

Bisbee Vacation

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THIS QUIRKY MINING TOWN FROM THE 1880S MIXES FOOD, FUN AND THE BIZARRE FOR AN IDEAL ROAD TRIP.

“Bisbee is not for everybody.” It’s a popular refrain in this mining town-turned-tourist destination in southern Arizona. Bisbee, founded in 1880 and named after an investor in the Copper Queen Mine, is one of the quirkiest spots in the state, if not the country. It takes the right frame of mind and an appetite for the odd to truly enjoy its atmosphere.

Visitors usually first stop on Highway 80 to photograph the crazy quilt of colorful homes built into the hills. Then they book a room at the Copper Queen Hotel, hit the Queen Mine tour, browse the artsy-craftsy shops on Main Street and call it a day. Those are all worthwhile pursuits, but for the more adventurous, there’s another side of Bisbee.

Bisbee’s Back Story

To “get” Bisbee, it’s important to understand the townsfolk. Phelps Dodge mining company (which Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold acquired in 2007) pulled out of Bisbee in the mid-1970s, and the hippies pulled in. They squatted in abandoned homes or, if they had a small savings, bought them. City Councilman and Lavender Jeep Tour guide Boyd Nicholl, for example, purchased his adobe house 32 years ago for \$18,000.

Then and now, Bisbee became a magnet for artists and intellectuals from places such as Los Angeles and New York looking to escape the rat race and kick back in a cheaper place with a great climate. Nicholl explains that many of the

residents are highly educated yet work “proletariat” jobs – as trades people and handymen; in retail, restaurants and inns; or giving tours. That might explain why Atalanta’s Music & Books sells The New York Times along with J.A. Jance paperbacks, hemp clothing and old LPs.

The real estate boom of the mid-2000s hit Bisbee as it did everywhere else, driving prices well out of the range of these urban expatriates. It brought in a new crop of residents – the type who drive convertibles, wear oversize sunglasses and carry tiny dogs in their purses. Many of them are gone, though, and the burst bubble brought prices back in range for second-home homeowners or chuck-it-all semi-retirees. Think twice before getting seduced by the laid-back, small-town vibe and interesting aesthetics, though.

“Bisbee is self-flushing,” Nicholl explains. “People come and say, ‘Isn’t this charming?’ and then they realize there’s 27 steps up to their house. That flushes out about 90 percent of the people right there. The streets are bad; it’s funky; it’s messy. (But) we do have a new sewer system.”

Copper Queen Mine Tour

Bizarre Sights

The casual tourist need not worry about too many stairs unless you’re staying in one of Bisbee’s guesthouses up in the hills or participating in the Bisbee 1000, billed as “the 5K that feels like a 10K.” This stair-climb fundraiser, held every October, is one of numerous special events Bisbee holds to attract tourists – and their money – to this out-of-the-way corner of the state.

Other events include the Bisbee Home Tour, Bisbee Lodging Tour, a gay pride weekend, car shows, motorcycle rallies, music festivals, a renowned Halloween celebration and the entirely insane New Year’s Eve parade. People march

through Brewery Gulch, the town's saloon district, sporting everything from elaborate costumes to papier-mâché heads. One memorable year, a man wearing a feathered mask with a giant beak rode in the parade on a unicycle while sitting on a rubber chicken. All events are on the town's calendar at discoverbisbee.com.

Even if there's nothing scheduled, visitors can while away hours in downtown Bisbee's shops and galleries. It's a treasure hunter's dream, with antique stores carrying everything from old housewares to vintage clothing and affordable mid-century retro-bilia. And just try to go home without a memento of pottery, jewelry or yard art. But even in these Main Street businesses, Bisbee's twisted sense of reality peeks through. Witness the mechanized cow skeleton on roller skates in Metallum Creations that moves via remote control and dispenses milk.

Then there's The Source Within, a Wiccan wonderland with items like the Tarot Deck & Book for Dummies. In the back is the Bisbee Mini Museum of the Bizarre, a windowless room converted to display a menagerie of oddities – some apparently authentic, others questionable. The creepy hand of a Haitian voodoo queen has paperwork verifying its pedigree, but the fairy mummy and Yeti hair are suspect.

Any number of tours are offered, but be advised: Bisbee residents are not as bound by convention as big-city folk. When asked if walking tours were held every day, as noted on the town's website, a visitors center staffer replied, "Every day that Mike is here. He's not here every day, so it's a shot in the dark."

Despite repeated phone calls and messages over the course of a week and a couple of stops into the visitor center, the elusive guide never materialized.

Brews, Beds and Food

You can't experience Bisbee without cruising Brewery Gulch.

Even if you don't imbibe, it's an integral part of the Bisbee experience. For example, you might see a man in drag belting out Frank Sinatra ballads on karaoke night at the Stock Exchange bar.

Beer lovers should hit Old Bisbee Brewing Company, which pours a mean non-alcoholic homemade root beer. And no trip is complete without sitting on a barstool at St. Elmo's, which dates from 1902 – and it shows. There's no better place to get local color and possibly a free drink (maybe a pint of locally brewed Dave's Electric beer) from a tipsy patron.

After taking in all of the strangeness, you'll need some sustenance and a place to stay. The two best restaurants in Bisbee are the legendary, much-awarded Café Roka (open Thursday through Saturday; reservations strongly recommended) and a newcomer, Screaming Banshee Pizza, with wood-fired pizzas that rival the best in the Valley. Also, Santiago's Mexican is easy to get to, and its fresh-fruit margaritas really shine. For a quick breakfast, grab a slice of quiche or a breakfast burrito at High Desert Market and Café. It's also Bisbee's gourmet market, with items such as grass-fed beef, imported cheeses, single-origin chocolate bars and baskets of local produce.

Bisbee, being a tourist town, has no shortage of places to stay, from guesthouses to B&Bs to inns to motels and even an old jail. Each has its own charm. But one of the most fun is the Shady Dell Trailer Court, a collection of 10 vintage trailers, a bus and a Chris Craft yacht, all decked out in the kitschiest retro décor imaginable (who couldn't love the leopard print carpet in the Royal Mansion?).

Justin and Jen Luria, who took over the Shady Dell in 2007, spruced up the place, putting in new beds, updating the bathroom/shower buildings, remodeling the office, adding Astroturf and plants, installing an irrigation system for the

fruit trees and setting up a PA system that plays oldies all day. The trailers have evaporative coolers, which don't do the trick during monsoons, so the Shady Dell closes for the month of August.

They also scaled back Dot's Diner, so it has returned to its original intent as more of a soda fountain. Saturdays and Sundays only, they dish up goodies such as fresh-baked pastries and pies, retro sodas and ice cream desserts.

The locals are right: Bisbee isn't for everybody. The visitor center staff can be grumpy; the streets are uneven; the innkeepers are sometimes spacey. But if you have a taste for the eccentric and the right attitude, you'll have a hard time finding a place as entertaining as Bisbee.

GUIDEBOOK

Weather

Average February temperatures: 60 high, 32 low

Sleep & Stay

The Shady Dell Trailer Court:
1 Douglas Road, 520-432-3567,
theshadydell.com

Activities

Bisbee Mini Museum of the Bizarre: 28 Main St. (inside The Source Within), 520-432-2000,
bizarrebisbee.com

Copper Queen Mine Tours:

478 N. Dart Road, 866-432-2071,
queenminetour.com

Lavender Jeep Tours:

No. 10 Copper Queen Plaza,
520-432-5369,
lavenderjeeptours.com

Eat & Drink

Café Roka: 35 Main St.,
520-432-5153,
caferoka.com

High Desert Market and Café:
203 Tombstone Canyon,
520-432-6775,
highdesertmarket.net

Old Bisbee Brewing
Company: 200 Review
Alley, 520-432-2739,
oldbisbeebrewingcompany.com

Santiago's Mexican:
1 Howell Ave., 520-432-1910,
santiagosmexican.blogspot.com

Screaming Banshee Pizza:
200 Tombstone Canyon,
520-432-1300,
screamingbansheepizza.com

St. Elmo's:
36 Brewery Ave., 520-432-5578

Stock Exchange Saloon:
15 Brewery Ave., 520-432-1333,
stockexchangesaloon.com

Information

discoverbisbee.com