



Equestrians, bikers, hikers and campers enjoy McDowell Mountain Park

■ BOBBIE BOOKHOUT

It could be the sight of a Harris hawk circling overhead, the 70-F temperatures in winter months or views of the Superstition Mountains to the east and the bouldery McDowell Mountains to the west that keep visitors coming to McDowell Mountain Regional Park. Add easy access, generous space between RV parking spots and a 360-degree panorama of unspoiled desert.

*Saguaro, ocotillo, creosote and brittlebush dot the spacious 80-site campground. Petroglyphs in the park were probably carved by ancient Hohokum Indians. McDowell's trails are suitable for wheelchairs or strollers, as well as horses, bicycles and hikers. Ranger "Crash" Marusich guides an interpretive nature walk to teach hikers about edible desert plant life.*



# Cool Off Near Phoenix

Although Phoenix is the sixth-largest city in the United States, this Maricopa county park just minutes north of the metropolitan area offers solitude in an unparalleled natural setting. The closest community to the park is Fountain Hills. Fountain Hills Boulevard becomes McDowell Mountain Park Road. Watch for the brown signs with directions to the park, located four miles north of the city.

At the park entrance, you'll receive two maps. One shows the entire park with hiking, biking and horseback trails; the other shows the campground. Drive past the competitive bike-track area and turn left on Palisades Drive to the campground. Eighty spaces, exceptionally clean bathrooms with showers, and a play area for children await you. A drive around the two loops of the campground takes you past saguaro, oco-

tillo, creosote and the bright-yellow blossoms of brittlebush.

The campground has what every good battle commander wants: the high ground. Neither the bicycling areas nor development can be seen from here. On the cliffs to the east, a broad, uneven pink stripe, roughly parallel to the ground, cuts across the Superstition Mountains. In Indian legend, it marks the height of the flood waters sent by the gods to wash away the evil.

When we were at the park, six people were playing cards at one picnic table, a woman walked a pair of white dogs, and another couple rode their bikes on the paved road.

Variety, the hallmark of resilient desert plants, is revealed in the campground and the park. Some plants survive by sending their roots deep for underground water. In contrast, the saguaro have shallow roots and exhibit slow growth. A 15-year-old saguaro is only a foot tall. The characteristic arms appear at approximately 75 years of age. In December, one saguaro beside a motorhome campsite was decorated with tiny white lights.

You can learn more about the area wildflowers, shrubs and cactus from the *Sonoran Desert Guide*. Also available from the campground host are lists of birds and mammals that live in the park. The pamphlet on reptiles and amphibians includes the yellow-and-black-beaded gila monster, an endangered species.

You can choose from various activities. One morning, Ranger Paul "Crash" Marusich, a former actor, entertained a group of about 35 hikers on the moderate Dixie Mine trail. Jovial repartee marked his lessons as we gathered on the trail to listen and learn. He paused by a barrel cactus to disprove the legend that it's filled with water. Even if it were, he pointed out, you'd need a machete to get past its thorns and cut it open. "Wouldn't it be easier," he asked, "just to carry water?"

A typical month's many events include a campfire slide show on desert flora and fauna and a 4.2-mile fitness hike. From strenuous moun-

tain biking to a ranger-led hike to identify 10 edible desert plants on a .5-mile-long trail suitable for walkers, wheelchairs or strollers, the events run the gamut. Sometimes an astronomer lectures, and most months the park offers a full-moon walk.

In fall, winter and spring, McDowell Mountain Regional Park hosts several biking competitions at the track near the entrance. For an additional challenge, many riders enjoy the 15.4-mile Pemberton Trail. Riders start the Pemberton Loop going southwest, travel clockwise and end with a gradual six-mile descent.

Fountain Hills has a variety of restaurants and shops and boasts the world's tallest fountain. The small lake surrounding the fountain has grassy green banks, perfect for a picnic, and the community has four golf courses. The city hosts art fairs in January and a hot-air balloon festival the last weekend in February.

Sailboats dot nearby lakes, which are a part of the dam-and-reservoir system on the Salt River. These destinations make good day trips. Italian stone carvers were brought in to make Roosevelt Dam a work of art. Apache and Saguaro lakes have food and boating concessions.

Enjoy a day of exploration, have dinner and, with wood available from the campground host, make a campfire. Then sit quietly and enjoy the view in anticipation of the changing palette, from pale pink to rose, of Arizona's spectacular sunsets. ■

## For More Info

- McDowell Mountain Regional Park, (480) 471-0173, [maricopa.gov/parks](http://maricopa.gov/parks).
- Fountain Hills Chamber of Commerce, (480) 837-1654, [fountainhillschamber.com](http://fountainhillschamber.com).
- For more state travel information: Arizona Tourism, (888) 520-3434, [arizonaguide.com](http://arizonaguide.com). Circle 212 on Reader Service Card.