



Yuma has long been a favorite winter destination for sun-seeking RVers, but this southern Arizona desert community straddling the Colorado River is gaining notoriety of late for much more than its 340 days a year of sunshine.

In October of 2000, President Clinton signed legislation designating the Yuma Crossing as the first *National Heritage Area* west of the Rockies. This lofty honor certifies Yuma's unique and heretofore largely unheralded role in American history — which

began unfolding 70 years *before* the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock when Spaniard Hernando de Alarcon sailed up the Colorado River to its



Yuma Crossing

Already a popular wintertime RV getaway, this Arizona outpost is undergoing an enticing facelift

■ DAVE G. HOUSER



Yuma is the nation's #2 producer of lettuce. Main Street's revitalization is part of the master plan for the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area. The East Wetlands Project is destined to clear non-native vegetation along the Lower Colorado River (above). From 1876-1909, this prison housed some of Arizona's most notorious criminals. The Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge helped link the nation's first transcontinental highway.

Yuma Crossing

confluence with the Gila River, “discovering” present-day Yuma.

A pair of granite outcroppings flanking the river created the so-called Yuma Crossing, one of the few safe and convenient crossing points along the then free-flowing Colorado. Westward expansion in the 1800s coursed through Yuma; more than 60,000 California-bound gold-seekers crossed the Colorado by rope ferry in 1849-50.

Owing to its location as a crossroads of the river and historic trails westward, Yuma became a key military post, steamship port and trans-shipment depot. With the revolution in transportation technology, other crossings quickly followed. In 1877, the first railroad came into Arizona by way of California — and in 1915, the opening of the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge helped link the first transcontinental highway. The establishment of Yuma Territorial Prison in 1875 further enhanced the city’s development.

As the 20th-century evolved, Yuma’s importance as a crossing faded — but an innovative scheme to harness and manage the Colorado River for power and irrigation came into play. The first major government dam and channel system (Laguna Dam) was built near the city in 1905, ushering in the creation of the Bureau of Reclamation, which set up its first offices in Yuma. The combination of a secure water source, industrious pioneer farmers and year-round sunshine created an agricultural miracle that today produces 90 percent of the nation’s winter lettuce (and a substantial share of its dates, melons, broccoli and cabbage).

The irony of the 20th century was that while Yuma experienced rapid population and economic growth, the community grew away from the river. Dams and canals that reduced flooding, generated power and fostered agriculture also severely diminished the river’s ecosystems. Starved of fresh water and choked by non-native vegetation, Yuma’s river bottom became increasingly unsightly and useless, save for a tract on the west side that was utilized as a dump.

Recently, however, (and particularly during the last decade), civic

organizations, the private sector and local government have worked in partnership to reconnect Yuma with its river. A plan began taking shape in support of environmental renewal of the Colorado River, historic interpretation and preservation of the Yuma Crossing and other heritage sites, and the recognition and celebration of the many cultures of the Yuma community.

A widening circle of support grew to include the local Quechan and Cocopah Indian Tribal Councils, various state and federal agencies, Union Pacific Railroad and scores of farmers and other property owners along the river. Planning turned to action as task forces went to work sourcing funds and manpower to restore a wide sweep of the Colorado River wetlands, refurbish historic structures, reopen the Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge and upgrade facilities at the Yuma Territorial Prison State Historic Park and Yuma Crossing State Historic Park. These efforts, too, spawned development of cultural and eco-tourism programs and special events, none more popular than the annual Birding and Nature Festival each April.

“Recognition as a National Heritage Area is just the frosting on the cake,” says Yuma Convention and Visitor Bureau president, Roger Beadle. “The real satisfaction comes with the fact that Yuma is a far better place today, both for its citizens and visitors alike.”

Yuma’s facelift has made this RV-popular winter treat even more enticing. Campers at River’s Edge RV Resort, for example, now look across the Colorado at the beautifully manicured 110-acre West Wetlands Park with its picnic shelters, playground, hummingbird garden and recreation trails — an area occupied until a few years ago by an ugly dump. An even more energetic restoration is underway to the east, where a 1,400-acre stretch of river bottom is being cleared of exotic growth and replanted with native cottonwoods and willows. This program has been heralded as a national model for wetlands restoration.

Yuma Crossing

A great deal of redevelopment has also transpired in the city itself, whose Heritage Area has been divided into five districts: the Downtown Riverfront, Main Street, Brinley Avenue, Century Heights and the Southern Pacific Yards.

Restoration work is well underway in all districts but most noticeably on Main Street, the city's traditional hub of commerce, arts and entertainment.

A partnership between merchants and the city has rendered the thoroughfare a convertible street, accommodating either festivals and special events or vehicular traffic. Historic facades have been restored, a large fountain has been installed and, most important of all, the historic 1912 Yuma Theater (famous in its day as a vaudeville stage) has been restored and linked with the striking new Yuma Art Center next door, which opened in February

2004. The combined performing and visual arts complex serves not only as a regional arts resource serving dozens of organizations but also as a cultural attraction that has substantially boosted the downtown revitalization effort.

The 1917 Gandolfo Theater and a number of turn-of-the-century adobes in the historic North End, restored in cooperation with the Arizona Historical Society, highlight progress in the Brinley District, while conservancy in the eclectic residential Century Heights District include some fine examples of Queen Anne, Victorian and Spanish colonial revival homes. A proposed new residential development is planned for the currently vacant Southern Pacific Yards.

Lovely old Yuma City Hall, a *National Historic Landmark*, serves as headquarters for the Heritage Area Corporation and will be converted into the Yuma Heritage Center, loaded with displays and interpretive exhibits, which will anchor the Downtown Riverfront District. Directly on the water, Gateway Park (an ambitious project still awaiting funding) will streamline visitor access to the river and will feature a host of amenities including docking facilities for excursion boats and recreational watercraft. A privately financed all-suite hotel and conference center is also in the offing for the riverfront district.

If the dramatic changes in and about Yuma have somehow escaped your attention, make note — and by all means, add this dynamic desert community to the top of your list of winter vacation possibilities. ■

For More Info

Arizona Office of Tourism,
(888) 520-3434,
arizonaguide.com. *CIRCLE 223*
ON READER SERVICE CARD.

Yuma Convention & Visitors
Bureau, (800) 293-0071,
visityuma.com.

Consult your *2005 Trailer Life*
Directory for campgrounds
in the area.