

Sonoran Desert National Monument & Gila Bend, AZ

Although you can't see it from the train, Gila Bend, Arizona has a famous welcome sign which reads, "Gila Bend Welcomes You; Home of 1700 Friendly People and 5 Old Crabs; Elevation 737 feet." This little town nestled in a bend of the Gila River now has closer to 2000 people, and the number of old crabs unfortunately is not recorded in the latest census. In addition to some interesting roadside sculptures and a motel with space décor, Gila Bend is a hot town in other ways – daily high temperatures exceed 105 degrees Fahrenheit all summer, and often exceed 115!

Gila Bend has been nicknamed the "Crossroads of the Southwest" due to its importance as a transportation route in the settlement, development and growth of the Great Southwest. Trails, roads and rail lines radiate out from Gila Bend like spokes on a wheel. Trails led missionaries to nearby Native American villages as early as 1699. Juan Bautista de Anza brought his party of soldiers and settlers through here en route to settle San Francisco, California. Today one of those spokes leads to the Sonoran Desert National Monument.

This mountainous preserve is administered by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Its purpose is to protect the vegetation, wildlife, and archaeological sites, rather than to attract visitors, so it offers few facilities. The Sonoran Desert National Monument contains over 487,000 acres of highly diverse desert habitat. Visitors willing to brave the elements to experience this wilderness area can hike through an extensive saguaro cactus forest or explore one of three distinct mountain ranges. You won't see crowds of people, so it is a good place to enjoy backpacking, stargazing, camping, hunting, photography and horseback riding. Several hiking and equestrian trails offer solitude and unconfined recreation, and the Monument also maintains a ten-mile route for 4-wheel drive vehicles.

After enjoying the desert's solitude, you might want to head back to the comfort of Gila Bend's space-age motel, or follow another road for further adventures.

Source(s):

http://www.americansouthwest.net/arizona/sonoran_desert/national_monument.html

http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/natmon/son_des.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonoran_Desert_National_Monument

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gila_Bend,_Arizona

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