Weekend long reads

North America holidays

The fall and rise of small-town Arizona

On an off-beat road trip through the southwest, Bella Pollen finds communities in the midst of reinvention

Bella Pollen FEBRUARY 28, 2019

Years ago, driving through the Arizona desert one bone-cold winter's night, I stumbled into the Hubbell Trading Post and asked to be directed to the nearest motel. The old proprietor barely looked up from the rusted skillet he was oiling. "Try La Posada, Winslow," he said, "It ain't the nearest, but you won't be sorry."

I wasn't so sure. The only noteworthy snippet I knew about Winslow was a one-line mention in the classic Eagles song "Take it Easy", and by the time I made it there, La Posada, along with the rest of the town, was firmly shut. Nevertheless, someone answered my knock, led me to an upstairs hall then lit a fire, illuminating not just the grand hacienda architecture of the place but a number of surrealistic canvases of First Ladies. Jacqueline Kennedy holding the card for the king of hearts, severed by a bullet. A beaming Nancy Reagan, Ronnie reflected in her starry pupils.

The artist, I was told, was Tina Mion, wife of the owner. The bedrooms were kitted out with original Spanish furnishings and the restaurant, I was astonished to discover, served exquisite south-western food cooked by John Sharpe, a British chef from Hartlepool. Here was some middle-of-nowhere alchemy and I was intrigued. Small-town Arizona is supposed to have been down on its luck since the joint decline of mining and the railways, but perhaps a road trip to discover the real story of these once prosperous communities was in order.

A freight train passing La Posada hotel in Winslow © Michael Turek

Winslow used to be the busiest railway hub in northern Arizona. Situated trackside, La Posada was the masterpiece of architect Mary Colter, who for 40 years worked with Fred Harvey developing hotels along the line of the Santa Fe railroad. La Posada opened in 1930, just after the Wall Street crash, and closed again in 1957, a year after Eisenhower signed the interstate highway act, in effect killing train travel.

By the 1970s, small towns such as Winslow lay scattered across the west like broken pieces of memorabilia, joining Arizona's countless gold rush towns, which ghosted earlier in the century when the mines stopped producing. Today though, thanks to creative grit and restorative graft, some of these are undergoing a splendid renaissance.

Sunflowers outside a house in Winslow © Michael Turek

On my return visit, in the dry furnace of summer, Winslow still has the feel of the dust-bowl era. The buildings are paint-faded and worn. The streets are empty, save for the odd flatbed truck and a native American grandmother rolling her wheelchair past boarded-up storefronts. “Take it Easy” is commemorated with a somewhat underwhelming statue of Eagles frontman Glenn Frey, literally “standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona”. There’s no doubt that it draws tourists but it is La Posada, today fully restored, that gives the town its beating heart, while Tina’s art, on permanent display in the hotel’s cavernous upper halls, has helped put Winslow back on the cultural map.

I find Tina in her studio behind hidden doors in La Posada’s First Lady gallery. Voluble and coltish, she works on a child’s stool perched low to the ground. “I’m absolutely a product of my geography,” she agrees. “If I lived in New York, I’d paint like everyone else.” Tina’s prolific output reflects a

delight in the truly odd. In the course of minutes, we flit from her series “Virtual Election”, which covered every US president up to the 42nd, Bill Clinton (“I moved on to the women, because I got so bored of the men”), to “Death Spoons”, one depicting Michael Rockefeller, boiled by cannibals in Papua New Guinea. Her portrait of Neil Armstrong is on display in the Smithsonian Museum. “Oh, and here’s a *piñata* of all the duds I dated before I met Allan,” she says.

Tina Mion in her study at La Posada © Michael Turek

Tina’s husband Allan Affeldt is the quiet saviour of the Fred Harvey legacy. He spotted La Posada on the endangered building list when the couple were living in California in 1993. The hotel became their passion project, Tina says, walking me round a museum and a 1930s train that they’re renovating. Allan is currently over in New Mexico, where he’s busy resurrecting Harvey’s first trackside hotel, the 120-year-old Castaneda. He answers his cell phone on the 10th ring. “These buildings are the distilled story of the Old West,” he says, struggling to make himself heard over the noise of construction, “great American treasures. We lament what’s been lost, but there is so much still to save.”

Drive south of Winslow, through the hot corridor linking Phoenix to Tucson, and you’ll find yourself on a desolate piece of highway littered with shredded tyres from exhausted trucks. Angle east, however, and industrial desert gives way to grassy plains replete with deer, quail and javelina. There, on a creek just shy of the Mexican border, lies the beautiful old mining town of Patagonia —

prosperous enough, in 1900, to warrant a two-storey railway station and opera house. Today, it's home to a tiny colony of artisans and nature lovers.

The Duquesne House hotel in Patagonia © Michael Turek

"Oh, you'll have no trouble getting to know the folks here," says Rick Jaynes, settling me into Duquesne House, an absurdly pretty adobe inn decorated wall to wall with Mexican folk art and textiles. With its single saloon, hotel and market store, Patagonia is a small-town delight. The town's marshal works out of a trailer next to the Tiny Bubbles Launderette, opposite the Politically Incorrect Gas Station (Pigs). Andrea Wood, waitressing at Gathering Grounds coffee shop, is running for mayor. The pie lady in the bakery moonlights by removing the occasional rattlesnake from locals' bedrooms.

Unusually for a community this small, there's an impressive library. Patagonia was where Jim Harrison, author of *Legends of the Fall*, wintered until his death in 2016. "Jim was kind, fatherly and a devoted husband," says Cassina Farley, who runs the town's theatre, "but that was Jim the man. First time I met Jim the writer, he walked up behind me and sniffed me from heel to neck."

Downtown Patagonia, Arizona

Harrison, famously, was an avid hunter, glutton and hard drinker. "He'd hold court at the Wagon Wheel Saloon," Cassina says. "Half the locals had no idea he was one of America's greatest contemporary writers. They just saw a disheveled guy, butt crack out, squinting from cigarette smoke in his glass eye. He was a cantankerous old shit, who'd say anything to shock and provoke and the town loved him for it."

Many Patagonia residents are had-enoughs involved in the arts. Zach Farley makes musical instruments. Saul Lieberman and Martha Kelly, originally from Brooklyn, live in a hoarder's paradise accessed by a path with a TV remote, a domino and a golf ball embedded in it. Martha's deceptively plain pottery comes in shades of cream and turquoise. Saul constructs exotic-looking creatures out of broken xylophones and cooking spatulas. "There are some world-class artists hiding away in remote spots like this," he says, "take Tina Mion, up in Winslow…"

Art and guitars, though, do not make an economy. Smuggling once provided a lucrative sideline. "There was a time when hundreds of residents got involved in drug trafficking," says Bob Ollerton, a computer scientist. "Retired folks with no income were suddenly driving around in $60,000 cars." Today, a resurgence in mining, prompted by new technology, is once again promising mineral riches, while dividing the town over economic and environmental issues.

"Plenty of people don't want them here," says Bob, "but the mine isn't going away. There is too much treasure in these hills. If Patagonia isn't to die all over again, we need to find a way to

reconcile our past with our future.”

Sixty miles east along the border, Bisbee has done just that. Situated in the bowl of the copper-rich Mule mountains, Bisbee was once the largest city between St Louis and San Francisco. Then, in 1974, the mine closed. Xavier, a drifter I meet outside a coffee shop, wears an eye patch and a faded black suit and offers an ironic footnote to the town’s catastrophic decline. “I’d had enough,” he says, “so I lay down in the street, but no cars ever came.”

Ana’s Seasonal Kitchen, Bisbee © Michael Turek

I had known little about the town before coming, other than that renegade stand-up comedian Doug Stanhope lived there and by definition that made it interesting. I had emailed him on a whim and he'd agreed to give me the skinny on the town when I arrived.

Bisbee's proudly shabby frontage is all historic charm. The wind of nostalgia blows through funky galleries and vintage hat shops. Hotel rooms are decorated as faux Victorian brothels or Chinese opium dens. A local Mennonite family, dressed in gingham and long dresses, delivers eggs to Ana's Seasonal Kitchen, where I'm eating a spicy omelette breakfast. Doug is reluctant to meet early in the day (saying he has no social skills before happy hour) but it turns out he's not the only maverick in town.

I soon fall in with photographer David Rose, a former assistant to Annie Leibovitz. David arrived in Bisbee some years ago, his New York life packed into a truck, and moved into a warehouse that he clad in wood stripped from old water tanks in Chelsea's Meat Market.

"Yeah, photography was good to me," he says, somewhat humbly, as I admire his portraits of Nelson Mandela and Willie Nelson alongside the album covers he shot for Bruce Springsteen, "but one day I was done. Now Bisbee is my home." David lives in the district of Lowell, which teeters on the abandoned mine, an apocalyptic-looking quarry with a dense amber liquid pooling at its bottom. When the mine's owner began to demolish some of Lowell's old homes, a few people took a stand.

Jay Allen in his garage in Bisbee © Michael Turek

Rose's buddy Jay Allen put a bunch of vintage pumps at the old Texaco gas station and plastered the streets with 1950s signage and cars. The local mining executives who'd grown up in the town thought it was cool and pitched in to help. "Project Americana ended up getting so much great press for Bisbee that the suits over at the mining company headquarters couldn't demolish it," David chuckles, "which, of course, was our evil plan all along."

I find Jay loading motorcycles into the back of a truck. He's off to race at the salt flats in Bonneville, Utah, he tells me, "but hey, come on in and have a drink." Jay, who has the looks and build of a Hollywood stuntman, turns out to be a land speed record-holder and founder of the world's largest biker bar, the celebrated Broken Spoke Saloon in South Dakota. His garage is crammed with upwards of 50 collectors' motorcycles and cars, all co-owned with his ex-wife. "Hey, it's not like I wasn't an honest husband, I'm just like that damn tumbleweed. You can't keep me in the yard."

Gay 90's bar in Naco, on the Mexican border just south of Bisbee © Michael Turek

Home is an old livery stable, where 1950s barbers chairs are semi-circled under a wall hanging of his daughter's wedding, designed by Michael Page, another Bisbee local, who has also created backdrops for the Oscars.

"When I was a kid, the mine owned this town," says Jay. "Forty years after they pulled out, it's finally reviving. So what if we get a few tourist jams — I'll take life over death any day."

It's time for happy hour with my comedian and his entourage — though not before a visit to the Gay 90's, a dark, dusty joint in Naco, Bisbee's entry point to Mexico, five miles south. There I meet a voluble old Mexican called Jaimé, drinking at the bar in his white string vest, and another riveting saga unfolds — this one connecting his German immigrant family, who came to work on the Mexican railroads, to the epic border battle between Pancho Villa and the Buffalo Soldiers. As the beer flows, and the arrows of the past lead back to the present, the shifts over the century seems less vast. What does it take to spark a town back to life, I wonder? A sense of belonging, the pull of home, a determination that the countless threads of shared history can be woven into a new narrative?

"I'm done in," I tell Doug when I finally manage to tear myself away, "I'm officially ghosting. Catch you on the next boom and bust."

Details

Bella Pollen travelled to Winslow, Patagonia and Bisbee with Dunton Journeys, a specialist tour

operator to the American Southwest. La Posada, Winslow, has doubles from $129; Duquesne House, Patagonia, has doubles from $140; Bisbee Gym Club Suites has doubles from $120

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