

AMERICA'S BEST STATE PARKS

BACKPACKER

GET OUT MORE

HIKES NEAR YOU!

- ▶ 79 LOCAL TRIPS ▶ FALL'S BEST TRAILS
- ▶ EASY WEEKEND ESCAPES

SAVE YOUR KNEES

HOW TO USE TREKKING
POLES THE RIGHT WAY

CAMP SMARTER

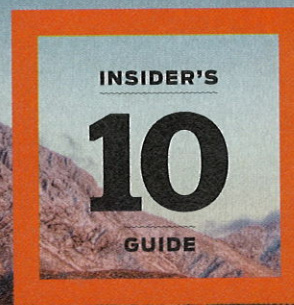
ESSENTIAL KNOTS EVERY
HIKER SHOULD KNOW

TAKE PHOTOS LIKE A PRO

16 TIPS ON LIGHT,
COMPOSITION & MORE



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Desert Oasis

Mazatzal Wilderness, Arizona

Think backpacking in Arizona is all about how much water you can carry? Not in the Mazatzal Wilderness, a high-desert preserve straddling the Tonto and Coconino National Forests.

Here, springs and creeks knit together steep canyons, Sonoran Desert shrublands, and pine-fir forests—where javelina, black bears, and river otters wander. For perfect weather, now's the time to join them.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

Travel through the Mazatzal to see saguaros and summits (here, in the Rolls Area by Brownie Tank).

The insider

As an official Arizona Trail Steward for the past four years, Chad Hummer roamed the Mazatzal Wilderness's roughest terrain, checking route conditions and water availability for the Arizona Trail Association. But the born-and-raised desert dweller was already hooked on the Mazatzal's magic: "I love hiking in places with shade and water—a precious commodity out here."

Go for the gold

All year, Hummer looks forward to October in the Mazatzal—fall brings relief from both searing summer temps and monsoon rains, giving way to dry, hiker-friendly weather (expect highs in the mid-70s). Even better: Starting in mid-October, the wilderness pops with bright oranges, yellows, and scarlets as hardwoods show off their fall colors. Hummer's favorite leaf-peeping trek traces Sycamore Creek under a canopy of golden cottonwoods. From the Mormon Grove trailhead, take the Saddle Mountain Trail #91 through a pinyon-juniper canyon 3 miles to the abandoned Story Mine. A few shafts dot the canyon walls (don't enter them), but the real attraction is the medley of shady, seasonal pools. Spend the night, then return the way you came.

Multiday

Circumnavigate 7,903-foot Mazatzal Peak on a 22-mile, three-day loop featuring waterfalls, shady campsites, and reliable springs. You'll score views of the Verde River and the 200-mile-long cliff face of the Mogollon Rim. From the Barnhardt trailhead, take the Y Bar Trail #44 southwest, gradually ascending blocky Mazatzal Peak (experienced scramblers can go for the class 3 summit, but loose rock and thick brush make it challenging). Around mile 5.5, scout a secluded social site under the pines. Next day, turn north on the Arizona Trail for vistas extending to the Verde River and Horseshoe Reservoir. Camp at Horse Camp Seep, a year-round spring. To close the loop, backtrack to the Barnhardt Trail and descend steeply along a canyon wall dotted with cascades.

Swimming hole

With its gushing waterfalls, staircase travertine deposits, and clear springs ("they're 30 feet deep, and you can still see the bottom," Hummer says), Fossil Creek draws the hordes—so much so that in spring and summer, the Forest Service bans camping and requires advance reservations just to park. But starting in October, the crowds fade and restrictions

loosen, opening up one of Arizona's primo escapes to backpackers. From the Fossil Springs trailhead, descend 1,600 feet on the 4-mile Trail #18 to reach the string of swimming holes on Fossil Creek. Splash away, then head at least 1.4 miles west to scout a cottonwood-shaded site at least 100 feet from the creek; camping is allowed west of Fossil Creek Bridge.

Basecamp

Pitch a tent under the pines at the Peeley trailhead, then spend a few days exploring the three trails that spiral out from there (high-clearance vehicle required; 4WD after rains). "There are awesome views overlooking the Mogollon Rim to the north and the valley below, and the higher elevation (6,000-plus feet) makes it nice and cool at night," Hummer says. Grab an impacted site with a fire ring (BYO water), then pick a direction for your next day's adventure: You can trace a ridgeline on the Mazatzal Divide Trail, follow a lush waterway on the Deer Creek Trail, or check out an old mine on the Cornucopia Trail.

Trip planner

SEASON September through April **PERMIT** Required (free); self-register at trailheads **CONTACT** bit.do/mazatzal