

November 2007: Saguaro National Monument (East)

As mentioned previously (as in the [ten-state tour](#), Jerri has a National Parks Passport book, in which she gets to put stamps as evidence that she has visited National Parks and Monuments. So she has had a long-standing intention to visit Saguaro National Monument to get a stamp (among other reasons, like just seeing it). The day after Thanksgiving was our all-family free-day after the heat of summer was off (even though 2007 has been a spectacularly warm fall - "global warming"), so we got our picnic lunch from the [Lucky Wishbone](#) (another Tucson tradition), and off we went.



Saguaro National Monument East is (duh) on the east side of Tucson, on the side of the Rincon Mountains. The trip out there from all points in town includes the picturesque and winding Old Spanish Trail, home to two other Tucson traditions, [Saguaro Corners Restaurant](#) and [Colossal Cave](#). The first stop inside the Monument is the Visitors' Center. There we get the all-important Passport stamp, look at the tourist trinkets, watch a short film about the flora and fauna in the park, and pick up a map. The Center is staffed by rangers who give advice on hiking paths, and there is a relief map that shows the Monument and the peak of the Rincons. In fact, the Monument actually includes the peak, up a hiking-only path perhaps 15 miles long. On the summit is a cabin built by the Manning family, who also had a [mansion](#) that still exists (as a conference hall) in downtown Tucson. This is a hike I may want to take someday. Maybe earlier in the year, when the threat of snow on the (fairly high) Rincons is less.

But today is just a day trip. The primary area intended for visitors is along a one-way loop road, with frequent pull-outs and interpretive signs (as usual, touting the millions-of-years evolution viewpoint). After stopping at several of these, the chorus of "I'm hungry!" from the back seat impels us down a dirt road to the Mica Mountain Vista picnic area. Here we eat our fried chicken, steak fingers, garlic toast, and fries with a cold breeze blowing on us from clouds threatening rain. Here we are at the Vista picnic area with the Rincon Mountains behind us and a cloudy sky overhead:



Of course, Saguaro National Monument was intended to preserve a saguaro cactus "forest". Here we are with a good-size specimen.

We leave the picnic area and resume our tour of the road. After a bit, we come to an "ecology" trail, so we stop and walk the trail. The signs here attempt to be poetic, and offer information to Tucson visitors, but nothing natives wouldn't know. More interesting is the discovery that the trail has benches for people to sit and contemplate, and that these benches are made of plastic, and that if we scootch our heinies on these plastic benches, we can build up a static charge and zap our sister.

The road takes us closer and closer to the nearer ridge of the Rincons. In a particularly hilly part, we stop again for a little hike up the hill. Here are the three hikers on a big rock on the slopes of the Rincons:



While we were up there, we climbed over a rock, and there was a mule deer doe, right there! She stared at us for a good while, then lifted her white tail and trotted off into the bushes! Too sudden for pictures. This baby saguaro was more cooperative.



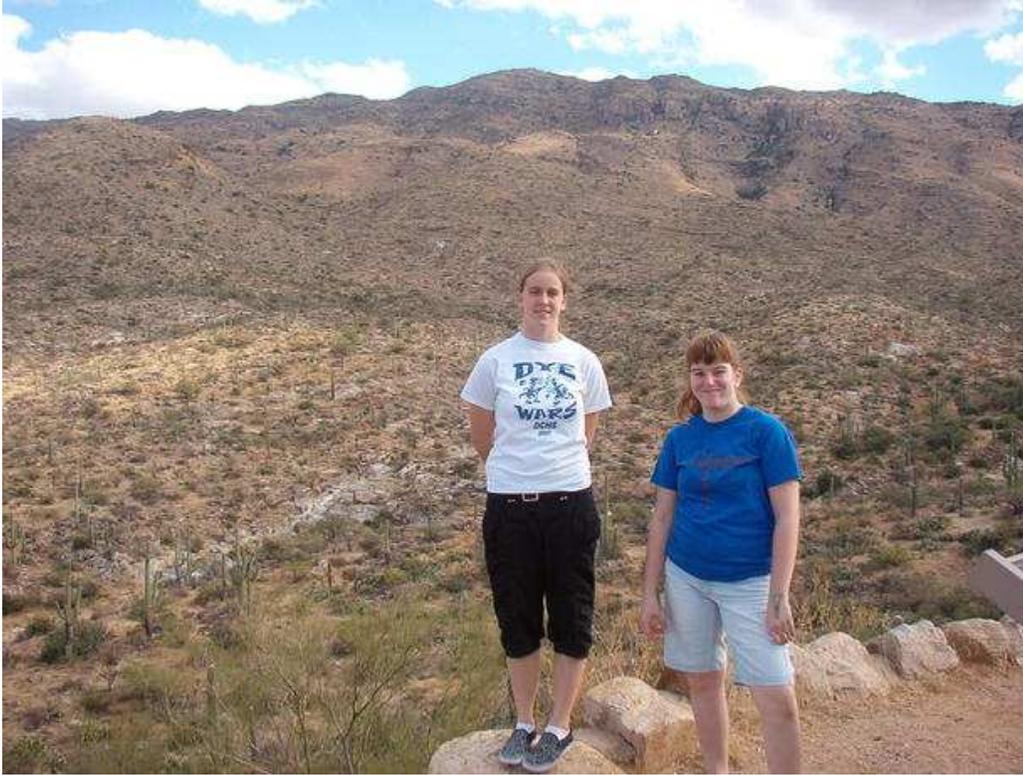


Mommy waits patiently with the little minivan at the foot of the slope.

Up on the slope, looking northwest, the Catalina Mountains loom over the city. This is why we live here...



Further along the road is a valley marked with watercourses. This place must be spectacular after the rains! However, the Monument closes the roads when there's that much rain, so I guess we'll never see it. Here's two Tucson natives with the big valley spread behind them.



About two-thirds of the loop road is behind us. We come upon an interesting rock formation called "Javelina Rocks", because javelinas (local peccaries - don't call them "pigs") hang out here. We didn't see any. This is like a playground that God raised out of the Flood, just for Tucson kids to play on. There were several groups of (older) kids playing and picnicking here already.

No javelinas, but here's a mountain goat looking down on Mommy.



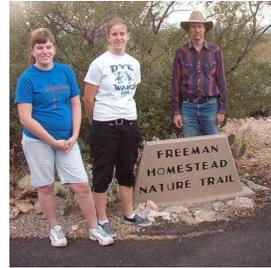


Three Ormands on a big rock. Mommy was doing pretty well to keep up with us. She eventually got up on the rocks, too!



At essentially the end of the loop, just before it returns to the Visitors' Center parking lot, is the Freeman Homestead picnic area and trailhead. It's just short of a mile down to where Mr. Freeman took advantage of the Homestead Act and claimed his 640 acres in the desert at the foot of the Rincons. I can't imagine what he thought they would live on, as the area is totally unfit for

farming or stock-raising. But live here they did, in a small adobe house which has now entirely crumbled away. Only a bit of the concrete foundation is left. Eventually, the Freemans deeded their property to the Park Service. When we left the Monument, there was a "Freeman Road", so it seems they left their mark.



Mommy had been here before, with a class from Palo Verde school, and recalled what it was like to herd elementary school boys down and up the trail, including an encounter with a rattlesnake. I think she was more relaxed this time!

As we were leaving the Monument, it was raining ever so slightly. The coolness was appreciated as we were hiking around. But I would like to come back earlier in the year for a more serious hike (up to the peak) someday.