

Desert Discoveries Part 3: Desert Pricklies

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Photos by Cherie Langlois

Prickly pear cactus is a tourist fave. Our time in the desert flies by in a sandstorm blur.

We take a scenic boat ride on Saguaro Lake (strange to see so much water – and bald eagles! – in this dry country), enjoy a night of eclectic music at the Arizona Opry (Elvis was there), visit Old Tucson movie studios (gosh, those cowboys are cute), and hike through birdwatching mecca Madera Canyon (spotted wild turkeys, lots of hummingbirds; missed the coveted Elegant Trogon).

We also participate in some less-touristy activities, like running around the neighborhood golf course at dusk looking for javelina and bobcat, only to find about 1,000 bunnies (and one pack rat) instead. Hello? Bobcats? You're totally missing out here.

We manage to squeeze in some quality time with my folks, too.

Hummingbirds adore the red flowers of the ocotillo. But the star attraction is the Sonoran desert, a rugged, prickly, sun-struck place completely unlike home.

I know people raise livestock here--we see horses and scrappy cattle--but I can't imagine my own menagerie living in this desolate country full of venomous snakes, threats of heat stroke, and spine-armored plants.

Here's just a sampling of the desert pricklies we bumped into (not literally, thank goodness!):

Arizona Barrel Cactus: These stout cacti sport hooked spines and tend to lean to the southwest. Sometimes they lean so far they fall right over.

Brown-Spined Prickly Pear: This cactus species has thin, green oblong pads with spaced clusters of long, straight spines. Juicy red prickly pear fruits make delicious candy, jam, and syrup – popular southwestern souvenirs.

Ocotillo: During dry times, these odd, tall plants look like dead, thorny sticks. When the rains come, though, they bristle all over with small green leaves. Hummingbirds adore the red flowers. This desert icon, the Saguro, is Cherie's favorite.

Velvet Mesquite: For the indigenous people here, this thorny, deciduous tree with the feathery leaves offered up a treasure trove of fuel, shelter, food, dye, medicine, and more.

Jumping Cholla: We've learned to give this bristling, many-branched cactus a wide berth on our hikes; its wickedly barbed spines are famously difficult to yank out.

Saguaro: My hands-down favorite, this desert icon can grow up to 50 feet tall and live over 150 years. It won't even branch or flower until it reaches the ripe old age of about 70!

Each year, the Tohono O'odham Indians harvest the fruit of this cactus for its tasty red pulp.

Back in Washington, I'm struck by how soft and cool everything looks: cushy green pastures, furry fir trees, puffy rain clouds.

Wet and dismal, too, but I'm trying not to dwell on that. It's still nice to be home on the farm.

~ Cherie

PS. Thanks Mom and Dad for a terrific time in the desert!

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