

# Yuma Territorial Prison

Imagine yourself slaving away at hard labor in Yuma, AZ, building a new prison facility that you, yourself, will soon occupy. That's exactly what the first inmates of the Yuma Territorial Prison experienced while building their soon-to-be home. That's right, in 1876 the prison's first seven inmates actually helped build the walls, hallways, cells, and punishment rooms with their bare hands.

The Yuma Prison was not for the faint of heart. It was nicknamed "Devil's Island" for its notorious nature, and because Yuma was one of Arizona's hottest, driest, and most isolated Wild West locations. Without any form of air conditioning available, day in and day out inmates suffered the blazing heat with little to no air circulation in their small 3x3 meter cell blocks. Six men squeezed in like sardines inside each cell, with only one bucket for bathing. A rule allowing prisoners to bathe only once a week, combined with a lack of ventilation, resulted in a constant gagging odor. To make matters even worse, the inmates dealt with constant visitations from creepy crawlers such as lice, bed bugs, and roaches.

Disobedient prisoners were punished by being chained and locked inside a cage located in the middle of a pitch black cell room, appropriately called the "Dark Room." It was an extended, and very eerie, "time-out" for Yuma prisoners to reflect on their deviant behavior. Furthermore, those who tried to escape and were recaptured, faced the classic ball and chain locked to their ankles to hinder any future runaway schemes. During the 33 years of the prison's operation, over 3,000 prisoners were held within its walls, including 29 women.

Despite the often grim and unbearable living conditions of the Yuma Territorial Prison, it was in fact a humane institute for its time. Aside from Arizona's unforgiving climate, the

inmates were actually treated in a civilized manner. Schooling was available, and many inmates learned to read, write and do basic math while in prison. They even had access to a prison library and quality medical treatment! Many upstanding Yuma citizens didn't have access to such luxuries and began calling the prison the "Country Club on the Colorado River."

In spite of the prison's many good and infamous reputations, it was no doubt a state-of-the-art facility for its time, from its amenities to its strict disciplinary code. It has been restored and opened as a museum for the public by the Arizona State Park system. If you'll look to the south our train actually cuts directly through the prison's cell blocks giving us an up-close look at the grounds the prisoners were bound to - a small glimpse at the celebrated life of an American Wild West criminal.

## Source(s):

<http://www.pr.state.az.us/parks/YUTE/index.html>

<http://www.arizona-leisure.com/yuma-territorial-prison.html>

<http://www.azpbs.org/arizonastories/seasontwo/yumaterritorial.htm>

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