

Trail winds through huge boulders, Saguaro forest

Rick Metcalf, Explorer November 28, 2007

Brilliant gems are waiting to be discovered in the deserts around Tucson. On a gorgeous early November morning one was revealed in the Western Tortolita Mountains. Wild Burro Canyon lies near the end of Dove Mountain Road off Tangerine Road, ready to dazzle.

At slightly over 2,700 feet, Wild Burro Trail departs the trailhead and drops rapidly into Wild Burro Wash, leading hikers on a northeast heading as it crosses the wash several times in the first mile. Gaining altitude only slightly, the wide, smooth trail passes between North and South Gallery Golf courses. Concern about hiking in a developed area will quickly be forgotten once the trail rounds a few corners.

Wild Burro Trail intersects with Upper and Lower Javelina Trails at just over a mile, just the first of many choices hikers will be asked to make in this vast network of remarkably well cairned, signed and maintained trails.

Challenges hikers love to experience begin at this point. Lower Javelina Trail quickly ascends through hillsides covered with enormous boulders and a forest of Saguaro cacti. It's a delight to once again visit an area where these giants of the Sonoran Desert not only survive, they thrive.

Following several twists and turns the trail crests a small hill, opening views in the upper reaches of Wild Burro Wash. Soon the canyon will narrow to a steep rubble of boulders, well worn by decades of heavy flooding that have carved and smoothed them. Rapidly descending back into the wash, rejoining Wild Burro Trail, and traveling up canyon will soon bring hikers to the base of the falls.

To this point roughly 2-1/2 miles has been covered. Climbing left out of the wash onto a low plateau reveals a crumbling stone structure, evidence that long ago this spot was someone's home. The next half mile will challenge, climbing steeply to a point overlooking the narrow canyon. The upper canyon spreads wide with numerous side canyons and tributaries, which, when raining, would pour into the main wash before thundering over the boulder strewn falls.

Just over three miles in, Wild Burro Trail continues in a northeast direction, eventually joining Wild Mustang Trail, which leads hikers over the higher elevations of the mountains to the north. Breaking off to the south is Alamo Springs Trail, the choice for return to the trailhead this day.

Lunch is enjoyed in the shade of a massive Cottonwood tree. Once hydrated, fed and rested, the return adventure begins as Alamo Springs Trail leads gently up and over a low rise, then dropping toward the main wash. At close to four miles this trail will make a left turn and climb back to the upper reaches of the hills to the south. A short connecting spur rejoins the premier wash just below the disarray of boulders. An adventure to this point during monsoon season would reward with a thundering, electrifying experience.

A couple of miles hiked directly down Wild Burro Wash brings hikers to the trailhead. At my leisurely pace the adventure has covered seven miles in just under 4-1/2 hours. Avoiding too high a focus on the end destination and keeping options open ensures the journey will be fully enjoyed.

A GPS device is a key item in the backpack, along with enough water, food and weather protection. Picking up a map at the Dove Mountain Information Center will assist in deciding which trails to enjoy.

Having covered only a fraction of the many trails in the Tortolita Mountains has fueled a desire to see more. Another trail during another season has to result in another highly enjoyable day on the trail.