

# A PARK LESS TRAVELED

Border attraction offers great elbow room by Tyson Hugie

**“Where should we meet up on Saturday?”**

**“Why?”**

**“Just so I can do a little mapping on times and distances.”**

**“So Why?”**

That’s how a planning conversation about this trip could have gone. Because, of all the places our group could have picked to rendezvous before venturing into the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, we picked the town of Why, Arizona.

The term “town” is used very loosely, since it’s home to only about 100 people. And, as we discovered, its only restaurant (Granny Mac’s Kitchen) is closed on Saturday—the one day of the week that we’d be visiting. Guess we’ll have to sample Granny’s culinary creations on a future trip.

I’ve visited Why before—about five years ago, actually—and had learned a little about how its name came to be. The intersection of State Routes 85 and 86 originally created a Y shape, but for safety reasons were later transformed to meet at a T. It was here in Why, at the Why Not Travel Store, where James Lee of Six Speed Blog and I awaited arrival of Jason from Driven for Drives. In addition to snacks and drinks (though I was disappointed the nacho cheese machine was out of cheese), the Why Not store also sells Mexican automobile insurance policies for travelers who are on their way south of the

border. A liability-only policy runs \$35 per day, and “full coverage” rates vary.

We didn’t stick around long, because we had turf to cover a little south of Why. Tucked into the far southern reaches of Arizona—literally touching the international border with Mexico—is a special place that is remote in geography and picturesque in landscape. Even with Arizona’s weather at its prime, when tourism should be at its peak, we had the park largely to ourselves. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument was established 82 years ago, in 1937, and sees just over a quarter million visitors per year. By comparison, another of Arizona’s parks, the Grand Canyon, sees about seven million visitors per year. I much prefer visiting the lesser-traveled park units.

Now with three cars in tandem—my 2013 Acura ILX, James’ tester Corolla Hatchback, and Jason’s 2004 Mazda 6—we visited the Kris Eggle Visitor Center, named in honor of a 29-year-old Border Patrol agent who was killed in the line of duty in 2002 by a Mexican drug smuggler. The dangers of being so close to the border are very real, and even today, visitors are encouraged to travel in groups and only visit during the day.

A 15-minute overview film taught a little about the terrain and its history. I noticed that a pair of hikers inquired with the park ranger about getting a token for completing one of the hikes, and later learned that any visitor who hikes five or more miles in the monument is eligible. We also saw a 7- or 8-year-old take

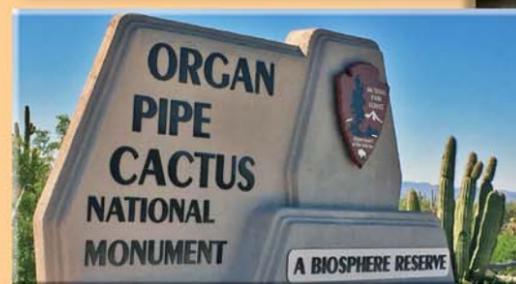
a “ranger oath” with his right arm extended. Traditions like that make visits to the parks memorable.

The Ajo Mountain Trail was the main attraction for us, and despite the fact that it was rugged and unpaved for most of the 21-mile loop, we knew we had to check it out. Per-car admission was \$20, but to me it was worth it to be able to say I’ve “been there, done that.”

I led the way and kicked up a pretty good cloud of dust for my followers while we stayed in touch by walkie-talkies. The trail extends eastward to the foothills and curves up to a panoramic lookout over the terrain. The Sonoran Desert, we had learned earlier in the film at the visitor center, is significantly one of the most “green” types of desert, and even in summer displays a wide variety of plant life. One of those plants, the Organ Pipe Cactus for which the Monument was named, is native to the area and highly prevalent.

Since amenities immediately near the visitor center were few, we decided to backtrack to the town of Ajo for a bite to eat at Agave Grill before splitting ways for the evening. James gave his hamburger a little more pizzazz by adding avocado, bacon and a fried egg. Jason and I couldn’t help but play copycat and order the same thing. The owner of the restaurant later came out to let us know how much the kitchen staff had enjoyed putting together our custom-ordered burger creations.

But the next time I visit, it’ll be on a non-Saturday so I can see if Granny Mac’s food compares. ■



**Why not start your trip in Why, Arizona?**  
 Hike five miles or more at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and you’ve earned yourself a token to commemorate your accomplishment.  
 Cab of an old pickup truck made into a fountain—with music playing from inside it!  
 Small town one-stop international services—need insurance while in Mexico? A place to store your car? Or your gun?  
 Dinner spot at Agave Grill in Ajo, Arizona, and a burger that wasn’t even on the menu.  
 Not necessarily the best road trip for low clearance and low-profile tires!

