



Along the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail

By Jan Cleere

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Follow the footsteps of ancient priests along one of the most historic trails across Arizona. Designated as a Millennium Trail, a route telling part of America's history, a section of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail rambles 4 1/2 miles from the old Tumacácori mission to the presidio at Tubac through a veritable forest of cottonwood and mesquite trees.

Enter the trailhead at Tubac or Tumacácori, about 45 minutes south of Tucson along Interstate 19. Consider leaving one vehicle at Tubac and heading down the road to Tumacácori for a leisurely 2-to-3 hour one-way stroll. Although overhanging trees shade the smooth path, water is always essential in the desert, even on a cool winter's day.

You may chance upon deer, coyotes and javalinas as you walk along the trail first traveled by Spanish Captain Juan Bautista de Anza in 1774 and 1775 as he sought an overland route from Mexico to California. The Arizona portion of the trail comprises 360 miles of which only the Tumacácori to Tubac section is open for hiking at present.

The trail follows the path of the Santa Cruz River, meandering back and forth across its northward-flowing waters. Nature's sense of humor deters any structure remaining permanently across the river and an extra pair of shoes might come in handy, although wading barefoot across the ankle-deep, silt-lined river bottom is a lot more fun. The current can be treacherous after heavy summer monsoons or exceptionally wet winters, and hikers encountering a rapid Santa Cruz at the first crossing, about 1/2 mile into the hike, should retrace their steps and return another day. Critters of every genre rely upon intense floods every five to ten years to nourish their lush environment.

The riparian habitat along the Santa Cruz nourishes a plethora of plants and animals, including over 50 rare species. Native desert suckers and longfin dace coexist with non-native red shiner fish and fathead minnows. Whirligig beetles and giant water bugs scurry

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through the water dodging long sticky tongues of Sonoran toads. Lizards, rabbits and garter snakes scamper and slither up and down the riverbank. Avid bird watchers search the skies for over 200 varieties of birds soaring above the desert floor. The songs of orioles, songbirds, and cuckoos; fleeting visions of herons, hawks, buzzards, and hummingbirds keep you ever watchful above, while cow pies tic-tac-toeing along the path bring your gaze earthward toward ebony butterflies transforming their wings from sky blue to pale green to fog gray as they frisk through sun-filtered desert broom and Palo Verde.

Kiosks along the way provide interpretive information about the abundance of plant and wildlife living in this extraordinary oasis. Keep an eye out for timeworn adobe walls and a crumbling ranch house.

A drive to reconstruct Anza's complete 1,900-mile trek is underway in Arizona and California. If completely restored, including a 600-mile stretch from Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico to Nogales, the Anza Trail would become the first international historic hiking route in the world.

If you turn around and retrace your steps, you might glimpse the ghost of an old priest winding his way from the mission to the presidio, bent on saving the souls of homesick Spanish soldiers or a desert Indian tribe. Don't be surprised if his sandals squish a bit as he passes by.

Contact Tubac Presidio Historic State Park (520 398-2252), or Tumacácori National Historic Park (520 398-2341) for trail conditions and upcoming events.