

Writer Suzanne Wright

I'd been in Tubac for less than an hour, tooling around, getting a sense of the place, when I spied an open garage where a middle-aged male artist was working on a life-size sculpture. I pulled over, cut the engine and got out of the car.

"Hello," I said in greeting.

Soft-spoken Nick Wilson waved me in. He was working on a commission for the firefighters' union in Hamilton County, Indiana. It was a warm July day.

"In this heat, it's like sculpting with peanut butter," he said with a laugh.

Then he invited me into his home, offered me a cold drink and showed me his paintings of wildlife. His technique is unique: Wilson uses razor blades to carve into the canvas, achieving photorealistic results. The hair on his coyote looked so natural I wanted to stroke it. Thus began my charmed stay in Tubac.

The Village of Tubac, which doesn't even register on my GPS, is about 45 minutes south of Tucson, but a world away. Five flags fly at the village entrance, each honoring the various governments that have ruled Tubac throughout its history: Spain, Mexico, the Confederate States of America, the United States and Arizona. Tubac was Arizona's first European settlement;

the Gadsden Purchase brought this part of Arizona into the United States.

Meeting Wilson was no accident in a town known as an artists' colony with an eclectic, laid-back vibe. Nestled in the Santa Cruz River Valley and surrounded by the Santa Rita and Tumacacori mountain ranges, Tubac is lushly green and quietly beautiful. *Conde Nast Traveler* recently named it one of the country's up-and-coming destinations.

My digs for a two-day stay were at the Tubac Golf Resort and Spa. Formerly the Otero Ranch, the largest cattle empire in the state, it's owned by the same folks who run Rancho Mañana in Cave Creek, a town that Tubac is often favorably compared to. Nine cows still roam the premises, occasionally slowing play on the golf course, where the movie "Tin Cup" was filmed. With one of the largest stands of oak trees in the state, a lovely onsite chapel and impeccably manicured grounds, it is no wonder the resort often hosts weddings.

My spacious and well-appointed hacienda room had a gas fireplace, jetted tub and a patio overlooking the links. As I unpacked, I was already wishing my visit could be longer. After ambling along the river — the Anza trail is on-property — I headed into town.

Old Town Tubac is compact and walkable, with numerous galleries, restaurants and shops. One of them immediately lured me in. The cleverly named Tumacookery sells all manner of kitchen goods, but it was the locally made mesquite-smoked olive oil and dulce de leche coffee that captured my culinary fancy.

Other attractions in Tubac include the Presidio, a historic state park that is on the National Register of Historic Places and brings nearly 2,000 years of Southwestern history to life. There is also San José de Tumacácori, a mission built in 1691 that marks the meeting place of Native American Tohono O'odham and Spanish cultures.

It was midweek during monsoon season and it felt like time had slowed and sweetened. By late afternoon, storm clouds were gathering like enormous suspended bruises. Fortunately, I had an appointment scheduled back at the resort's intimate spa. My massage was satisfying, the therapist practiced at locating and smoothing stress-knotted muscles. I padded back to my suite in a bathrobe, opened the doors to a light rain and read for an hour or so before readying for dinner.

Elvira's has been named one of the 50 best restaurants in Arizona. The owners were invited to open a restaurant here after operating a very successful restaurant in Nogales, Mexico, about 20 miles south in Sonora.

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Now Elvira's is a destination for both locals and visitors, Mexicans and Americans. The décor is decidedly sexy, with hundreds of glass teardrop and heart-shaped pendants hanging from the ceiling.

The minute I spotted huitlacoche on the menu, I knew that I was in for an authentic dining experience. The food here, to my gustatory joy, is a far cry from the bland Americanized fare that often passes for Mexican on this side of the border. I first had huitlacoche folded into an omelet at the Four Seasons hotel in Mexico

City and the distinctive flavor imprinted itself forever on my taste buds. Think of it like corn truffle, earthy and mushroom-y. Chef Ruben Monroy lightly fries cigar-sized chicken tenders and tosses them with mushrooms, onions, tomatoes and roasted corn, deepening the flavor of the huitlacoche and providing pleasing texture. Yes, I admit, I emitted audible sounds of satisfaction.

There are many other temptations, chief among them the moles, the likes of which I guarantee you haven't tasted unless you have an *abuela*. There's the mole

negro, made with a whopping total of 34 ingredients, including ancho chiles, chile cascabel, sesame seeds, peanuts, raisins, plantains, cocoa, almonds and avocado leaf; the mole xiqueño, featuring morita and mulato chiles, garlic, ginger and pumpkin seeds; and the mole manchamantel, loaded with dried apricots, dried apples, plantains, peanuts, monita chiles and hoja santa leaves. My suggestion is to lasso as many folks as possible to come with you so you can try them all. Washing the works down with a specialty margarita is a must. I subbed mezcal for tequila for a rich, smoky taste.

I passed the next day pleasantly at the resort. The onsite restaurant, Stables, served a fine breakfast--one day it was chicken fried steak, the next it was huevos rancheros--and hosted a Spanish wine tasting that attracted a number of locals along with guests. I capped the evening with a night swim under starry skies.

As I was wheeling my bag out on the day of my departure, the sky opened and it poured. Power lines and trees fell and the roads were impassable. Thanks to the rain gods, I got my wish for another day in Tubac.

tubacalendar.com

Upcoming Events

ArtWalk: Nov. 28-29: ArtWalk invites visitors to explore the local working artist studios and fine art galleries for which Tubac is renowned. Meet the artists and enjoy special exhibits, receptions and demonstrations.

"Woven Nation" and "Under the Desert Stars" Exhibits: Oct. 17-Nov. 30: The Tubac Center of the Arts mounts a dual exhibit that presents an artistic history of Arizona. Navajo blankets and rugs from the collection of Steve Getzwiller and selected works of Maynard Dixon from the collection of Mark Sublette are featured.

Luminaria Nights: Dec. 6: Fiesta de Navidad is the town's annual celebration of the holiday season. The streets are lined with luminarias and shops are open until 9 p.m.

Festival of the Arts: Jan. 4-8: The Tubac Chamber of Commerce sponsors the 56th Annual Festival of the Arts, the city's preeminent event. It showcases the work of hundreds of visiting artists from the United States and Canada. The food court features a variety of cuisines.



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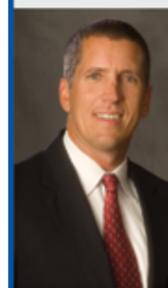


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