

A run to the border, with a side of time travel

By Joe Sage / Photos: Kathy O'Connell, Tucson; The Frederick Collection; Joe Sage

We first heard of Ruby, Arizona from a post on social media, by an Australian who seems to know more about America's historic sites, lore and treasures than just about anybody anywhere. Intrigued, we made a mental note to visit when we had some time and a good vehicle for the trip.

Ruby is just about three miles from the Mexican border at its closest and not far from Nogales as the buzzard flies. Maps suggest a couple of ways to get there via I-19 (from Tucson to Nogales), the farther of which looks shorter, but takes longer due to its twists and turns; it also appears that option is mostly dirt and gravel. The route we chose, West Arivaca Road from Amado, is paved to within a

few miles of Ruby. An original ridge-topping frontier stagecoach trail with curves and hills galore, it's a great driving road.

We ended up with a perfect machine for the trip—the 2024 Hyundai Tucson Limited Hybrid AWD (see previous feature), with on-demand active all-wheel-drive, great for all conditions, 8.3 inches of ground clearance if needed, and rated at 37 mpg.

With border conditions so much in the news lately, we called the San Cruz County Sheriff's Office for an advisory, as a lot of the route seems on the remote side, on the map. They got back to us quickly and indicated that all was good—no incidents of any note, though they mentioned that they

are mostly elsewhere lately, facing bigger issues.

We've driven in Tucson in the Hyundai Tucson multiple times. This time, we just passed through to pick up and drop off a co-adventurer. (We neglected, however, to grab the requisite photo of our Hyundai Tucson with a Tucson landmark or sign.)

Ruby is a compelling attraction, an entire mining town full of history and largely intact, with various protections and restorations underway. The property is under the care of charming, hospitable and knowledgeable caretakers, and is open to visitors Thursdays through Sundays, with a prior online reservation required to stop by. Entry is \$15 a head—and you will need to bring cash folding money.

Setting out from Phoenix at the break of dawn would be a plus, but we started mid-morning—a couple of hours to Tucson and a couple more down to Ruby—arriving mid-afternoon. We had brought a picnic lunch and shared it with them, first, along with great conversation. By then, the sun was dip-

ping below the hills. Thus our first visit was less of an immersion—which the place well deserves—and more of a look-around.

But they provide a solid overview. Here's a look at Ruby's background and activities:

RUBY: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first Europeans to visit the Ruby area were Spanish conquistadors in the late 1500s. In the 19th century, the region was referred to as "Oro Blanco," or white gold, after a distinctive light colored strain. Later, as colonists moved west, there was an influx of adventurers, mountain men, ranchers and miners. The first strike in the Montana vein was in the late 1870s, and by the turn of the century, the town of Ruby had become the largest mining camp in the area. Site of fortunes made and lost and two famous double homicides, Ruby was once the largest lead and zinc producing mine in the state of Arizona. Our museum houses artifacts from mining days, plus photos of what Ruby was like when 1,200 people lived near the mine at the height of its production.

For more on Ruby's history, they recommend the book Mining, Mayhem and Murder. Copies can be bought on site from the caretaker. And the website has a link to a great 29-page booklet, The

Photo: Joe Sage

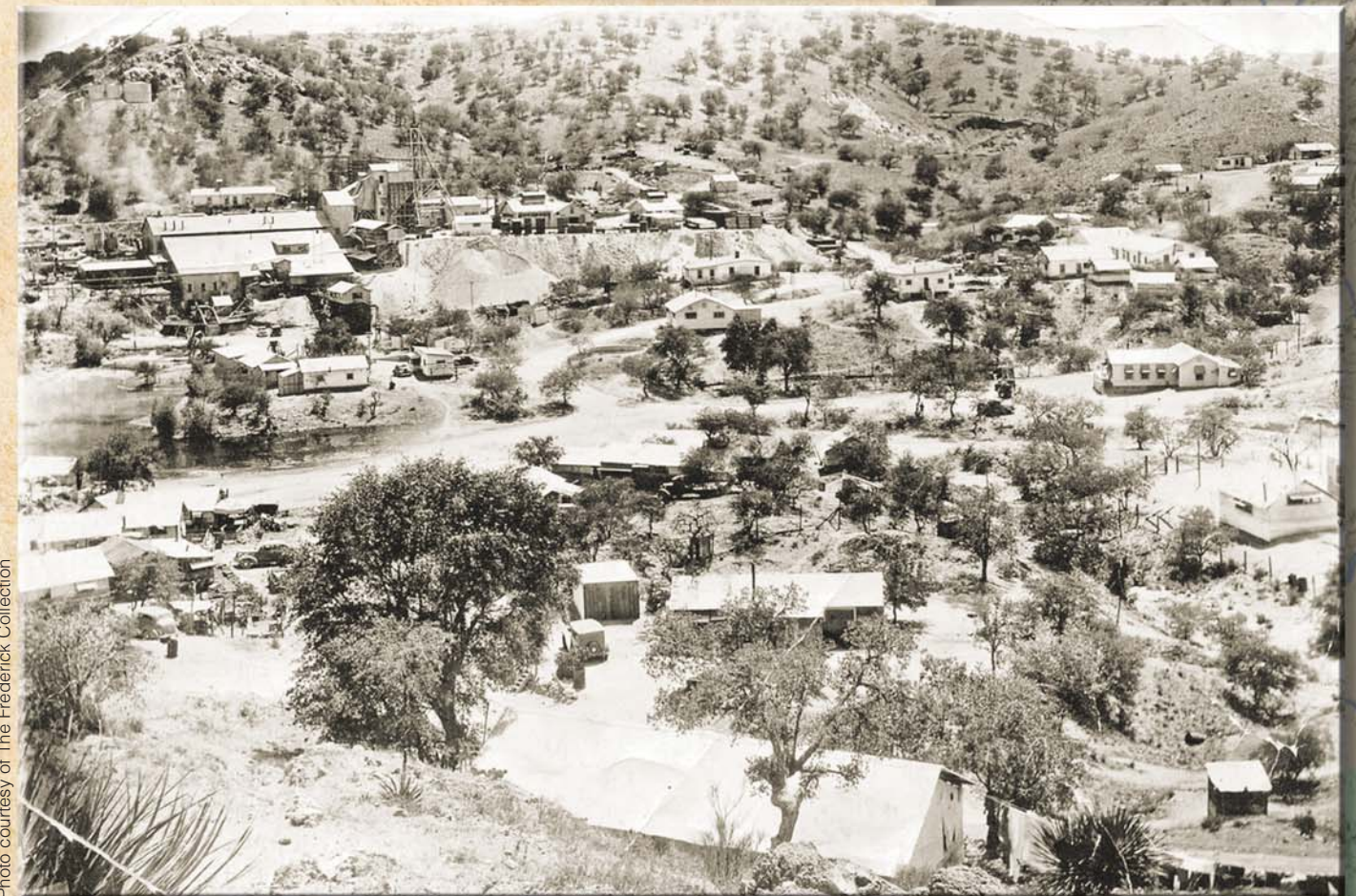


Photo courtesy of The Frederick Collection

Private Life of Ruby, Mining Ghost Town, prepared for the Arizona History Convention.

RUBY: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION

Ruby was approved for listing with the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. The property owners have started a historic preservation project to restore a small part of the old town to some of its original form.

The Arizona State Parks Board provided Ruby with a historic preservation grant in 1993 to begin this restoration. That initial phase focused on re-establishing the perimeter fences and stabilizing the remaining historic buildings. In 2007, the Southwestern Foundation awarded Ruby a historic preservation grant to do extensive stabilization of the School, Warehouse and Courthouse. Work on this phase, including a new front wall in the School House, began in November, 2009.

Since then, Ruby achieved non-profit 501(c)3 status for its restoration foundation, the Ruby Mines Restoration Project [EIN 36-4661715]. This allows Ruby to receive donations and apply for historic preservation grants to carry out restoration and stabilization.

Ruby has a wish list, if you can help:

- Front end loader
- Small tractor

- Cement mixer
- Corrugated tin
- Water harvest tanks
- Lumber
- Wood treatment material
- Pot belly stoves
- Antiques, circa 1900-1940

RUBY: ECOSYSTEM PRESERVATION

Ruby has worked with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to better understand and protect the area's wildlife. A big-game fence was constructed around the perimeter to allow access for wildlife and help protect the property's ecosystem. This fence allowed ash and many other trees to mature in an area impacted by livestock overgrazing. It is now a forest with a drainage system continuing down the valley. From riparian areas to rocky hillsides, caverns to crests, Ruby provides critical habitat for migrating birds, and year-round protection for all manner of desert creatures. Read about how Ruby is currently being used as a base camp for Round River Conservation Studies here.

A colony of Mexican Free Tail Bats inhabits Ruby's abandoned mine shafts from May/June to September each year. Estimates of the colony

range from 90,000 to as high as 150,000 animals, representing a nightly appetite for up to a 1/2 ton of insects. This is considered a maternal colony and they produce the young in June and leave for parts south in late August. Their nocturnal schedule varies with storm, wind and insect life.

You're invited to join us at Ruby, evenings spring through fall, to watch the bats emerge at dusk to feed. This is a stunning standalone moment, or you can head to the viewing area from your campsite before dark to settle in for the show. You can keep updated on when they return on the website or Facebook.

A RELAXING TIME IN RUBY, ARIZONA

As a privately owned desert landscape of over 350 acres, Ruby offers a highly specialized, intimate experience for those drawn to its history and mystery. And there is so much more. Here's some what you can expect to do once you arrive:

Tour the ghost town; stargaze (bring a telescope!); watch 150,000 migratory bats emerge to feed; take photos; birdwatch; go barefoot; mountain bike; watch bikers tour Ruby; paddle board; put up a hammock and test it with a nap; read a copy of Mining, Mayhem and Murder; explore the museum; and check out the cemetery.

Ruby also makes a fine base camp for other

adventures. Nearby highlights include Coronado National Forest (our backyard); Sycamore Canyon; Montana Peak; California Gulch; Arivaca Lake; and Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge in Arivaca.

Ruby is at an elevation of 4500 feet. The bright days are fabulous year-round, and the best way to enjoy your visit with us is come prepared for the landscape of a desert ghost town. Our personal recommendations include sunscreen, a brimmed hat, comfortable walking shoes or hiking boots for gravel trails and paths, a water bottle and plenty of extra water (the location itself operates on very limited rainwater only), long sleeves, long pants, snacks and chapstick, if grilling, bring charcoal.

Dogs and responsible pet owners are welcome. Do bring a leash and biodegradable waste bags, to clean up after your pet and dispose of waste in the outhouses. No plastic, please.

All trash and food waste must be packed in, packed out in this leave-no-trace environment.

ARIVACA AND AMADO

Unplanned high points on our route to Ruby included Arivaca and Amado (at Arivaca Junction, exit 48 from I-19). Heading in, we were running late, though we stopped at Arivaca to take a few photos of the cottonwoods, still in brilliant fall color in

mid-December. On the way out, we stopped again. As the sign below notes, Arivaca is the oldest inhabited townsite in Arizona (thought to have been a Pima or Tohono O'odham village). The enticing nature of Arivaca Road is confirmed by a great many motorcycles outside the restaurants here.

On the way in, exiting I-19, you may barely notice a Dollar General, auto shop and small market as you zig and zag to West Arivaca Road and the route to Ruby. But on the way out, the sun now down, something irresistible was staring us in the face—the Longhorn Grill and Saloon. Its cattle skull entry sets the stage, with many more surprises inside (that snake does not bite, at least not lately). We grabbed for an impromptu dinner here, where both the food and service were top notch, and the staff very friendly. This is surely a "welcome back" spot worth its own second visit.

Our route was perfect. However, there's also a route in from the west side, not much longer from Tucson, also passing through Arivaca, appearing to include more open two-lane and about half the twisty-turny distance of our route—a pro for some people, a con for others. For variety's sake, we might try that next time. Maybe just one way, as we'd hate to miss another stop at the Longhorn.

Visit www.rubyaz.com for more information or to sign up for your visit. ■



Photo: Kathy O'Connell, Tucson



Photos: Longhorn Grill entry and cautionary sign: Kathy O'Connell, Tucson; oldest bar and snake: Joe Sage