

Feel like royalty

Historic Copper Queen Hotel 10 miles from Mexico

By Tyson Hugie



The mining boomtowns of rural Arizona gave rise to some of our state's richest culture. Our November-December issue showcased a recent trip to Oatman in the northwest part of the state. Prospectors in the 1860s discovered gold there, and even though the mining industry has since phased out, the town lives on as a tourism destination.

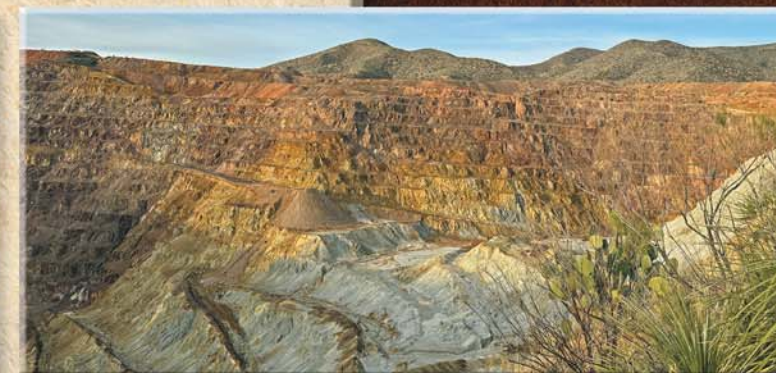
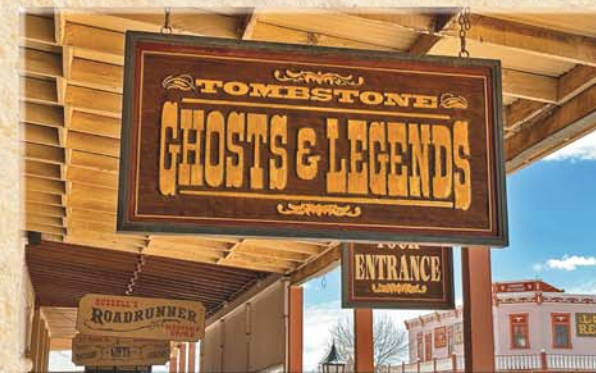
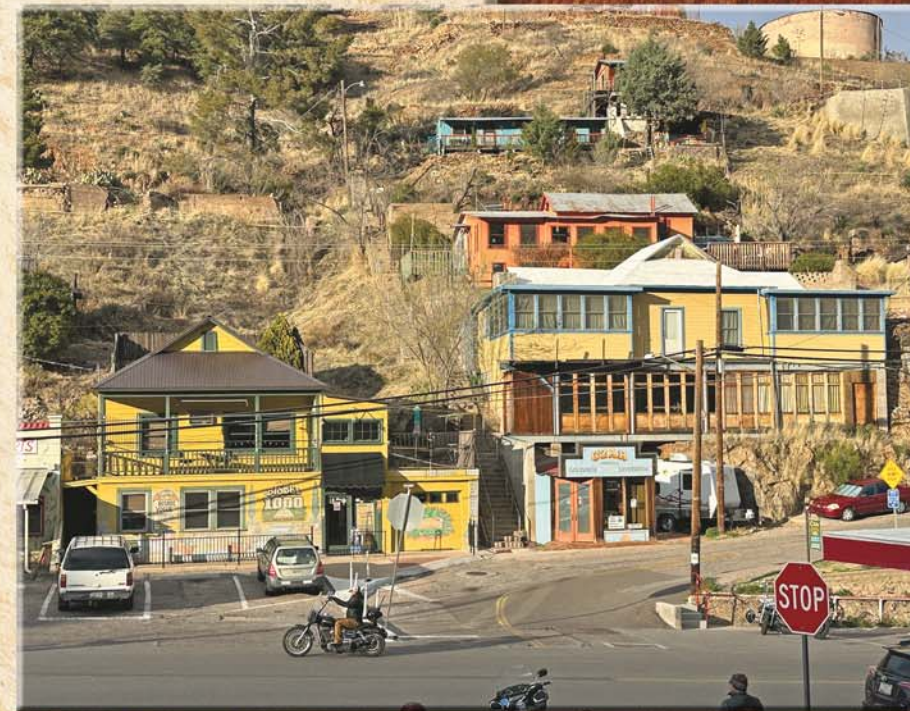
This time, we look at a parallel town at the opposite end of the state: Bisbee is located just ten miles north of the Mexican border in the Mule Mountains of southeastern Arizona. The area was initially settled in 1880 as a home base for the gold, silver, and copper extraction activities going on nearby.

Over 120 years later, Bisbee is still alive and well, even though mining operations have scaled back. There are only 5,000 residents who call Bisbee home now, but the town plays host to many annual events that bring thousands more to visit.

Ten years ago, I met a like-minded road-tripper named Jason from southern New Mexico and we took our first "joint" (coordinated) road trip involving a lunch meet-up in Bisbee. In the ensuing years, we've taken over 20 other trips together—some involving multi-day drives to far-away places like the Arctic Circle in Alaska and Death Valley in California. It seemed only fitting that we would commemorate our ten years of travels by returning to the place where it all started, and with that, Bisbee made its way onto our travel calendars in mid-March.

I made the roughly three-and-a-half-hour trek from Phoenix in a tried and trusty 1994 Acura Legend (the same vehicle, incidentally, that I drove to Bisbee in 2013). My route took me through Tombstone where I happened to catch the tail end of a parade before grabbing a taco salad at the Crystal Palace Saloon. By the time I arrived in Bis-

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bee, it was early afternoon, and the area was bustling with activity. The rumble of motorcycle engines was constant; as it turns out, there were a number of biker groups in town for special events.

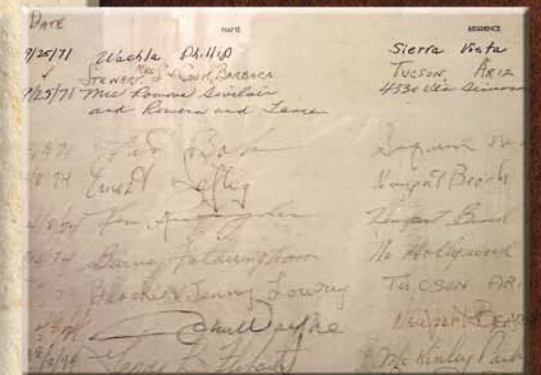
For an authentic lodging experience, we booked rooms at the Copper Queen Hotel, located just a block off the main road and completed in 1902 (the same year Bisbee was incorporated as a city) as a place for dignitaries and investors in the nearby mining operations. The lobby today is decorated in period-correct red velvet seating and wood furnishings, including a piano. I was assigned to room 216 and presented a key (indeed, a hotel with a traditional metal key!) upon check-in.

Hanging at the end of the hallway was a framed guest log containing the names of famous visitors from over the years. Included in the log was famed Western actor John Wayne, who stayed at the Copper Queen in 1974. A fireplace and a chess set in the common area added to the old-time ambience.

Jason and I made the ten-minute walk to Contessa's Cantina for some Mexican food a little while later. Visible across the way from our patio seating was a large concrete staircase climbing the hillside, which reminded me that Bisbee is home to the "Bisbee 1000 (The Great Stair Climb)," a 5K run event that requires participants to climb 1,034 stairs. The hilly terrain in and around Bisbee makes it the perfect venue for a physical challenge of that sort. Back at our hotel home base, we stepped into the saloon to enjoy the upbeat music before calling it a night.

As much fun as Bisbee can be with all the hustle and bustle of tourists and motorcycles zooming around town, my favorite experience in Bisbee was the serene solitude of dawn the following morning. The Copper Queen does not

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have on-site parking, and the streets were packed when we had arrived in town, so we had been forced to stash our cars in a \$30-per-night lot about a half mile up the road. While easy to use via web-based payments, the overnight permit expired at 6:00 in the morning, which made for a very early wake-up call.

That wake-up call turned out to be a blessing in disguise: When we walked up to get the cars at 5:45 am, we noticed that the city was pin-drop quiet and there was virtually no activity going on. This opened the door for us to do some exploration on our own, including staging some early-light photos with my Acura and Jason's 2004 Mazda6 parked right in the middle of Tombstone Canyon Road. That's not something you can do at rush hour!

Just two miles down the road is the Bisbee Breakfast Club (BBC) in Lowell, and Jason and I decided to hit that up for a bite before parting ways. Lowell is not much more than just a single street lined with vintage cars and old buildings, but it felt like something out of a mid-20th century movie set. I ordered a California omelet, which hit the spot. One of the highlights of the trip was discovering that a local artist had made an image from our 2013 Bisbee trip (pulled from my travel blog) into an abstract painting, which was hanging on the wall above the BBC counter. The staff members got a kick out of it when we showed them the original photo.

Whether for a copper mine tour, for seeking paranormal activity at a historic landmark hotel—yes, it has long been reported that the Copper Queen Hotel is haunted—or for just enjoying a trip back in time, Bisbee is a prime spot and only a 200-mile jaunt from the Phoenix area. Maybe we'll make another trip in the future to participate in that 1,000-stair climb. I need to work off the calories from that omelet, anyway. ■

