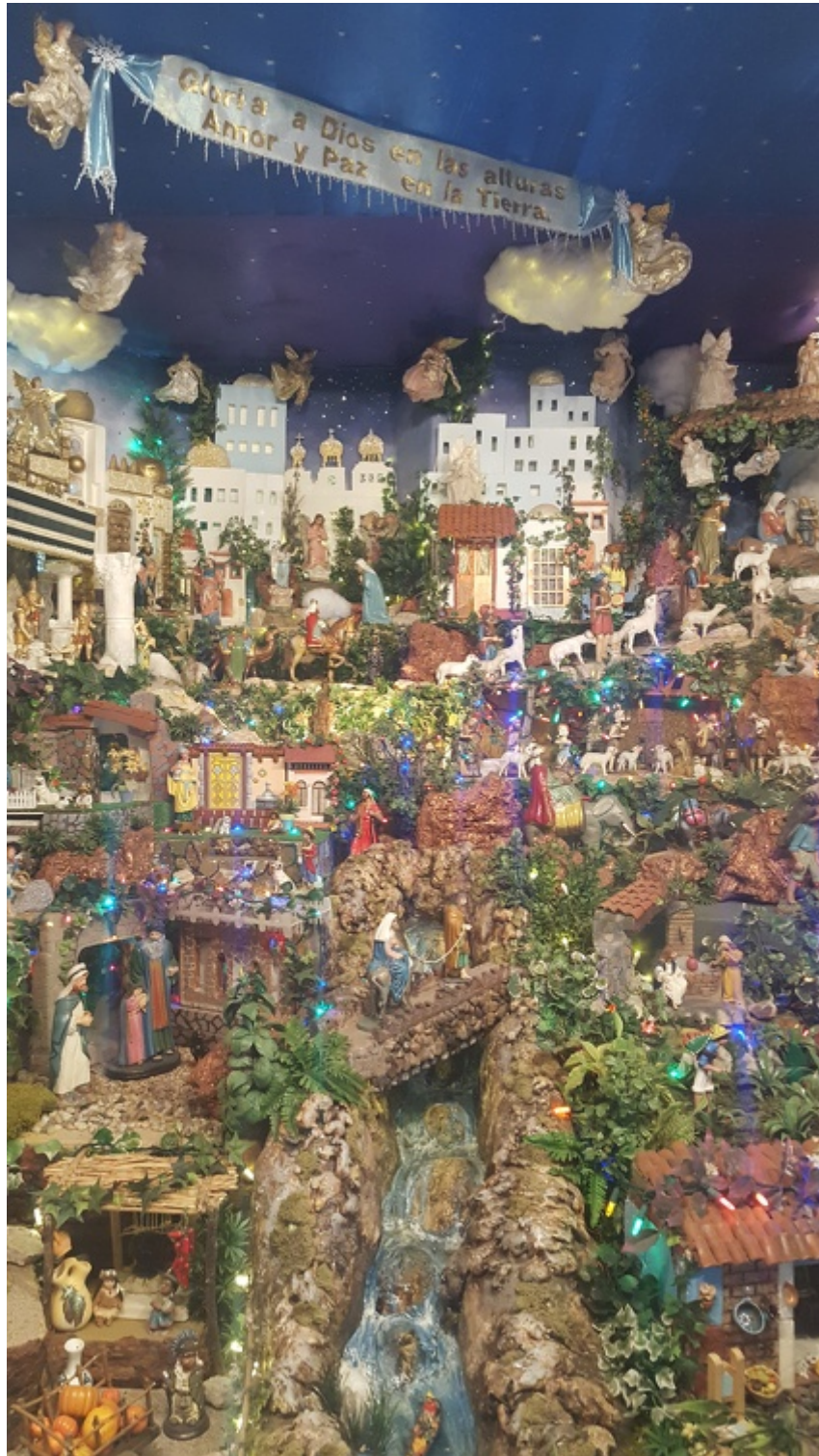


*Seated Figure with Ritual Ornamentation in front of Effigy Urn with Bat God Motif. Quimbaya Culture, 900-1200, Colombia / Cauca River Valley Tairona Culture, 900-1200, Columbia, Santa*

*Maria*

The collection of artwork and artifacts from the native peoples in Central and South America was amazing!





*El Nacimiento - A Tucson resident created this display and the Tucson Art Museum hosts it every November - May. It's a super*

*elaborate nativity (and other) scene.*



*Retablo: Mano Ponderoso – I saw this image or one very similar to it in a show in Abilene and like it then. Oil on tin, 19th century.*

I had a fun stay in Tucson. Originally I'd planned on spending a couple of weeks there, but there's an enormous gem show (the show is big, no idea about the gems) and it interfered with my ability to get cheap housing. So, after a week, it was off to Phoenix!





*Leaving Tucson (taken by Christian, one of my fabulous Airbnb hosts).*

I took some back roads up to Phoenix on Sunday and hit a few stops alongside many of my

fellow motorcyclists.





*Tom Mix Memorial.*

There's a small picnic area alongside one road with this memorial to Tom Mix, cowboy western star. After spending some time at a nearby gambling and drinking establishment, he sped through construction warnings, overturned his car and was killed by his aluminum case full of money and jewels sliding forward and breaking his neck.

Then it was off to the astounding Casa Grande!



*Casa Grande*

This was originally a four story structure, made entirely of Adobe, by the Native Americans hundreds of years ago.





It's a startling sight today; a giant adobe structure rising out of an otherwise empty plain. That's in large part because we've dammed up all the rivers so there's no local water. Originally this was situated near one of the many hundreds of miles of canals (all hand dug) built for irrigation. Apparently this village held around 2,000 people.



*Roof added to help preserve the remaining structure.*

After wandering the grounds for a while, it was time to head up to begin my next week in Phoenix.