

Amelia's Journal

THE SONORAN DESERT, ARIZONA



THE SONORAN DESERT

The Sonoran Desert covers a large part of the Southwest in Arizona, California, Baja, and Northwestern Mexico. It's the hottest desert in North America and is known for the unique saguaro (pronounced "sa-war-o") cactus that grows here.

Some things you may not know about a saguaro cactus:

1. They're the largest cactus species in the United States.
2. They live for 100-200 years.
3. When they're fully grown, they can weigh more than a ton.
4. They serve as "hotels" for birds like the Gila woodpeckers.
5. They don't get their first "branch", or arm until they're 70 yrs. old!



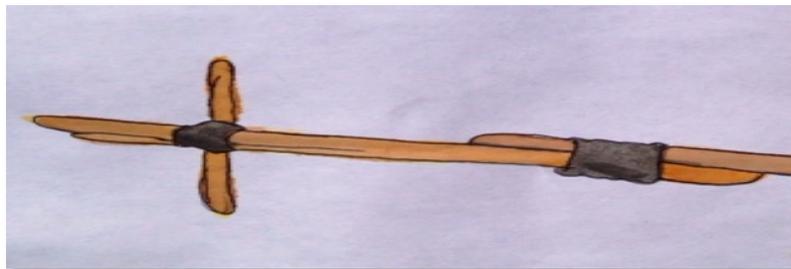
TOHONO O'ODHAM SAGUARO HARVEST

Saguaro's produce a sweet fruit that is red and juicy on the inside. The fruit tastes like a combination of watermelon, strawberry, and pear. The Tonoho O'odham Indian Nation has a very long tradition of harvesting the fruit of the saguaro before the monsoon rains arrive in the summer.



The Annual Saguaro Harvest celebration, known as "Ha:san Bak" dates back through the centuries. Ha:san Bak is a Tohono O'odham word that means '*the saguaro is ready!*' Many Native American tribes don't allow any kind of filming, so when my parents were invited to film the Saguaro Harvest, they felt very honored and wanted to work extra hard to present this tradition with the respect it deserved.

We woke up before the sun came up and drove to Colossal Cave Park, where the harvest was going to take place. We started by learning how to make a "koy-e-but", a tool made from the dry woody ribs of dead saguaro that are tied together to make a pole. When you're trying to reach fruit that are high up on the saguaro, a koy-e-but is a necessity!!!



A Koy-e-but

Before heading out to collect the fruit, we listened to a beautifully sung rhythmic prayer, which asked for blessings for the saguaro harvest. To continue the blessing, we took the first saguaro fruit we picked and opened it up. Then we rubbed some of the fruit on our body, near our heart. Going through these actions, the fruit pickers are asking for a good heart and a clear mind. Following tradition, we then placed the fruit on the ground with the inside part facing towards the sun. This was so the sun would take in the fruit's moisture and make rain clouds and rain.



We collected fruit all morning long. Everyone placed their fruit into large pots where it boiled all afternoon to make saguaro fruit jam. It was hot outside and it was a very powerful feeling to know that I was participating in a tradition that went back so many generations. As we waited for the jam to cook, we watched a rain dance, where prayers were sent, asking to "bring down the rain". I laugh when I see people in big cities running around with umbrellas. In the desert, rain is sacred. We all run outside because we don't want to miss a drop of it!

When we went to check on the cooking fruit, I noticed that my hands were a bright shade of crimson! I learned that saguaro fruit are also used as a dye for wool and fabrics!



We all took turns guessing how many jars of jam we thought the fruit would make. My guess was the closest, and as a prize, I was given a wonderful Tohono O'odham shirt (it's now one of my favorite shirts in my closet!)

SONORAN ANIMALS

The Sonoran Desert is filled with a lot of unique animals. I got to learn about a few of them as we filmed:

JAVELINAS



Javelinas look like wild boars with reddish grayish fur. Though they may look like pigs, they aren't. Javelinas are classified as peccaries and there are many differences in the anatomy of pigs and peccaries. Javelinas are herbivores, meaning they eat vegetation like prickly pear, agave and mesquite beans.

BOBCATS



Bobcats have short black and white tails, have long fur on their cheeks and tufts on their ears. Bobcats can be found in Canada, North America and Northern and Central Mexico. They have an all meat diet and are known to eat rodents, lizards, birds and sometimes deer.

COATI or COATIMUNDI



The coati is a curious-looking animal. To me, it looks like a cross between a raccoon and an anteater. Even though coatids live in social groups of 30 or more, most people never see them. They live in oak-sycamore canyons and riparian areas. These omnivores eat both plants and animals.

KANGAROO RATS



A kangaroo rat has feet like a kangaroo and a face like a mouse. They have pouches like kangaroos—but, they're not for carrying babies. Their pouches are in their cheeks and are used to store food. Kangaroo rats can survive without ever drinking water as they get moisture from their seed diet. They have excellent hearing as well.

LESSER LONG-NOSED BAT



The lesser long-nosed bat is one of several bats that migrate. They are nocturnal, which means they're active at night. This is because food sources like the saguaro cactus flower only bloom at night. These bats have long tongues to help them reach the nectar inside flowers.

DESERT TASTINGS

People don't always think about tasty food coming from the desert—but, I learned that you shouldn't jump to conclusions! My parents and I spent an afternoon at the Tohono Chul botanical gardens, where we had the opportunity to taste recipes with foods that all came from the desert. We ate tepary beans, which were good. We tried nopalito salad, which is made with cactus pads after the spines are removed. I was a bit nervous to try it at first, but the cactus was delicious and gave the salad an overall crunch. Then we tried turkey with prickly pear onion jam. Prickly pear fruit and onions? On turkey? I wasn't sure what to make of this combination, but tried it, figuring that if I could eat cactus and like it, I could definitely give this a try. It ended up being really good!

For dessert, we tried cookies made with mesquite flour (the mesquite came from ground up beans from the mesquite tree). I also tried a new drink as well: prickly pear lemonade. It kind of tasted like a mixture of strawberry lemonade and candy. I think I like tasting foods of the desert!

'Til next time,

Amelia

