Tips for Enjoying the Sonoran Desert

There’s a beauty in the desert, and a way to enjoy it year round. However, there are some things that are helpful to know as you acclimate to the desert southwest.

Hydration: The Need for Water
Water is essential to life, and the desert plants, insects, and animals have learned how to adapt to the low humidity and intense heat of a Tucson summer. But humans need to take special care to drink enough water to stay hydrated. There is no set rule, since how much water you take in is dependent on how much is lost in perspiration, respiration and excretion. A good way to tell if you are sufficiently hydrated is urine color and output. Urine should be pale yellow with no odor, and sufficient in volume. If urine is the color of apple juice, you need to drink more liquids.

It’s a good idea to carry emergency water in your vehicle when driving through the desert. There are stretches of roadway where there are no services available. By having a gallon or two of water with you, you will be prepared in case your vehicle breaks down.

Remember to take sufficient water with you when hiking. It’s recommended that you take a minimum of one gallon per person. This may seem excessive, but you’ll be surprised at how much water you will drink with exercise! For other forms of physical activity, whether it’s bicycle riding, horseback riding, golf, sports, etc., you should keep in mind the importance of remaining hydrated. When engaged in activities causing heavy perspiration, you may need to replace electrolytes as well as fluid. Email UA Life & Work Connections for more detailed information about sports nutrition and hydration. jcharvoz@email.arizona.edu

Signs of Heat-Related Illness
Be aware of the signs of heat-related illnesses, for yourself and those around you:

- Dehydration: headache, fatigue, lightheadedness [http://www.umm.edu/non_t...](http://www.umm.edu/non_trauma/dehyrat.htm)
- Heat stroke: lack of perspiration, confusion (call 911 as this can be life threatening) [http://www.umm.edu/non_trauma/dehyrat.htm](http://www.umm.edu/non_trauma/dehyrat.htm)

Protection from the Sun
The Tucson sun is intense, and the need to protect your skin from its UV rays is vital if you plan to be outside for extended periods of time. The sun’s rays are most intense from 10am to 3pm, and dermatologists recommend that you use sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or greater, and wear long sleeves, a wide brimmed hat, and sunglasses during those hours. Since sunlight acts upon skin to produce Vitamin D, short time periods in the sun can be beneficial. Consider sun exposure on un-sunscreened arms for 10-15 minutes a few times a week to ensure that you are receiving sufficient Vitamin D. Bear in mind that dark-skinned individuals will need more time exposure to the sun to produce Vitamin D.

Venomous Desert Animals and Insects
Desert wildlife is fascinating, and understanding the insect and animal species can add a whole new dimension to your understanding of biology. Visit the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, [http://www.desertmuseum.org/](http://www.desertmuseum.org/), or talk to a wildlife biologist or entomologist here on campus. Since poisonous snakes, plants, and insects are part of our environment, here are a few tips:

* Rattlesnakes [http://www.azgfd.gov/w_c/arizona-rattlesnakes.shtml](http://www.azgfd.gov/w_c/arizona-rattlesnakes.shtml)
  When walking in the desert, be aware of your surroundings. Use a flashlight at night, and do not place your hands or feet in areas you cannot see. If you are bitten, remain calm, and proceed to a hospital.
  Coral snakes are also venomous, but are rarely seen in the day time.
  Scorpions are part of the desert ecosystem, and their sting can be painful, but rarely dangerous.
  Avoid walking barefoot, and use caution in picking up rocks or pieces of wood.
  Black widows make their webs in low-traffic areas, such as wood piles and storage sheds. Their venom can cause severe discomfort, and there may be a need for medical intervention.
  The bite of an Arizona Recluse is less severe than their Midwestern cousins. However if you suspect you’ve been bitten, see your physician.
  Tarantulas are an integral part of the Sonoran desert. They will not bite unless severely provoked.
* Gila Monsters  [http://www.desertmuseum.org/books/nhsd_gila.php](http://www.desertmuseum.org/books/nhsd_gila.php)
  Gila monsters are poisonous, however they must be provoked to bite. Enjoy watching them from a distance.
  If hiking along riparian areas around Tucson, be aware that poison ivy or poison oak might be present. Learn to identify the plants to avoid them.

Photos from AZ Game and Fish Department  [http://www.gf.state.az.us/i_e/wildlife_photo.shtml](http://www.gf.state.az.us/i_e/wildlife_photo.shtml)

**Desert Storms**
Intense rains are often a part of the Tucson’s weather during the summer months, starting in July and ending in September. The distinct fragrance of creosote after a rain is one of life’s pleasures, and the coolness after the storm almost makes the heat and higher humidity worthwhile. Here are some precautions to take during storms:

  * Lightning: To be safe, seek shelter during a storm. If you are outside, do not seek shelter under a tree, and avoid being taller than your surroundings. If you are in a building, avoid using electrical appliances, and stay away from windows.
    Dry washes turn into roaring rivers every summer due to run off from a thunderstorm. Never attempt to drive across a flooded area. Either wait until the water recedes, or choose an alternate route.

**Valley Fever**  [http://www.vfce.arizona.edu/VFIH-what.htm](http://www.vfce.arizona.edu/VFIH-what.htm)
Valley Fever is primarily a disease of the lungs. It is common in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, and is caused by the fungus Coccidioides sp., which grows in soils in areas of low rainfall, high summer temperatures and moderate winter temperatures. These fungal spores become airborne when the soil is disturbed by winds, construction, farming and other activities. Infection occurs when a spore is inhaled. Valley Fever symptoms generally occur within three weeks of exposure, and include fatigue, cough, and chest pain. Most people experience mild symptoms and recover within 6 months, however people with a compromised immune system are at greater risk for more severe disease. See your physician if you have questions or concerns about Valley Fever.

Removing cactus spines can be a painful experience. The tiny spines have barbs on the end that make them difficult to remove. The best way to remove a cholla segment is with a comb. Slip it in between your skin and the cholla, and pull with a quick motion. If you don’t have a comb, you can use 2 sticks, one on either side. A tweezers is needed to pull out individual spines. For the tiny golden colored stickers of prickly pear that are too small for a tweezers, try using sticky tape – press on to the skin and peel off; hopefully the stickers will come off too.
**Becoming acclimated**

Living in a desert climate takes some adjustments. You might notice your skin feeling drier; the use of lotions and moisturizers can help. Many feel it is worth the effort to get used to the heat, since temperatures are well above 90°F from May until October. Spend time outside in short segments until the heat becomes bearable, then increase your time outdoors or the intensity of your activity level. You will gradually become acclimated, and be able to do the outdoor activities you enjoy all year round. Remember to stay hydrated, and protect yourself from excessive sun exposure.