



The Fragrance of History

Hopes and dreams in tough environments.
Words by Doug Rose. Photos by Larry Angier.

To a boy from northern America, the Southwest looks like a Martian work of art. Breathtaking red clay buttes are spotted with sparse green, brown, and yellow vegetation. This vegetation would be confused if it lived in the Northeast. It seems to be neither tree nor bush, but something in between. Technicolor canyons and solitary rock formations look as if they'd been dropped onto the flat desert floor from some faraway galaxy.

Abandoned ghost towns are more eerie in person than their artificial backdrop-for-a-western-movie counterparts could ever hope to be. The shattered wooden shutters slap against their rotting clapboards even on windless days, as if propelled by the breath of the actual ghosts of this former frontier. The spirits that failed to make a life in this desert 200 years ago seem to be warning newcomers



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of the difficulties they will face. These spirits had hoped that this place would be their heaven, their Camelot. Instead it became a cemetery for their dreams, and in many cases for their families. They inhale attachment and exhale despair. They never get to move on.

Normal breezes do not have the otherworldly smell that air movement in a ghost town does. It is the fragrance of history. It is

an odor of momentary hope, glory, and demise gone by so long ago that no one alive remembers the occasion. These scents rise from the ether to frighten a stagnant atmosphere into movement.

Despite the emotional gravity of ghost towns, they are really no more than a short misplayed note in the vast majestic symphony that is the Southwest's desert. Scenery too beautiful for humans to have possibly built was here long before these abandoned settlements were a twinkle in a wagon train's eye. It will be here a long time after the mini-malls and fast-food troughs are gone.

Giant cacti are camels-as-vegetable-matter. They store a year's supply of liquid life while surrounded by rock and sand that long ago died of thirst. The occasional ranch house stands all alone in the middle of several thousand acres of nothing, testifying to the great

strength and sheer audacity of the human will—but for the most part this land looks like it did before humanity existed.

The Southwest is one of the few areas in North America where the continent's original human native inhabitants are still readily available. These natives have suffered a painful fortune that even the Marquis de Sade's heartless imagination would not have been able to fathom. In some places, they survive the harsh result of the human cruelty inflicted upon them with the same grace and strength they employed to survive the harsh natural environment for millennia before suffering their own holocaust. In other places, native survival is much more reminiscent of the bone-chilling decay of the ghost town's clapboards and the breeze of lost souls that moves the shutters of its former windows.



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Nights are a little bit colder here than days back in the northeastern states. It can get a lot colder at night in the southwestern desert. Moonlit cacti host lizards, rodents and snakes on evening hunting trips. Coyotes in ruthless packs define clever and resourceful by their cooperative survival efforts.

The harsh majesty of the Southwest exacts a price, even from its survivors. It is a dog-eat-dog world. Serious danger and awesome beauty live together under the cruel sun, and often under the same rock. One must master the truths of this environment or one will surely suffer the consequences. ■

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