



Sonoran Desert Conference Center

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Ajo, Arizona is a fascinating, off-the-beaten path place, where you might see a javelina walking down the street on your way to a gallery opening, watch a Harris's hawk circle overhead during an outdoor yoga class, or get lost staring into an 1,100-foot-deep hole in the earth. It's a town of hidden gems that rewards the curious traveler with new experiences, tastes, and adventures. A great home base for exploring the area is the new [Sonoran Desert Conference Center \(SDCC\)](#), an inn and event venue housed in an historic elementary school. Here is a Top Ten list of Ajo highlights, put together by SDCC Directors Emily and Stuart Siegel:

1) A City Beautiful: stunning Spanish-Colonial architecture

Ajo's town center was designed in 1914 by a Minneapolis firm at the behest of New Cornelia Copper Mine owner and future AZ senator John Greenway. Followers of the "City Beautiful" movement, the town was designed to instill pride in the miners who would make Ajo their home. Spanish-Colonial architecture dominates the civic structures, the jewel of which is the Ajo Plaza. From the Plaza you can see two gleaming white churches and just past them, the grand Curley School, which has been converted into housing for artists and the Sonoran Desert Conference Center. The entire downtown is listed on the National Historic Register, and a self-guided walking tour of the area is available at the Visitors Center in the Plaza and at the Sonoran Desert Conference Center office.

2) The desert at your doorstep: millions of acres of pristine desert

People call Ajo "A small town with a big backyard", because 12 million acres of pristine desert surround our little hamlet. To the south is [Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument](#), a destination for wonderful hiking, mountain biking, and scenic drives. West and north of town is the [Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge](#), the second largest in the Lower 48 and home to the elusive Sonoran Pronghorn, North America's fastest land mammal. A highlight is Crater Range, a craggy outcropping of "bite-sized mountains" where you may spot desert bighorn sheep. On the edge of town is the Ajo Scenic Loop, a 10-mile drive that winds past towering saguaros and Organ Pipe cacti, among other native plants. The open vistas, mountain views, and abundant wildlife surrounding Ajo are the perfect place to discover the beauty of the Sonoran Desert.

3) Tri-cultural heritage: Mexican, Tohono O'odham and Anglo traditions

Ajo is made up of a mix of three cultures: Mexican, Tohono O'odham, and Anglo. Historically, these groups lived in separate neighborhoods and segregation persisted through much of the 20th century. While painful memories of this era remain today, rich traditions of each group are now celebrated across racial lines. Opportunities for visitors to experience cultural activities abound: watch Ballet Folklorico de Ajo and hear a Tohono O'odham "Chickenscratch" band perform at a festival. Participate in a Saguaro cactus harvest in July and taste the flavors of Sonora prepared by third-generation Mexican-American Ajoites. Visit Triangle Park, where an art installation pays tribute to Ajo's Mexican Town and Indian Village neighborhoods.





4) Public art: walls, streets, and alleys alive with color

Ajo is home to a growing population of artists and craftspeople, many of whom live in the [Curley School Artisan Apartments](#). Their work is on display and for sale in galleries like Under the Arches, aVita Boutique, and the Copper News Gallery, and you can also view art just strolling around town. Murals cover the sides of many buildings; a favorite is the *trompe l'oeil* scene covering the façade of the Ajo Copper News building. More murals line Art Alley, a project launched in 2015. Street artists came from across the region to contribute to this effort, many of their murals with a borderlands theme. Local and visiting artists continue to add to the walls, which are quickly becoming covered with vibrant scenes. Sculpture is on display, too; take a walk and see how many of Val Uschuk's "Yard Ghosts" you can spot around town!

5) Discovering fabulous food: from burritos to barbacoa

Ajo has a handful of restaurants and wonderful food hiding here in unexpected places. The Chevron sells delicious homemade burritos; these aren't your typical gas station fodder. Local chefs Dionne Vega and Christina Vega-Zubiate put on pop-up restaurant nights in partnership with the Sonoran Desert Conference Center, and cater many events for visitors staying there. Social clubs like the Elks and the Chu Chu Club host steak frys and brunches that are often open to the public, and the Knights of Columbus barbacoa sales are legendary (we dare you to finish a plate heaped with shredded beef, beans, coleslaw, and tortillas). Hit up Roadrunner Java early on weekend mornings for fresh donuts and fruit empanadas, and families should stop at Olsen's, our local supermarket, for their fresh chicken fingers. Trust us: your kids will thank you.

6) The local growing movement: community gardens, urban farms, and fruit orchards

Ajo is full of gardens, to the surprise of visitors who expect the desert here to be brown and barren. Ajoites are pushing the limits of what grows in the hot, dry weather here. Produce, herbs, flowers and fresh eggs – much of it organic - are for sale at the Authentically Ajo Farmers Market, which runs on Saturday mornings or Thursday evenings, depending on the season. The Ajo Regional Food Partnership hosts garden tours and workshops year-round, including at the Many Hands Urban & Learning Center located in the Conference Center courtyard. Local entrepreneurs are putting this produce to use in products like citrus jams made by the Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and Mexican-style popsicles made by Sonoran Desert Conference Center Director Emily Siegel. These are available at the farmers market and featured at Conference Center events.

7) Festivals in the Plaza: bringing visitors and locals with food, music, and family fun

The centerpiece of Ajo's historic town center, the Plaza is home to countless festivals throughout the year. From the International Day of Peace in September to the Sonoran Shindig each March to the annual 4th of July Parade, these events bring together visitors and locals with food, music, and activities for the whole family. An annual highlight is Ajo's





100-year-old Christmas Eve tradition, when the Plaza is lit up with a towering Christmas tree and Santa arrives in a sleigh after appearing in the Curley School tower. The Ajo Rotary Club hosts the event and hands out popcorn balls, chocolates, and oranges to hundreds of revelers. It's good, old-fashioned, small town fun straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting – only with cacti and palm trees!

8) The Pit: a glimpse into Ajo's copper-mining roots

For over 70 years, Ajo was a company town built around a thriving open-pit copper mine. Though the mine closed in 1985, the pit remains today: a mile across, as deep as the Empire State Building is tall, with a pool of turquoise water at the bottom. No trip to Ajo is complete without a drive up to the Mine Overlook to view this enormous hole and to learn about Ajo's mining history. A small visitor center at the Overlook is open weekdays from October-May, and the couple that runs it are full of information about minerals, mining, and "The Company" (Phelps Dodge Corporation) that ran Ajo for decades. Be sure to check out the old photos on the wall for a glimpse at Ajo's past, including images of Indian Village and Mexican town.

9) The Weather: warm days, cool nights, and year-round sunshine

Southern Arizona's warm, dry climate makes it a destination for travelers from around the globe. Ajo benefits from year-round sunshine and balmy temperatures, with daytime averages in the 80s for much of the year. The summer gets hot, but as any Arizonan will tell you, it's a dry heat. Mornings and evenings stay cool right through the summer, making it a great escape from Phoenix and other nearby cities. Two rainy seasons each year – the gentle winter rains come in December, followed by monsoon season in July and August – means our corner of the desert is green and vibrant. And the fresh, clean air, coupled with very little light pollution, means incredibly clear night skies and world-class stargazing.

10) The People: no one stays a stranger for long

From long-time residents to relative newcomers, East Coast transplants to die-hard "desert rats", artists to academics to farmers to retired miners, Ajoites are a remarkable group. Visitors are often struck by the openness and friendliness of this community, and delighted at the chance to have authentic interactions with locals, who will gladly show you their home, their garden, or their art studio. The Sonoran Desert Conference Center serves as a hub for visitors to connect with locals in both formal and informal ways, through guided tours and cooking workshops and around the fire pit. Sometimes travelers even become residents; more than one has felt so welcomed here that they have bought a house during their visit and made Ajo home!

