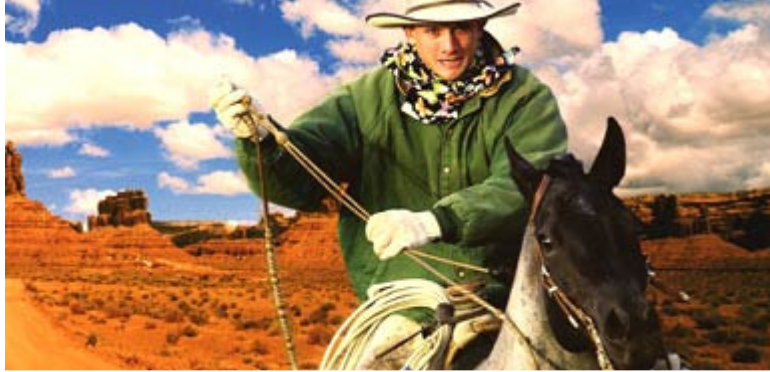


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Arizona: escaping the US elections

In an isolated corner of Arizona, you can find peace, ranchers and absolutely no TV, says Stanley Stewart



Stanley Stewart

I had only been in Tombstone half an hour when the shooting started. Apparently, it was the Republicans and the Democrats at it again.

This was just the kind of thing I had come to Arizona to escape.

Like most people in this year of interminable electioneering, I had had enough of politicking, of spin and soundbites, of poll figures and attack ads.

I was heading deep into the southeastern corner of the state in the hope of escape. I was looking for a quieter America, for a ranch somewhere with wide, empty landscapes, and cowboys with few opinions beyond yep and nope. When I stopped for lunch in Tombstone, I hadn't expected to be detained by a gunfight on Main Street.

Trouble had been brewing all morning. There had been heated words outside the Bird Cage Theatre. Threats had been exchanged at Big Nose Kate's. Now, Wyatt Earp and his brothers, Virgil and Morgan, with old friend Doc Holliday, were advancing down Main Street in spangly waistcoats. The Clan-ton gang had been spotted at the OK Corral. A crowd drifted after them. "There's going to be shooting," a fat man from Ohio helpfully informed his fat wife.

To some people, this was the Gunfight at the OK Corral, in which the Clantons are gunned down in a hail of blanks every day at 2pm. To others, it is part of America's political feud. The Earp brothers were the hired guns of the Republican hierarchy, the owners of the big mining and cattle operations who wanted to make Tombstone "safe for investment". The Clantons, humble cowboys who wanted to preserve a bit of economic space for freelance prospectors and small independent ranchers, were aligned with the Democrats. You can see how much has changed in 127 years.

I didn't wait for the final body count. I was a man on a mission. I climbed back into the hire car, a big beast appropriately named Bronco, and spun away down an empty highway. Telegraph poles flashed by.

Yellow hills rolled into empty distance. On the radio, crackling with static, a man was singing, “All my exes live in Texas, and that’s why I hang my hat in Tennessee.”

In Douglas I stopped for a coffee at the Gadsden Hotel. It is the town’s only moment of glamour, built a century ago for cattle barons. In the lobby, a grand double staircase rises past a vast spread of Tiffany stained glass. One night, a drunken Pancho Villa is said to have ridden his horse up these stairs, firing into the ceiling as he went. You can still see the chipped marble on the seventh step.

Pancho probably didn’t read English – which explains why he missed the sign on the door of the Saddle & Spur lobby bar: “No firearms or weapons of any kind”. The bar was empty but for the barman, who had fallen asleep in front of a “wanted” poster. On the television in the corner, people were waving flags and banners while John McCain, the Arizona senator, was giving them the thumbs up. I turned the set off and stepped next door into the diner for “All the coffee you can drink – one dollar”.

BACK IN the Bronco, I followed Highway 80. It ran like a drawn line through the empty grasslands of the San Bernardino Valley. In an hour’s driving I saw two other cars, neither of them sporting political bumper stickers. From time to time, distant homesteads appeared, set back a mile or so from the road, tucked into folds in the long, yellow hills. It was remote country. My mobile couldn’t get a signal. Hopefully, I was beyond the reach of Fox News as well.

Price Canyon Ranch lies at the end of a long dirt road in the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains. It was just the kind of place I was looking for. I wanted a real working ranch, not a dude ranch with an infinity pool and a spa and a yoga class. I wanted somewhere that felt like the West, somewhere comfortable but rustic, not a citified luxury resort where you expected to find the horses on the sun loungers, sipping martinis.

Price Canyon has 10 guest rooms elegantly decorated in western style with hardwood floors and Navajo rugs. One of the old barns has been beautifully converted into a large central lounge with a stone fireplace, deep leather sofas, a library of western books and a dining area where meals are produced by the wonderful Fred Tullis, a painter-turned-chef. If food is the heart of a home, Fred and his generous country meals are the heart and soul of Price Canyon.

any. If I was tempted to sneak a peek at Meet the Press, there was nothing I could do. And it got better. The internet access was down. A repairman was meant to come from Tucson – three hours away – but hadn’t been able to make it. Hopefully he wouldn’t be able to make it tomorrow, either. Or the next day.

After dinner I sat out on the porch and listened to the silence. Far off in the hills I could hear coyotes howling. A shooting star fell into the next canyon.

Riding is what most people do at Price Canyon. Sometimes it has a point – there are cattle to be moved, fences to be checked and spring herds to be rounded up for branding – and sometimes it doesn’t. Out here, they are firm believers that the best thing for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse.

I set off the first morning with Jesse, one of the cowboys at the ranch. We rode north beneath a vast sky over ridges broken by outcrops of rock. In the valley bottoms, lines of oaks and junipers ran along the

creek beds. Small quail whirred up as the horses approached, while redtailed hawks, wings feathering in the wind, sailed low over the yellow grasses.

We rode into a canyon where there were ancient Apache caves, later used by cattle rustlers; you could still see their rusted barbed wire, abandoned more than a hundred years ago, tangled in the brushwood. We rode across a high ridge where we paused to survey the country. Mountains pressed in on all sides. The peaks and canyons of the Chiricahua ran away to the north. To the south, mountains marched into Mexico; the furthest range, Jesse said, was the Sierra Madre. Their blue heads were buried in clouds.

Jesse had grown up in town, in Tucson, but had always spent his school holidays “cowboying”, working on ranches down in these parts. It was the only life he wanted. He could be living in Phoenix, working a nine-to-five like so many of his schoolmates, no doubt hooked on the evening news, but the lure of these landscapes, and of the life they offered, had proved too strong.

Jesse was also a musician, twice the winner of the Arizona fiddlers competition. In the evening, he came to play for us, unpacking his fiddles in front of the fire. The tunes were mostly traditional Scottish and Irish melodies transplanted to the new world. The highlight of the evening was a tune that he knew as Loraina, a melody so haunting that it was banned during the civil war because it made soldiers homesick, prompting them to desert their posts.

It had the same effect on me. After three days of riding across God’s own country, and an evening of Jesse’s fiddle, I had deserted. I didn’t care who was up and who was down. The poll figures meant nothing to me. I was a free man again.

In the end, I decided that it would be easier on us all if we just let the candidates loose in the streets of Tombstone, with spangly waistcoats and some twangy background music. It is a classic, really – the grizzled gunslinger, bearing a dozen old wounds, up against the new kid in town who thinks he has all the answers.

I put my money on the kid – and will stand a round of cold ones in the Crystal Palace Saloon, in Tombstone, should he let us down.

Stanley Stewart travelled as a guest of British Airways and American Roundup

TRAVEL BRIEF

Getting there: British Airways (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies to Phoenix from Heathrow; from £395. Tucson is an easy 2½hr drive from Phoenix. There are good plane-change options to Tucson with Continental (0845 026 4800, www.continental.com; via Houston) and Delta (020 8867 6295, www.delta.com; via Atlanta), also from £395.

Staying at the canyon: Packages: American Roundup (01404 881777, www.americanroundup.com) has a week at Price Canyon Ranch from £1,382pp, including flights with BA from Heathrow to Phoenix, accommodation at Price Canyon, all meals and riding. Round-trip transfers from Tucson cost about £250. drive from the city. When to go: Arizona is a year-round destination, and Price Canyon can be visited through the winter. But high summer is probably best avoided.