

Arriving Arizona

Your oven is dry heat, too.

“Welcome back to the United States of America.” I had just told the guy in the gun shop that I’d just moved from California. He’d smiled and shaken my hand and looked me square in the eye. To his mind, the western boundary of the country wasn’t marked by the Pacific Ocean but by the Arizona-California border.

I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know things feel different here in Arizona. For one thing, it’s flat. I grew up in Denver, so I was used to always getting my bearings by knowing that the Rockies were always to the west. In California, the Sierra Nevada are always to the east, but since you can’t really see them from the San Francisco area, you have to rely on the ocean—if you see it, it’s to the west; if you can’t see it, you can sometimes smell it; and at the very least, the fog blows in from the west, the prevailing wind is from the west or northwest, and the sun sets in the west.

But Arizona, at least this part of Arizona around Phoenix, is the land of vistas. If you find a little mound of ground to raise you up a few feet, you can see for miles in every direction. But if you stood in the Central Valley of California, you could see for miles in every direction, too.

In fact, Arizona and California are probably more alike than either state would want to admit.

The middle of Arizona is sort of like east side of California: It’s got mountains, it’s got trees, it gets snow. And southern California is sort of like southern Arizona: It’s a desert. If Los Angeles didn’t draw water from the Owens Valley at the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada (what Bill Mulholland accomplished with the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1913 and everyone learned about fictionally in *Chinatown* (one of my favorite movies of all time, by the way)), and now from the Colorado River to the east (which forms that squiggly border with Arizona), it would be as much a desert as the outskirts of Phoenix.

And even Phoenix, which is in the desert, has mountains. They’re not the Sierra, but nothing is. But after a short time, you recognize that the White Tank Mountains are on the west and South Mountain is conveniently in the south, so you can get your bearings. But here the mountains seem to just erupt from the desert like zits on a teenager’s face, interrupting the broad vistas with sudden up thrusts of rock that create an almost cognitive dissonance that such jagged peaks could so abruptly burst from the desert floor.

I have a friend who is an earthquake engineer and travels all over the world to give lectures to fellow professionals. When I told him we were moving to Arizona, he described the state as “one of the most geologically uninteresting places on Earth.”

Maybe if your professional thrills come from living at the edge of the San Andreas Fault and you like the fact that the local segment of the Ring of Fire is less than a half day's drive away and you're breathless that the Cascadia Subduction Zone is just up the coast a ways, maybe by that standard Arizona is uninteresting. But if you go to the Grand Canyon, you can look down into rocks that were formed two billion years ago, almost half the age of the Earth itself. You can see trees that have petrified into solid rock. And you can see a stunning example of Earth's early history in a picture-perfect meteor crater near Winslow, which could just as easily be on Mars or the Moon.

Sure, it's a little disconcerting at first to be in the garden department at Home Depot and see a guy reading the back of a bag of potting soil while wearing a gun on his hip. Or to be in Sam's Club and see a guy impeccably dressed in a black suit and a black silk shirt, escorting a charming-looking young woman also dressed in her finest, while sporting a pistol in an equally fashionable black holster. Open carry is the exception. But you know that a lot of the loose-fitting shirts are as much to cover your sidearm as to keep your cool.

But nobody flinches. Nobody panics and flees the premises screaming, "He's got a gun, we're all gonna die!" This isn't California. Here, firearms just seem to be part of the landscape. Venture out into that desert or up into any of those hills, and there are things there like rattlesnakes that can seriously hurt you.

We live in a "development." It's suburban, but it's not like being right at the edge of the known civilized universe. I mean, drive a mile from here, and you're in raw desert, but still, this is not the frontier. But we've got rabbits all over the place, and you can't drive a block without having to wait for a quail family to cross the road, or a bunch of mourning doves to decide whether moving over a foot might be preferable to being squashed under a tire, no matter how slow-moving and how patient the driver is. We have coyotes and javelinas (a type of wild pig) and scorpions and some kind of cockroach that's about three inches long and looks like a miniature lobster, only not nearly so mouth-watering. And you know what? People embrace all this wildlife. Just like we did in California. A lot of people in Arizona, it turns out, come from a lot of places other than Arizona.

But whatever values and experiences and histories we bring from where we lived before, we now seem happy to share the same common experience of living in Arizona. I don't know, maybe it's me or maybe it's where we're living exactly, but I feel more I'm in touch with the elements here. It's hot. And after a few days of 110, you long for the days of 105. But they're right about the dry heat: It is different. When it hit 90 in San Francisco, the headline in the paper was inevitably something like "City stalls as temp soars." Here in Arizona, it hits 90 and people are looking for socks and a long-sleeve shirt.

And while the winter here is all nice and pleasant and paradise-like, which pulls in the "snowbirds" from the Midwest and Northeast like a magnet pulling iron filings from a pile of dirt, the summer here reminds you that you are at the mercy of forces on this planet much greater even than the wrath of the IRS. Dust storms rise up from the desert north of Tucson and roll up into great biblical clouds of brown wind that tower over the land like a tsunami in some end-of-the-world special-effects movie. TV news crews cover its advance

and storm chasers dance at its front edge as it moves inexorably north toward Phoenix. And the sky turns suddenly reddish-brown and winds begin to whip you and every tree as if someone had turned on a switch. Then your skin is being sandblasted and fine dust begins working its way into every pore of your skin.

Then as quickly as it's rolled in, it's rolled on, and you think you're safe. Until it starts to rain. Not rain in the conventional sense of what most of us know as rain, but rain in the Noah-it's-time-to-launch-the-ark sense. It just dumps. And then you realize what all those deep-carved channels next to the roads are for, because this is the land of the flash flood, where the parched desert has been burnished to a fine hard concrete and water flows horizontally instead of down into the soil.

And maybe during the rain or before the rain or maybe it's after the rain, the Norse gods and the Greek gods and the Roman gods all seem to be fighting it out in the heavens by hurling great bolts of lightning and thunder bombs at each other. It makes for an amazing sky—and nervous pets.

But the next morning, the sky might be blue again and the air fresh and clear. Or it might be muggy and humid and sticky hot. But either way, the whole world seems to have been covered in a smooth brown layer of dust as fine as talcum powder. Forget about putting your paper towel to the test in your kitchen, bring it out to Arizona after a dust and rainstorm and see how it fares.

They call it “monsoon season” around here, which I thought only applied to the tropics, but certainly applies here, too.

But these severe storms are rare, even during the season, and even at that the mornings and evenings are filled with the most extraordinary light that bathes every palm frond and every Palo Verde tree and every distant mountainside with a soft glow that almost calls to your ears the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, it's that grand, that inspiring, that holy.

I lived in California for forty-eight years. I've been in Arizona for two months. But that has made me realize that our real enemy, what will really drain the life from us, is complacency. “Being settled” is a good thing, but “settling” is bad. When you thrust yourself into a whole new world, as we did by moving here to Arizona, you realize that we humans need challenges in order to grow and to thrive. Moving here has reignited instincts long atrophied, a can-do, let's-get-it-done spirit that is invigorating and thrilling and exhausting but remarkably fun.

It's not testing yourself at your limits, not like *Naked Survivor* or some such show where you're cast into the jungle with nothing but a pocketknife and a Q-Tip. But it's the idea of rattling your cage, upsetting your routine, forcing you to cope and invent and discover and *live* in a new way. That's what's great about it.

I love California. I loved living there for forty-eight years. And California is still there, just a few hundred miles away. But I'm already loving Arizona. I doubt I'll make it another forty-eight years here. But what the hell, it's worth a try.