From Provo to Waco, from Texarkana to Tonopah, the Saguaro has been transplanted to landscaped lawns and casino lobbies. Now an Arizonan sets out to stake the four corners of its natural range, and gets acquainted with his own backyard.

Photography by David Muench
Between Gila Bend, Arizona, and El Centro, California, are 180 miles of desert unencumbered by scenery, a place memorable for what it lacks. The mountains are too distant to be more than names on the map. The big cacti of central Arizona are no longer big, and then not larger. Plants that do survive are admirable units for their persistence. The traveler’s eye searches for a focal point, and finds only a vast plain of small black masses scattered by the sun. The areas are volcanic, with a peculiar sheen, and under the midsummer sun the plain appears glazed with heat, like the skin of a roasted turtle.

To most visitors, cruising at sixty-five miles per hour on Interstate 8, the primary reaction to this desert is to get out of it. So it is with skyscrapers, because our bowling below its prime to the snows, and because we’re looking for the last square, the vaporization of the giant saguaro.

There were plenty when we left our home in Tucson this December morning, the mountain slopes heaving with thirty-foot, sixty-foot, century-old saguaros. Now, 340 miles west, at the Colorado River farming town of Yuma, we decide it’s time to plumb the local knowledge. We haven’t seen a saguaro since thirty miles back.

We’ve brought with us The Ecology of the Saguaro, by Charles Lowe and Warren Steenbock, a scholarly study that includes a distribution map. But it’s a little map of the entire Southwest, lacking the needed detail.

“Let’s see,” says the Cheyenne attendant, tagging up the bill of his cap. I’d say that day our map would be over by the Cuyama Mochachos or the Cholatines. Military lunacy ranges, you know, near there. Off-Limits-Do-Not Enter. But for the most part they just shoot dummos.”

We push onward, north and west, leaving the pavement when the sun leaves the sky. We camp in the Cuyama Mochachos Mountains, just across the border in California. What little firewood I find catches and burns freely, the embers pulsing with the last breeze of the day. After a dinner of garlic soup and a tortilla warmed over the coals, we walk through the desert, walking where we please because there’s little to stand in our way, only a thin line of scrappy trees tracing the dry washes. Back at camp we contemplate the cryptic words of the Cheyenne man. “They just shoot dummos.” Does he mean blank rounds? Or six! It’s a good thing he didn’t know the whole of it: I’m out to find the four corners of the saguaros.

It was Pete Sunda’s idea. Pete’s a lanky and sandblasted ecologist with an intimate knowledge of saguaros, having accidentally driven one into last year, while driving back from Tucson from a history trip in New Mexico. Pete and I began to search for a homecoming grove in the southern part of the state. We searched, waited, saw it, and made a ceremonial toast with a can of Milwaukee’s Cheyenne Bear.

“Someday,” said Pete, “I’ll like to find all four. The farthest west is east, the saguaro closest to the equator and nearest to the North Pole. The last ones—or the first, depending on which way you’re going.” He shifted the dashboard with his hand and belched, “Why not? And so the idea was conceived, I, however, delivered the baby. Somebody had to, for little research revealed that the saguaro was being cut down in its popularity to place it’s never existed. Postcard from New Mexico, dust covers of novels set in Utah, red velvet cocktails at Las Vegas casinos. Lie, all lies.

Those of us fortunate enough to have a land we call home hold some notion of where that place begins and ends. It may be where you find the arcing curve of a Southern live oak, the turning of sugar maple leaves in New England, the cool scent of sedgebush in the Great Basin. For me, home is where the saguaro is. I wanted to know its true range.

In Arizona’s Saguaro National Monument, a flowering member of the species blossoms upon itself like a giant bee in bloom.

I doubt in the Cuyama Mochachos. Clouds trailing tendrils of vapor drift in from the east, luminous across the face of the moon, falling before dawn. When the sun takes the chill off the morning we emerge from our king-size down bag, enjoy a banana breakfast of coffee and more coffee, toast biscochitos in our packs, and take a walk.

There are only a handful of obvious species of plants, and the variety of vegetation makes us feel like real botanists. We know of
We're waded down by a man in a pick-up. He's looking for a lost dog—have we seen it? Sorry, but we're looking for a lost squaw—he's seen it?

Dutch-boy style wails by a sun-warped door stenciled KEEP OUT.

“Why, you wouldn’t have to drive around in circles to get him if you weren’t on the lookout for that jackass junk collector piling up his crap all over the desert!” Shela perches tidily in the direction of her neighbor’s shack, a stone’s throw from here, even though she’s the only two habitations within a hundred square miles.

Unfortunately, she can’t help us. “If there was a cactus out there,” she adds, “I’m sure that jackass junk collector has made getting there a pain. Now tell me—why would a man collect antique bowls and put them on his property line?”

A fleet of old wooden crates, big boxes with the paint peeling and the shadows bared out, is grounded only thirty feet from her house. It’s the only one for miles, though her neighbor will get closer, for each watchcock is, notes Shela, a happy mix of shepherd-pit bull-doberman-cayuse wolf. Just thinking about her dogs makes her smile, and temporarily forgetting her feud, asks, “Ain’t it lovely out here?” But by the time we leave she’s fleeing mad again, pointing to the snakes that mark her land—Shela’s Last Stand.

Before we hit the pavement we’re waded down by a man in a pickup. He’s looking for a lost dog—have we seen it? Sorry, we say, but we’re looking for a lost squaw—we’ve seen it! He grins affably, and we leave and tell the right man.

“Been coming here thirteen winters, but I didn’t spot it until a couple years back,” says Bill Hall, examining the map tacked onto the hood of his jeep. “It was with my dad. We wouldn’t have noticed it that cactus—I mean, they’re usually only over in Arizona. It was big, but we thought it was a monster, and it was right around here,” he indicates an area of about three square miles. We camp that night in an arroyo, hiding from the wind. It’s been a warm day, so the sixties, but the humidity is so low that when the sun disappears the heat flows with it. At dusk it’s twenty-eight degrees. I relight the fire under the blackened pot, prepare the coffee, and climb the bank to warm in the morning sun like a lizard.

Our nameless arroyo is crowded with trees. The ironwood, whose prairie-sisal-wood and sun, seems an immense thing for this desert, reaching fifty feet in height. Its leaves are almost an inch in length, exuding turgidly through its long, slender needle-like shoots.

In the foreground, the pale white and smoke tree are collections of blooms, the latter being a mass of mostly dead thorns on mostly dead branches. Lacking a broad crown or pointed apex, the smoke tree appears to grow in random directions, the partially green-sprout branches, then dying, the dead ones a handsome nut-brown when backed by the morning sun.

Ten paces beyond the arroyo there’s scarcely a plant—only desert pavement, the windshield flats where small animals fit together like a puzzle, with sand and dust filling the joints. Across the flat there’s another arroyo, farther—another flat. A bird’s-eye view would reveal a reticulated network of converging and diverging arroyos, but our eyes see a series of desert trees in every direction. No wonder it’s nearly noon before we find it, all alone in a little arroyo the last squaw. With one big arm, one little, it’s about twenty feet tall, indicating it took root sometime in the late 1800s. It looks bare, with some spines and calluses and spindly shoots. It’s not dead or even dying. Squaw are incapable of self-determi-

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as a February morning, the sky streaked with banners of clouds, I cross into Mexico at the city of Nogales. From the border it’s only a short ride in a taxi with massive velour seats to the train station, where three blue coaches, a baggage car, and engine are stationed toward Guadalajara. Between here and there is the southern arroyo. Its location is well-known among local indi-

ents. Getting there is another matter.

In my backpack is a map with an "X" marking the spot, but this arouses no suspicion from the immigration officials—two women with green uniforms, lips painted rosy-red, and, for an air of authority, wrap-around sunglasses. They give me a look and a nod. When the train pulls out at four p.m., I’m on it, face
There are new things to see, like a saguaro passing me at fifty-five mph, soaring to where it will not voluntarily go. A trussed-up saguaro is a pathetic prisoner.

I leave the train and my new luck in Navaloa, a small and sleeping city, now for its bus station. A bus driver bound for Mexico City stops in for coffee, allowing me to spring my incredible story of "the southernmost saguaro in the entire world." He is proud for Mexico, and sympathetic to me soon I am left with my pack at the roadside, four hundred miles from Tucson. The moon is out for the night, but I can still discern Cerro Mesaica, the old hump on an utterly flat coastal plain. I find a dirt track winding toward the hut, and trudge under starlight until I find a place for my sleeping bag. Three hours later, at sunrise, I discover the southernmost outpost of the saguaro, thirty feet from any camp. There are more than a hundred, living among the glassy black boulders that form the Butte. Ironwood are here, too, with purple morning glories twining round their trunks. I climb the butte to see the Gulf ten miles to the west, across a thirsty and unbroken-thicket of small trees, each with an orbicular crown arising from multiple trunk. In July, when the rains come fast and hard, flooding the plain, the crown will leaf out into a nearly continuous canopy. Although the saguaro needs readily a wide range, the seedlings just as readily can in poorly drained soils. The saguaro live above this sea of them sculp on an island of sand, the rain quickly draining from between the boulders and cobbles of Cerro Mesaica. Too much rain is as lethal as too little. Meanwhile, on the butte, the saguaro holds the line. The colony is diverse; fuzzy globes five years old, yet only an inch around skinny, foot-tall adolescent columns, many-spired son-tines, for a century overlooking the Gulf and the skeleton of the falcon, with mere held out nulas, like, the say sotilas. I hide back to the highway and stick out my thumb. Within two minutes, I'm sitting in a rambling, cramped Tame Am, with Luis at the wheel. I'm looking good for a young man who last week killed his car—this car. He's looking for work, perhaps roofing, probably in Vegas or Palm Springs. The north, says Luis, is the place to be.

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An ironwood roping (left) seems to collapse under its own weight. Unlike saguaros, barrel cactus always lean south.
Leaving Tucson this morning, squinting into the morning sun as Ray's fancy much races along on cruise control, we talk of secret camp spots, books by Ivan Doig, Wallace Stegner, and Edward Abbey, and, stirring into gossip, of a certain transsexual river runner who has, says Ray, "had trouble getting the male appendage attached." Life isn't fair, we agree, as we leave the saguaros behind and climb east into the Chihuahuan desert, a high desert of cold winds, few obvious oaks, and no trees. Entering deep into northern Mexico, it's the undungalond kingdom of the cromero, tarbush, and white-thorn acacia, three shrubs that rule the broad basins between ghastly mountains of powdery gray limestone, a rock that erodes into cupids as friendly to the hand as a cheese grater. The basins often have no oaks, the serranos losing to dead-end chiles, the park-flat home of the engrine.

The winter rains here are usually weak, the plays empty in the spring. But today we pass a paseo alive with snowy egrets—water birds that seem too big for their stiff legs. White lope tuples with scarlet-tipped thongs bend the road, along with the tangy-scented blossoms of mallow-beautiful things that cannot last. Eocene with blossoms for a week or two, they'll soon collapse beneath the weight of seeds that will penicate stems, until powered again by rain. More flowers crowding the desert—the uncivilizing purple blooms of palo verde, the coral pink pensetum—down to the Gila Valley and the town of Safford, where we pick up Steve Bingham, another botanist. The afternoon is spent helping Ray "catch photos," which is the stuff of his science. After sitting through archives of botanical photos in Tucson in search of old landscapes, Ray then tracks to the precise place the shelter opened up to a hundred years ago, where he takes a matching photo. Old-timer talk of "the way things were," but Ray documents in grasslands invaded by shrubs, oak replaced by mesquite—his last due, says Ray, to catacombic freezes, droughts, and the transplanting of seedlings by cow.

All this makes me worry about the evermore saguaros. Maybe we're too late. We drop Steve off back at Safford and head across the Gila River, black and seemingly endless, before climbing into the mountains. There's nothing but cresset along the cobbled river terraces, where the cold air collects each night, while ahead and above, the mountains are dark with juniper and pine trees. We drive on, plotting our progress on the map, making a wrong turn, crossing a bridge between deep canyons whose watercourses are itself shaded by these walk of volcanic ash. Beneath the crampars of mottled pine stone, and amid the talus slopes of fallen rock, are hundreds of saguaros.

Ray takes a picture, for posterity. I take a walk. A creek meanders along the canyon floor, a place shaded by vancions with roots exposed and broken by rock, like slumped boulders. I climb up a slope where the pale violet bloom appears and everlasting is in the final light of day. The saguaros, like their southern counterparts, are close to the big rocks, the night radiates. I sit on a boulder to feel the warmth, and from beneath it comes the snarl of a rattlesnake, waiting for something small and also much colder. I move on, fast.

Back at camp Ray has already built a fire and mixed a batch of his favorite nightshade—grapefruit juice and tequila. "The good thing about tequila," says Ray, "is that it's good for you." The stars ignite, and we drink our orgies by the popping fire and continue that these saguaros have to be picked a tree to be left alone. I move on, fast.

Ray heads over to his cook box to prepare enchiladas, leaving me to idle feminine thoughts. Saguaras may have no brains, I muse, but they appear fairly clever. They live on a rock pile above the summer flooding of the Gulf plains, in an arroyo in the California desert to catch the one snowfall each year under this warm bower of snow to make it through the winter.

There is something pleasurable in the good fortune of the survivor.