

Two cool places to see are diagonally opposite across the broad river valley that is Tucson. (Catalina Mountains to the north, picturesque eroded volcanic Tucson Mts to west, distant Santa Ritas to the south, and Rincon Mts to the east.)

Nearest to you is the San Xavier Mission, built by Father Kino in the 1700s and recently restored to rather dazzling brilliance by Italian conservationists who discovered that prickly pear juice was one of the secret ingredients to bind the pigment to the plaster of the interior walls. It's a working Catholic parish on the Tohono O'odham (Toe-ho-no AW-aw-tum) reservation. Go south on your frontage road, right on 22nd to the turnoff for Mission Road, and go left, or south again, on Mission. Drive several miles, past Valencia Road and onto the reservation, and turn at the sign for the mission. It's half a mile down. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, there may be vendors with "popovers" or fry bread cooking over mesquite fires. That's a very substantial meal, if you get it with red chile (lethal stains, though) or green chile (safer for your tee shirt). Paul Staley, our new tenor, says the Mission is one of his favorite places on earth. Picture it with green cultivated fields around it, as it was until the 50's when the water table was pumped too low to support agriculture without irrigation.

Up on the Northeast side of Tucson is Sabino Canyon, a deep cleft in the Catalina Mountains with running water, greenery, and cactus growing up the hillsides. It's a delight to walk, and even better to see from the tram that goes up to the end of the paved road. You can take the tram to the end, and hike down on the Telegraph Trail. Or just get out at one of the higher stops, and lie on the big smooth rocks and wade in the cold water. There's a charge, but it's worth it. You can get there (check at your hotel) by taking Speedway or Grant all the way east to Tanque Verde Road, going left or north on Tanque Verde until a left turn on Sabino Canyon Road. Almost no other spot shows such a rich and exciting close-up of the mountains and the lush vegetation. It puts the desert up vertically so you can see more.

Speaking of which, bring allergy meds! The palo verde trees will be explosions of yellow bloom right now. There's a lot of pollen in the desert spring, and my personal belief is that all desert pollen has microscopic thorns.

Very near your hotel is a little unique place good to visit at twilight -- El Tiradito Shrine. It's the only shrine to an individual buried in unconsecrated ground known to be in the US. The story is told on a plaque at the site. It's almost directly across the freeway from your hotel, at the south edge of the Convention Center. Ask the desk clerk how to get to El Minuto Cafe. It's a very good example of the Blanket O' Cheese Mexican-American cuisine -- you guys are young enough to eat a cheese crisp without your arteries simply slamming shut. The shrine is next door to El Minuto, on the other side of their parking lot. So many candles have been burned there that the ground is simply saturated with wax, and little tapers flicker here and there in the wall and on some wrought iron racks. It's touching. You could light candles and pray for professional advancement.

The shape note singers meet at a co-housing development off First Avenue. You'll cross Euclid on your way to the University. If you follow it north, it becomes First before Grant Road. Whoever drops you off to sing could continue all the way to the end of First Ave up in the foothills of the Catalinas, winding into residential streets, and take a hike into Pima Canyon. It's not as wonderful as Sabino, crossing some hot exposed area before it goes into the canyon, but you do see cacti growing there that just don't happen in other places, and a good view across miles and miles of blue mountains and valleys, all the way into Mexico.

Another sunset spot: Gates Pass. It's at the west end of Speedway in the Tucson Mountains. I think it's more scenic to take 6th Street, which becomes St Mary's on crossing the freeway, and then becomes Anklam Road before it joins Speedway. You go into the low mountains through stands of saguaros and up to the crest at the pass. On the right, there is a park, mostly consisting of a parking lot, a couple of picnic tables, a stony hillside, and a rock structure. It is a spectacular spot to watch the sun go down over Avra Valley and the next mountain ranges to the west. Look to the southwest and you will see a peak standing up from the Baboquivari Range, on the reservation. That is the home of I'itoi (EE-ee-toy), the Elder Brother God of the O'odham. You can watch hawks circling, listen to the silence, and if you stand near a saguaro, you will be amazed to hear how the wind thrums in its short stubby thorns.

And you have handily memorized Cafe Poca Cosa, which is in a nondescript high rise downtown hotel, on Broadway I think, but is the opposite of nondescript. Run by the fabulous Suzanne and her natty father with the beret, it serves huge plates of absolutely delicious nouvelle cuisine Mexican fare. Carla and Jerry and I all got sampler plates with tastes of their different entrees. And the Margarita that was so poetic was made with Chinaco Anejo tequila, 3 Generaciones Ora, if I deciphered my scribbled note correctly.

I hope you love Tucson. There is nowhere else like it. It is like living on the moon -- always either hot or cold, and unbelievably dry, and just strange. Wear sunscreen and drink water and bring a jacket because once the sun goes down, the temperature plummets.