

THE MOUNTAIN GETAWAY ISSUE



# SUNRUNNER

THE JOURNAL OF THE REAL DESERT

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**FILM HISTORY IS  
ALIVE IN LONE PINE**

**PRESCOTT CIRCLE**

Roger Naylor takes us for a hike on a  
fantastic Arizona trail

**DRIVE 395  
EASTERN SIERRA PARADISE**



# ARIZONA'S

# SURROUNDED BY ADVENTURE:

## Prescott Circle Trail



## Author Roger Naylor shares a favorite mountain hike in Arizona

It will occur to you at some point along the Prescott Circle Trail that this was not your typical Arizona hike at all.

Maybe as you move through shaggy grasslands shimmering golden in morning sun, or weave among an elegant ponderosa pine forest with the sparkling water of Goldwater Lake peeking through the trees. Maybe as you relax in juniper shade admiring the rocky thrust of Thumb Butte, or pause to watch mule deer graze in the timber on Wolverton Mountain.

Maybe as you reach a high saddle to see the entire town sprawled at your feet, or as you enjoy an intimate moment listening to butterfly wings beat back the breeze from its perch atop a thistle bloom. Maybe as you pass beneath the spreading branches of century-old cottonwood trees or scramble among those rowdy, riotous and weirdly stacked boulders that stand guard at Watson and Willow lakes. Whatever you expected, Prescott Circle Trail delivers so much more.

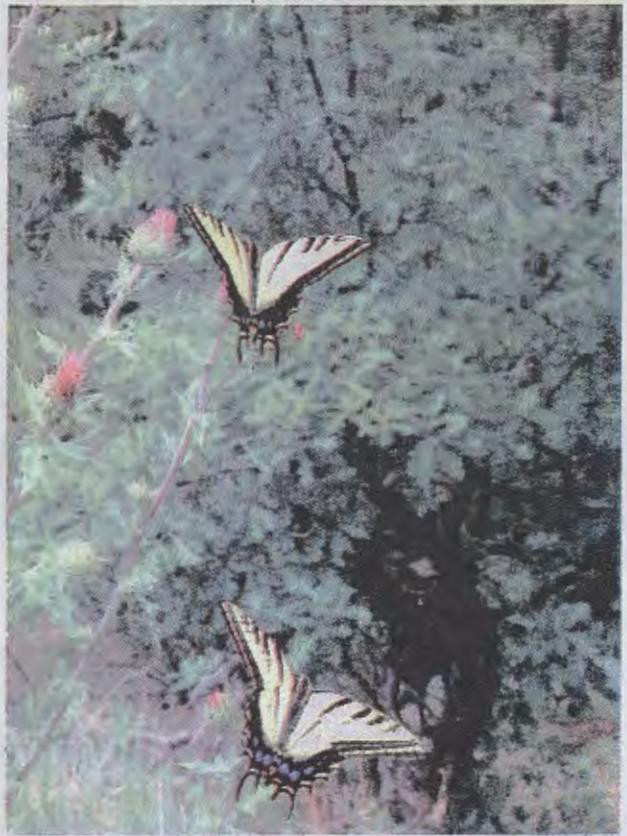
Suddenly, Prescott is surrounded by adventure. The newly completed 54-mile trail throws a long and deliciously diverse loop around the town in central Arizona. It passes through a remarkable range of habitats from riparian corridors to marshy lakes to open grasslands to dense chaparral and into lush pine forests. Along the way it offers sweeping views, connects all major landmarks

and provides a backcountry experience while never straying far from city comforts. Any trail that delivers wilderness and Whiskey Row is one worth exploring.

For those who imagine Arizona to be nothing but sun-scorched desert, Prescott swiftly dispels that tired notion. The town nestles in a forested bowl, 5,374 feet above sea level amid the largest stand of ponderosa pine in the world and wears a chain of lakes like a sapphire necklace. It could be a landscape plucked from the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. During the summer, Prescott becomes a haven for heat-weary Phoenixians reveling in the mild temperatures of the Mile High City.

Prescott Circle Trail is part of the continuing evolution of the town that served as Arizona's first territorial capital. While long regarded as a popular retirement community, Prescott has been rediscovered by a new generation of mountain bikers, rock climbers, kayakers, trail runners and hikers. They come seeking Prescott's perfect blend of thrills, scenery and amenities.

The idea for one epic trail completely encircling Prescott was first formulated about 25 years ago and moved forward, driven by the passion of a handful of residents who were part of the Yavapai Trails Association. The project involved a remarkable level of cooperation between land management agencies and incorpo-



rates national forest trails, city park pathways, state trust land and miles of new construction. A battalion of volunteers known as the Over the Hill Gang, many of them retirees, manned picks and shovels and sweated over every hard-won mile.

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The Prescott Circle Trail is multi-use, open to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians. There is 6,000 feet of elevation gain spread across the miles but the trail is beautifully engineered. The pristine singletrack incorporates long flat stretches, swooping curves, languid switchbacks and rarely exceeds 8% grade. Despite their name, the Over the Hill Gang is anything but. They seem to have a knack for tracing natural contours, dodging obstacles and exposing exquisite panoramas along the way. Plus, they're very meticulous with the signage making the trail easy to follow.



WATSON LAKE, THIS PAGE. GOLDWATER LAKE, OPPOSITE PAGE. SCENES FROM THE PRESCOTT CIRCLE TRAIL, PREVIOUS PAGES.

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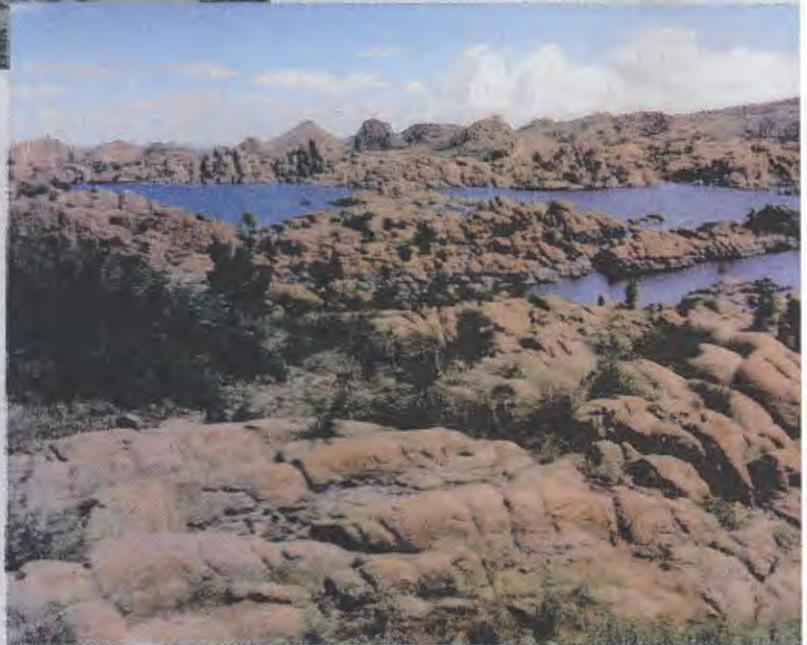
Numerous trailheads provide quick access for day hikers who want to enjoy it segment by segment. But the trail also skirts past several campgrounds—and dispersed camping is permitted in the national forest—so backpackers can tackle it as a manageable loop. And the proximity to town means that motels, restaurants, saloons and shops can be part of any itinerary. Bite off exactly as much adventure as you desire.

In a state known for an abundance of eye-popping, jaw-dropping trails, Prescott Circle Trail matches up with any of them.

Prescott is full of surprises like that. It's a thoroughly Western town with a comfortable Eastern feel. A stately courthouse surrounded by a tree-shaded plaza anchors one of the most beautiful downtowns in Arizona. Elegant Victorian homes line the streets fronted by tidy yards overflowing with flowers. The very air is perfumed with a slight scent of pine. You don't earn the title "Everybody's Hometown" without bringing a heavy measure of charm to the table.

Yet just a few generations ago this was the raggedy edge of the frontier. Prescott began as a gold camp and was named the territorial capital of Arizona in 1864. Ranching and mining thrived and nearly 30 saloons and houses of pleasure once occupied the section of Montezuma Street known as Whiskey Row. This was where legendary figures like Wyatt and Virgil Earp and Doc Holliday tossed back the hooch.

Today, Prescott has over 600 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's home to the "World's Oldest Rodeo," which dates back to 1888. The downtown is



ALL PHOTOS BY ROGER NAYLOR.

a treasure trove of art galleries, antique shops, restaurants, quaint B&Bs, and of course, enough saloons to keep the spirit (and spirits) of Whiskey Row alive. Three museums and the remnants of Fort Whipple, the original outpost built in the 1860s, help maintain a strong connection to Prescott's past.

Whenever national magazines or newspapers publish a list of Most Livable Cities, Prescott is almost always in the mix. A big part of that is the intimate relationship between the community and the vast swaths of open space that cradle it. Surrounded by more than a million acres of national forest and over 450 miles of hiking and recreational trails, no one comes to Prescott to hunker indoors.



The Circle Trail provides almost instant access to wild country as it follows the high backbone of rising mountains. It connects to all other major trail areas as it orbits the town. No matter where you are in Prescott, you're only minutes from a trail. What a rare gift that is—to be able to immerse yourself in fragrant woodlands at a moment's notice. To be able to stroll the shorelines of sun-kissed lakes or clamber over craggy granite formations whenever you feel the urge.

And the urge will strike often in Prescott, Arizona's new summer playground. The quickest way to discover this historic place, a mile in the air, ringed by mountains and swaddled in pines, is to just get out and walk around it in a big old circle. Fortunately, that's easy to do.

A Guide to the Prescott Circle Trail booklet has been produced by the Yavapai Trails Association and includes maps, directions to trailheads and descriptions of the segments. Books are available for \$10 at local biking and hiking shops or can be ordered from Yavapai Trails Association. For more information, visit [www.yavapai-trails.org](http://www.yavapai-trails.org).

FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PRESCOTT AT [WWW.VISIT-PRESCOTT.COM](http://WWW.VISIT-PRESCOTT.COM).

