A Quest for Dry

(A shortened version of this travel article was published by the Fargo-Moorhead *Forum*, April 1997)

By Ross Collins

Basement seepage. Sidewalk slush. Creeping flood. The steady drip-drip-drip of ice dam-runoff into a dining-room catch pail. Water in the house, water on the street, water in your socks, water, water, water!

The ads tell us to take a vacation to "get away from it all," and in the Red River Valley right now, all there is, is seems, is water. In fact, a vacation away from too much H2O would be more than just a getaway--it could be a mystical quest, a pilgrimage. A Quest for Dry. A pilgrimage to Tucson.

The docent at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum 14 miles west of Tucson, explained that precipitation in the area is unusually low right now, about 2 inches in a desert that expects perhaps a scanty 10 a year. "It's been very dry," she said. I've come to the right place.

A city of 735,000, Tucson once was the northernmost defensive "Presidio" of the Spanish colonial rulers in Mexico. The idea of Tucson as "northernmost" seemed surreal to someone just stepped off a plane from Fargo, but a visit to La Casa Cordova offered a reminder that for much of the last century this must have indeed been a frontier wilderness. The Casa is one of the oldest houses in Tucson, built before the United States acquired the region through the Gadsden Purchase of 1854. For a good share of the year early residents made their living room outdoors, eating, sleeping, working and playing in the adobe-walled courtyard restored to its mid-19th century look. You could do that in Tucson because for most of the year, of course, the climate is warm and dry.

The Casa is part of a downtown walking tour of old adobe, a remarkable parade of offices and homes surrounded by fences and frames of prickly pear cactus, paloverde, saguaro, mesquite, ocotillo and cholla. There are few grass lawns in Tucson. Water comes from precious underground aquifers, and you'd have use it to irrigate, because the weather here for lawns is just too dry.

Part of the walk includes an artists' colony well worth the visit, the Old Town Artisans of North Meyer Avenue. This entire block of southwest-inspired art is housed in 1850s adobe, remarkably roofed with tough saguaro cactus ribs, whiskey barrel staves and old packing crates. The scrubby wood of the Sonoran desert offers meager fare for builders, who before easy truck transport made do with wood on hand. Adobe walls are thick and cool, so tough they actually encircled the original defensive presidio of 1775, then 12 feet tall and 750 feet long. You can see a monument to the old city walls, although they are now long gone for modern development. Not that the walls decaye--the walls of mud, straw and pebble last for centuries here. According to a Tucson restoration architect, adobe is still popular in up-scale new homes built on the edges of town by new residents attracted to the climate: dry.

Adobe also made the Old Barrio district south of downtown, and a walking or driving tour of these less tarted-up old residences offers a glimpse of the little bit of Old Tucson left after urban renewal cut a swath for modern buildings 30 years ago. The adobe stands tough as long as it stays away from earthquakes and wrecking balls. And stays dry.

The area around Tucson is fascinating for what's living there: the Lower Sonoran desert of the southwest United States is one of several desert life zones, but much more alive with plants and animals than a sand sea such as the Sahara. Nothing, absolutely nothing, similar to Red River Valley flora seems to grow naturally here, except perhaps an occasional dandelion. Cacti such as prickly pear, barrel, cholla, and the intimidating saguaro clamber up and down the stony hills. The saguaro, living legend of the Old West, may only grow an inch a year, yet here a specimen can touch 50 feet. To learn most about the desert's plants and wildlife, make a visit to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. (Open every day; $8.95 for adults.) It's a mostly-outdoor natural preserve of the complex Sonoran region. Particularly noteworthy are the unusual animals, such as cougar, coyote, javelina, margay. Animals that like it dry.

Or, if you're particularly interested in seeing a thicket of cacti, head just a few miles farther to Saguaro National Monument West. The dense saguaro forest behind the interpretive center opens onto some of the many hiking trails that track through the prickly trunks. Hikers need to watch out for cactus spines and maybe a sunning rattlesnake, but not mudholes, as the stony paths are very, very--how else can we say it? Dry.

A little less rustic is a walk up Sabino Canyon northwest of the city. It's a 3.8-mile road up the Santa Catalina Mountains, surrounded by hiking trails and picnic areas. Daunted by the climb? Fear not: you can take a shuttle bus up ($5), get off and on when you like. And if you're feeling hot, you can take a dip in the fast-moving canyon creek tumbling down the canyon.

Wading in the creek water was refreshing, a happy--and I never thought I'd be admitting this--break from dry. Back home in Fargo, the water was bullying, exasperating, life-threatening. But sometimes, here now in the desert, it's also cooling, refreshing, life-giving. The quest for dry comes to an end at the edge of a stream.

If You Go:
Metropolitan Tucson Convention and Visitors Bureau, 130 Scott Ave. S., Tucson, Ariz. 85701. Tel: (520) 624-1817. On-line: http://www.hcstucson.com/tc/
Transportation: Northwest Airlines offers direct service from Minneapolis. Shuttles run to hotels. Getting around Tucson by car is simple, based on a grid with main streets running the length of the city. Major car rental agencies have outlets at the airport. City buses also run; a bus map is available from the visitors bureau. Tour buses offer regional day trips and city tours.
A note on food: They say you can't find a bad Mexican meal in Tucson, the city proud to call itself America's capital of this ethnic cuisine. Expect the occasional roving mariachi band at your table. Also look for traditional cowboy fare of steak, potatoes and beans, and mesquite-grilled everything. A few other restaurants squeeze in among these.

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