

## February 2008: Rodeo Days 2008

Tucson has a local holiday that gets some businesses and most public schools time off for the third Thursday and Friday of February - La Fiesta De Los Vaqueros. Or Rodeo Days!



Now, we've been to the Rodeo before, and we may go again some time, and that time will be the time (if any) that we post pictures of us at the Rodeo. So most of the time, like this year, what Rodeo Days mean to us is time off from school. So I took time off from work, so we could do something cool during Rodeo Days!

## Snow on Mt. Lemmon

**First Day: Thursday.** Late morning, we pack a lunch and head to the local cool spot - [Mount Lemmon](#). Late winter in Tucson is the time of the winter rains, which means snow on the majestic Santa Catalina mountains. It had rained a fair bit in January, and as recently as last weekend, so we had every expectation of finding snow on Mt. Lemmon. However, as we got into the pine trees, past Windy Point, past Palisades, and very little snow left on the ground, we realized that the hope of finding enough to play in was dim.

Just outside of Summerhaven, we decided to stop for lunch. There was still some snow on the ground, and we managed to scrape up enough for some snowballs, but mostly, it was munching our sandwiches while shivering in a cold wind.



A few years ago, at our local Fry's supermarket, I found a 6-pack of Jolt Cola. Which was supposed to have disappeared (although it seems to still be around [in a different format](#)). This is the second to last can, consumed at this lunch.



After lunch, we continued on toward Summerhaven, intending to make the most of a disappointing day. Now, the road to Ski Valley is on the way, and Ski Valley isn't very far in, so we decided to look in on it, just to be game. When we did, we found the slopes were still quite snowy, but apparently not soft and fun enough to attract many skiers. However, the road on up past Ski Valley is in a deep cleft, and the snow was still in there, along with a lot of families and sledding kids. So we walked up past the sledding action, and found a spot on the side of the road where there was still a lot of untarnished snow. We proceeded to build a "Snow Steve":



**Steve is a cat (if you hadn't guessed).  
Note the resemblance.**

**The idea was to build a snow figure as tall as Faith. I think we succeeded. Here is the snow character from the left and right.**



The clouds were blowing overhead pretty quickly. We had heard that there was a chance of rain today, but since there had been no sign down in the valley, we weren't particularly concerned. But the clouds were heavy, it was getting dark, and we heard a siren back down the road, kind of like a weather warning. I wasn't too keen on trying to drive back down the windy Mt. Lemmon road in the snow, so we hurried up and

went back down to the parking lot. But when we got there, it didn't look so bad, so I figured we ought to just go on into Summerhaven, because we wouldn't be much worse off there than we were here, if it really was threatening to snow.

Summerhaven is a "town" (with full-time residents, but not much infrastructure - no gasoline, no groceries, etc.) at the top of Mt. Lemmon. In times past, there was a Alpine Lodge on one side of the street. During the Fire on Mt. Lemmon, several years ago, a lot of the buildings burned down. The Lodge was one of them. In its place, the Mt. Lemmon Community Center was built. Here we are on the verandah of the Community Center, with Turkey Run full of snowmelt just below.





**A better view of Turkey Run. Not so much of Faith.**

**The creek runs under the road under a fancy new bridge. A view of more of Summerhaven beyond. These are all new buildings.**



**The big attraction of Summerhaven is the Mt. Lemmon Cafe, which serves several different kinds of handmade pies. Unfortunately, we didn't know they closed at 4:00 (!!), and had already spent the afternoon building Snow Steves and examining the new Community Center (and using the facilities). So we didn't get our pies. We settled for**

giant chocolate chip cookies at the Cookie Cabin further down the street, with a warm common room, a nice gas fire, a big "State Farm Is NOT A Good Neighbor" sign (apparently unsatisfactory coverage for fire damage), and some of the other few guests on the mountain this afternoon.

It was time to leave. So down we went, with the threat of snowy roads dropping as we did. We *did* pause at Windy Point for an obligatory snapshot. Tucson is visible in the haze beyond the nearer peaks, the better part of an hour from this location.



## Saguaro National Park (West)

Second day: Friday. Jerri is in pursuit of another stamp for her National Parks Passport book. We have already visited Saguaro National Monument (East) (as documented [here](#)), so today, the long-laid plans to visit the West part of it ([check it out](#)). I didn't think there *was* a visitor's center on the west side, since the east side is the "Monument". Silly me, thinking the Federal Government would pass up a chance to collect visitor fees! And not only was there a different stamp, but she got a special "75th Anniversary" stamp, *and* a green "Cactus" stamp! Plus we purchased our "Interagency Annual Pass" for activities we hope to do this summer (stay tuned!). And watched a slide presentation. Interesting how the double standard works - the Park Service can be up in arms and hyperventilating with moral outrage if a Christian puts a book in the Grand Canyon gift shop suggesting that the Canyon was cut by receding floodwaters - but it's perfectly okay for Your Tax Dollars to pay for an Officially Sanctioned slide show of how the Native Americans view the sacred desert, how we came out of the earth and will return to it, how the saguaros are people, and so forth.

The East Monument is bigger, has more environment zones, includes real mountain peaks, is better developed. The West Park has a higher density of cacti, and... well... *feels* more like Tucson, with craggy volcanic hills and washboarded dirt roads. Here's a view of that dense Saguaro forest from the visitor center.



Like the East Monument, the West Park has a loop road. On this loop road are three popular "easy" stops. We stop at each one.

**Desert Discovery Nature Trail.** Pretty nice little paved trail, with the usual little signs for what plant you are looking at. One "unusual" thing we noted was the abundance of pencil cholla. I never saw so much, and Faith picked up on my amazement, and suggested that they could tell when I was coming and would "sproing" up!





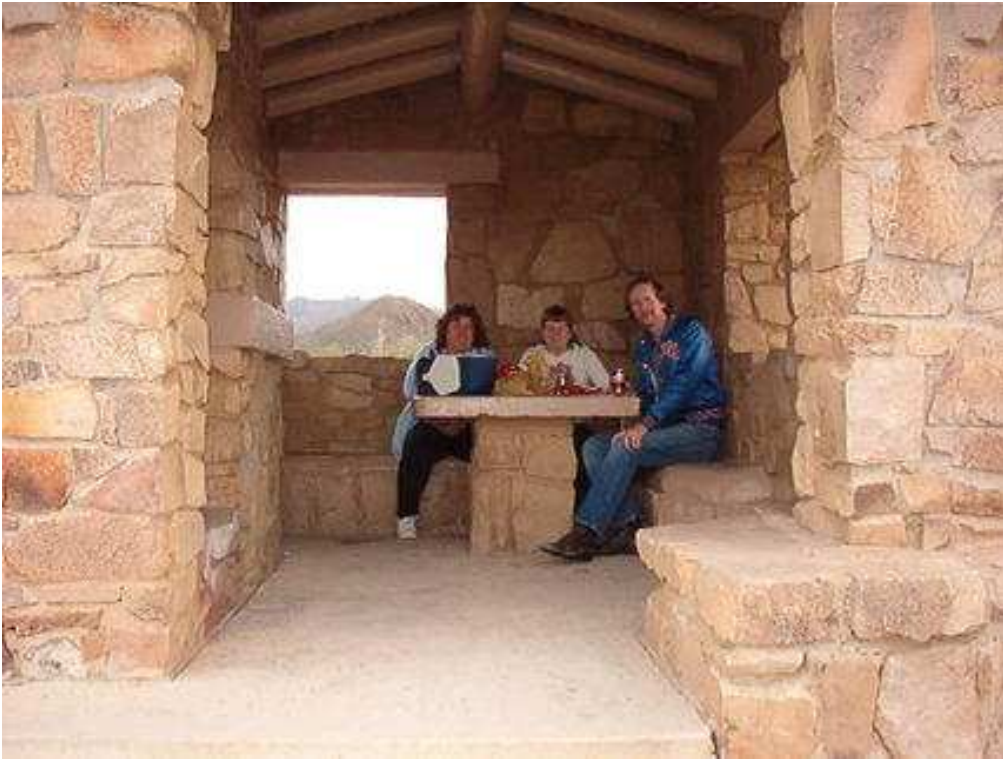
Here's a funny saguaro with two arms at the very top, like bunny ears!



Several giant saguaros had arms that had obviously twisted down from their weight. The natural inclination for the plant is for the arms to grow upward in the same direction as the parent stalk. Faith thought this one looked like a gorilla, with its two massive arms dragging on the ground, as if it were walking on its knuckles.

**Signal Hill.** By now, it was 1:30, and people's tummies were grumbling. We decided to have our lunch at the Signal Hill picnic ground. This is a pretty nice little picnic area, with little shelters built by the [CCC](#). Here we are in the more enclosed one, that looks like it might have had a functional fireplace in the past (and I drink off the last can of

Jolt!).



The guide didn't explain how "Signal Hill" got its name. Seems to me I've heard that this relatively small bump was used by the U.S. Army as a heliograph signalling post back in the cavalry days. Its real attraction now is for the Hohokam Indian petroglyphs at the top.



**Valley View Overlook.** After a nice little half-mile hike up some very nice, well-kept path, a saddle point between two peaks affords a tremendous view of the Tucson desert to the west and north.



Faith and I climb the nearer peak, and take a picture of Mommy resting on one of the benches down there. The peak on the other side is much more impressive than this one, but we don't have all day, and we dodged enough cactus and catclaw bush and small but VERY prickly palo verde trees to get to this one.

The view is really tremendous. We can see Baboquivari and [Kitt Peak](#) (which Faith and her classmates visited just three days ago), Silverbell Peak, Picacho Peak, and a host of other mountain ranges off in the distance. It is a bit cloudy, but not dusty or hazy.



**Faith can touch the top of Picacho Peak from here!**



## Valley of the Moon (not really)

Third day: Saturday. We go by the [Valley of the Moon](#). Unfortunately, it is closed. It doesn't look like it is open very much. I know there is concern among the interested parties for the survival of this unique Tucson fixture, but I was hoping we would see it before it reached the edge of survival. Maybe it's too late. We will try again.



Instead, we find a little park nearby at the end of Tucson Boulevard, where it ends at the Rillito River. The park, Rio Vista Natural Resources Park, largely exists to provide access for nearby horse-owning people to the Rillito River Park (a narrow strip of land on both sides of the big wash, with rails and paved paths for bicycles and joggers) and the river bed. We have ridden our bikes on the River Park before, but much farther west than this, so we check it out.

And descend to the river bed ourselves! Here is Mommy and Faith near a footbridge over a feeder wash on the south side of the river. And here is Daddy and Faith in the middle of the river, with the ramp we used to get down on the right side of the photo.



Here is Mommy and Faith at the north side, with me taking the picture from the "River Park" up on the bank. Faith is picking up pretty little rocks. She fails to pick up the brick I find for her. A few hundred feet upstream from here is a storm sewer discharge pipe; Faith and I creep up a little ways inside, until we encounter massive spider webs, but we can see light beyond, where the runoff from the apartments on the north side opens up. The sand is still damp; can't be from the rains last weekend, there wasn't enough of it. The river actually *does* run, underground, and some seeps to the surface. This is pretty clear from the other rivers in the area, which have a lot more vegetation in the river bed than this one does.



Jerri, for all the years she has lived here, has not been in the river bed. Neither have I. But I guess this isn't much; we need to descend to *THE* Tucson river bed - the Santa Cruz. However, I often see people (and horses, and motorbikes, and ATCs) in the Rillito and the Pantano rivers, but I *never* see people in the Santa Cruz.

### **What's wrong with these pictures?**

If you didn't already know, there are two teenage girls. The older one begged to go to Disneyland with her two silly friends, after the family of one of them offered to take them. So Rodeo Days wasn't quite as much fun as it could have been. But it *was* busy!