

Rising Arizona

From the desert floor in the heart of Arizona's Santa Catalina Mountains rises Mount Lemmon, a climb of epic proportions and breathtaking beauty

Words **JAMES SPENDER** Photography **PATRIK LUNDIN**





I've been riding for two miles when it finally clicks. 'Jojo was a man who thought he was a loner, but he knew it wouldn't last. Jojo left his home in Tucson, Arizona, for some California grass.'

The Beatles' 'Get Back' is the reason why the words Tucson and Arizona seem so inextricably linked in my mind, possibly the only reason before this trip that I knew where Tucson actually was. In the two miles we've been cycling (we're in the United States so imperial measurements rule) I've learned from my ride companion, Miguel, that Tucson is Arizona's second city to Phoenix – population half a million – and Arizona is one quarter of the 'Four Corners', the sole quadripoint in the USA where four states butt heads, the others being Utah, Colorado and New Mexico.

Miguel tells me he's spent the winter months training with the runner-up of Liège-Bastogne-Liège, Canadian Michael Woods, who is one of a number of 'snowbirds' – out-of-townners who flock to Uncle Sam's southwest corner each winter for a slice of Arizona's 350 sunny days per year. He also informs me that the cactus here are cactus, not cacti, and one such cactus is so proudly indigenous it is a protected species.

The saguaro cactus (pronounced *sah-wah-roh*) enjoys such a privileged status that when Miguel had some work

When life gives you a Lemmon...

...cycle to the top of it

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/77arizona. Start at Le Buzz Cafe on E Tanque Verde Rd on the outskirts of Tucson. Head northeast on the adjacent E Catalina Highway, and look out for mile post zero at the intersection with N Mt Lemmon Short Rd, where the ascent begins. Follow the road into the mountains, checking off waypoints at the Molina Basin, Thimble Peak and Windy Point at mile post 14. Willow Canyon, Palisades Visitor Centre and Bear Wallow follow, then it's on to Summerhaven and Ski Valley. Just before the blue town sign for Summerhaven, take the fork right, signed E Ski Run Rd, and follow the road to the observatory. Return to the fork and turn right into Summerhaven for one almighty descent.



The early slopes of Mount Lemmon are a botanist's paradise – if your thing is cactus

Top left: Every good climb has a good cafe, and Lemmon boasts two. Neglect them at your peril



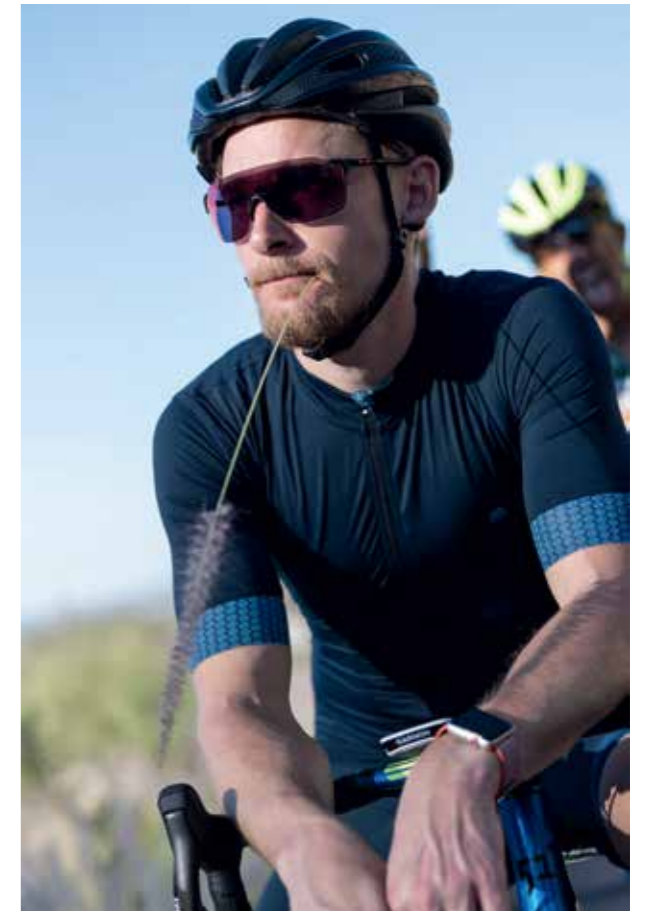
Windy Point is 14 miles up. Or given our glacially slow progress so far, several days away

General Frank Harris Hitchcock was a Washington power-player at the turn of the 20th century who went on to become postmaster general in 1909, during which tenure he established airmail at the US Post Office. In 1928 he took part ownership of local paper the *Tucson Daily Citizen* and made the city his adopted home. On experiencing the ungodly temperatures of Arizona's summer, Hitchcock used his political contacts to commission the building of a road locals could use to escape into the cooler Santa Catalina Mountains.

Work on the road began in 1933 using a prison labour workforce and took 18 years to complete. Although Hitchcock himself died just two years into the project, the road, on which Miguel and I are now pedalling, became dubbed 'the Hitchcock Highway', with a memorial to the man erected at Windy Point, 14 miles up. Or given our glacially slow progress so far, several days away.

I can't blame our pace on Miguel either. He's an elite-level rider who races for local shop team Landis Cyclery (no relation to Floyd). He has legs like turned redwoods and there's probably more fat in a pint of milk than on his whole body. And he rides a lot. He joined up with the US Air Force when he was 19 and retired at 40. Now 46, his services pension means he is totally free of the need to work so he dedicates his days to cycling.

I decide instead to blame our pedestrian pace on the bun – the one I ate at Le Buzz Caffè at the foot of the climb a short time ago. In true American style, this glazed cinnamon monstrosity was more loaf than bun, and probably contained about half my recommended daily calories. At the time I convinced myself it was valuable ▶



Top right: The mountain is a haven for wildlife. We can't identify this bird, but then it's not like *Bird Weekly* can identify a Pinarello Dogma

Right: The way is dotted with superb vantage points, or 'pull-outs' as the locals like to confusingly call them

done on his house a city official had be called in to re-site a saguaro cactus in his garden. To do otherwise could have resulted in him being prosecuted. People have been locked up for rustling cactus, which can sell for thousands of dollars on the black market. Not surprisingly, people in Tucson pay more for houses with a saguaro in the garden.

As we climb the early slopes of Mount Lemmon, in Tucson's Coronado National Forest, I am totally in the saguaros's thrall. We are, after all, surrounded.

Making roads

Mount Lemmon exists to Tucsonans as the Sa Calobra does to Mallorcans. It's a macadam mecca that rises over 27 miles from Tucson's east, serving the town of Summerhaven and Ski Valley (it actually snows here enough to ski) and dead-ending at the Mount Lemmon Observatory, 2,792m above sea level. And like the Sa Calobra's engineer, Antonio Parietti Coll, this road has its celebrated patron.



The rider's ride

FiftyOne, £5,800 (frameset), approx £11,000 as tested, fiftyonebikes.com

This is a custom carbon rig built precisely to my measurements by Dublin framebuilder FiftyOne. As you might expect, I got on famously with it, especially the paint, which FiftyOne designed with input from me and which drew admiring looks all over Tucson. The stiff and racy brief was met with low slung geometry, short fork trail and handpicked tubing from Enve and Deda, and the sum of these parts was a bike that put me in a naturally aggressive position, felt ready to deliver plenty of power and swivelled on the proverbial sixpence.

It did everything well, but really came into its own on the long, swooping descent of Mount Lemmon. With 28mm Vittoria Corsa G+ tyres the bike produced oodles of grip, the Enve wheels eye-watering speed, and with the paddle-style shifting of Sram eTap the FiftyOne felt more race-car than race-bike. However, the real star here was the frame itself, which had wonderful balance and poise, and was a joy to spend all day pedalling.

fuel, but now that I am on the climb it feels more like a dead weight on my stomach.

It also doesn't help that my body hasn't really woken up yet. It's 6am, which is a popular time to ascend Mount Lemmon so as to avoid the heat of the day. We spot a number of other riders on the climb, most of whom know Miguel by name.

As we continue slowly on the lower slopes of Mount Lemmon, the number of saguaros increases. Resembling tall, slender bodies from which arms jut, it's little wonder these cactus were called *los viejos* – the old men – by the Tohono O'odham Native Americans. Miguel informs me that each cactus takes at least 70 years to grow its first arm.

It seems the saguaros are a cornerstone of desert life. They traditionally provided the Tohono O'odham with everything from wine to sewing needles to jam to

Right: As the altitude increases the saguaro cactus population begins to dwindle

Below: Tucson's sprawl begins to fade as the General Hitchcock Highway does its intended job of taking people up into the mountains and out of the heat

Chilled-down Shangri-La will come from halfway up, where the temperature will drop by 1.5°C per 300m climbed



construction materials. Reptiles hide on them, mammals eat them and birds live in them – woodpeckers bore out holes in the upper trunks in which to make their nests. Saguaros are native only to the Sonoran Desert, which spans Arizona, California and Mexico. As we pass by on our tarmac carpet, it feels almost like these old men, arms aloft, are cheering us on.

We tick off a few lengthy hairpins and soon the sticky sprawl of Tucson is out of sight. Cooler temperatures, however, are yet to materialise. At mile zero, 880m above sea level, it was 18°C. By mile four, having ascended nearly 500m, it's now 31°C. If there is a saving grace it's that the gradient is gentle and should stay this way for the majority of the climb, averaging just under 4% across a total vertical rise of 1,756m. Miguel assures me that General Hitchcock's chilled-down Shangri-La will come from halfway up, where the temperature will drop significantly, apparently by 1.5°C per 300m climbed.

By my reckoning that means the temperature at the top should be nearly 10°C cooler than at the bottom. It's a buoying thought, until it dawns on me that it's not yet mid-morning so the mercury is rising at least as quickly as we are, and that by midday yesterday it was 37°C. If there was ever an incentive to up our pace it is to get out of this simmering cauldron.

America in miniature

Mile five coincides with a viewpoint over Molino Canyon, one of nine vast rock depressions that encircle Mount Lemmon. A helpful sign points out that there are many environmental faces to the mountain and that we are in the presence of number two.

At the bottom of the mountain is the Sonoran Desert, demarcated in the main by the saguaros. Now that we have topped 1,300m, that once-dense cactus throng has thinned to nothing, leaving a band of scrubby



► ‘Semi-Desert Grassland’ from which oak and sycamore start to rise. According to the sign we will traverse ‘Oak Woodland’ nearer 1,800m, ‘Ponderosa Pine Forest’ at 2,500m and finally ‘Mixed Conifer Forest’ near Mount Lemmon’s Peak.

In 1889, New York-born naturalist Clinton Hart Merriam pronounced these climatically distinct areas ‘life zones’, observing that they followed the same floral order as could be experienced journeying north towards Canada. Old Clint reckoned that every 300m vertically up Mount Lemmon was the equivalent of travelling 300 miles horizontally northwards. In other words, Lemmon itself is like a compacted version of America, running from Mexico at its base to the Canadian border at its crest.

This work was elaborated upon in 1908 by the aptly named Forrest Shreve, who concluded that the main cause of these distinct bands was soil moisture. Lemmon’s lower slopes were too arid for Alpine-like vegetation to spill down, while its higher planes too prone to freezing for desert plants to make it up.

Miguel refers to such invisible boundaries as ‘temperature veins’, but makes his own division of the mountain in cycling terms. At mile five many riders turn around because ‘it’s pointless to do much more if you want better power numbers – it’s all about going hard for a short time’. After that it’s either climb to the Seven Cataracts at mile nine – so named after the waterfalls that spill down the granite – or continue on to Windy Point at 14 miles. ‘Then after that, you may as well go right to the top.’ ►

Above Tucson is Willow Canyon, which in any other setting would be top of a Trip Advisor list in its own right



These pines still bear the battle scars of the wildfire that decimated 84,750 acres and razed 340 homes in 2003



Most other cyclists have long since turned tail, leaving us and some lizards as the only traffic

True to Miguel's words, most other cyclists have long since turned tail, leaving us and some lizards as the only traffic. We pedal with metronomic determination while the lizards scuttle about with chests puffed and chins pointed like fastidious butlers. The road is so quiet their scabbles start to form an irregular snare between the bassy rub of our tyres and the Doppler-whine from circling flies. Our speed is so low that I manage to spot a particularly well camouflaged lizard warming atop a wooden stump. The air is humourlessly dry and heavy with a rich musk of mesquite and rosewood, two other trees that thrive in this area.

Hoodoo rock formations cover the sides of the mountain. They're made when soft rock is topped with harder pinnacles that resist erosion to leave what they're stacked upon intact

Ever upwards

Looking back down a hairpin, then up it, I'm suddenly hit by the utter massiveness of the mountain. Far away on the horizon is Tucson, now a collection of intangible grey

cubes, from which radiates like low-tide surf a sandy brown and waxy-green wash of desert. Above that is an expansive mass of trees sprouting from Willow Canyon, a place that in any other setting would be top of a Trip Advisor list in its own right.

Looking up, the road disappears into a Mediterranean-style wilderness that is sandwiched below a 'sky island', the name given to the peaks that appear to be floating and isolated on hazy days. Uniting these different worlds are dozens of hoodoos, great teetering rock columns jutting out like lost teeth, looking for all the world as if they might topple with a single breath. On one hand it's a shame our road is here at all, scarring the natural splendour, but on the other it's what has allowed us to experience this wonderful pleasure in the first place.

It's heartening to see our 19th mile tick by, although the pleasure is tempered when I hear we are about to lose





By the numbers

The truth behind the stats

27

Miles (or 43km): the signed length of the Mount Lemmon climb to Ski Valley

45

Kilometres, the reality of climbing all the way to the summit observatory

2,658

Calories burnt on the way up

466

Calories burnt on the way down

124

Estimated net calorie deficit given scoffing of giant pastry and cookie

38

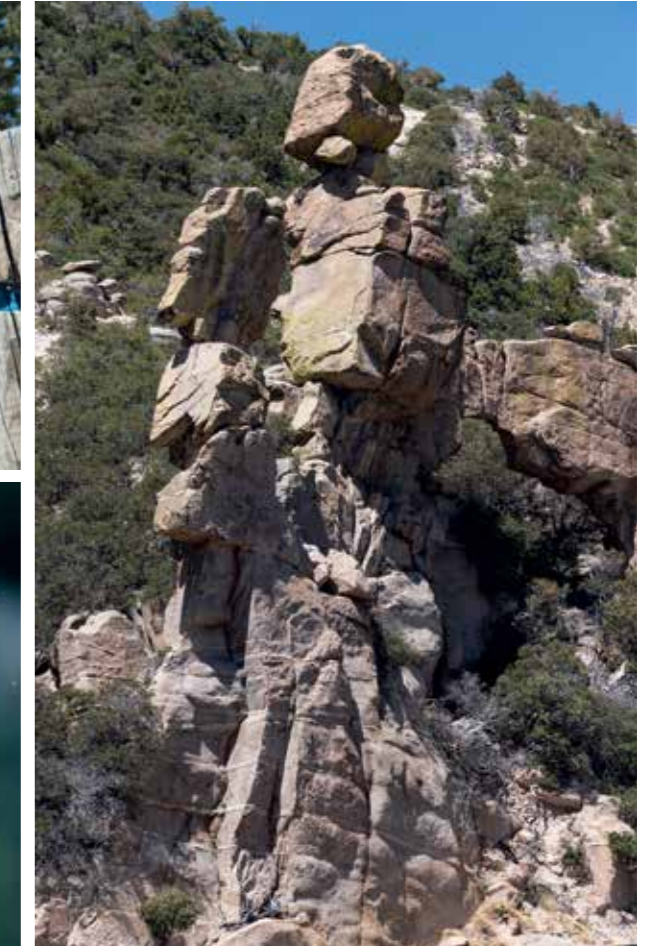
Peak temperature in Celsius

15,000

Price in US\$ being asked for a stolen 200-year-old saguaro cactus (the cactus rustler trying to sell it got six months in prison)



Previous pages: Unlike many Alpine roads that coil, Mount Lemmon snakes, taking 10 crow-flies miles from base to summit



Miguel can tell I'm flagging and slows down, only for me to slow more. We may as well be walking for all the use my pedal rotations are

precious metres in altitude by way of a descent to Bear Wallow. Miguel signals for us to stop at a lay-by in order to fill our bidons at a standpipe that he explains is the only guaranteed source of water on the mountain.

Today we have managed to find water elsewhere, in visitor centres and a couple of roadside restrooms, but choose the wrong day and one might find these places closed. Miguel says he and his friends will hide filled bottles along the climb in the days before an ascent, along with spare clothing should the summit prove inhospitable, which summits this high easily can be even on the sunniest days.

The water is warm but I'm glad of it, and even more so for the band of air we have just entered. The road is shrouded in firs that trap what little moisture there is, and together with the speed-induced rushing of wind, I'm pleasantly cool for the first time since we left the air-conditioned confines of Le Buzz.

The downhill drag is long but the sensation of cooling relief is over all too quickly and we're soon back climbing, even more ponderously now. By the time a clutch of A-framed wooden houses rounds into view, signalling the arrival at Summerhaven, I'm floundering in Mount Lemmon's giant hands like a fortune-telling fish from a Christmas cracker.

I can only imagine the untold wealth of comfortable chairs and maximum-dialled air-conditioning units in Summerhaven, population 40, but our road has presented a right turn away from this oasis to the observatory beyond.

A forest fire devastated this side of Mount Lemmon in 2003, leaving the charred remains of trees spilling into the canyon below. Their gnarled spikes jar against the memory of the rich environments further down. Miguel can tell I'm flagging and slows down, only for me to slow more. We may as well be walking for all the use my pedal rotations are. When salvation finally comes it arrives in the form of

The cookies are pizza-sized discs, served to us by a waitress with sympathetic eyes

🚫 a chain-link fence that ensnares the Mount Lemmon Observatory perimeter. We can go no further.

The return

Summerhaven is everything I ever dreamed it would be, or more specifically, The Cookie Cabin is. The cookies are pizza-sized discs of sugary goodness, served to us by a waitress with sympathetic eyes. I am clearly not the first cyclist who has underestimated this climb. I eat mine, then a good part of Miguel's. I rather suspect my pancreas is now operating at near-critical levels, but the rush from the sugar is worth it. Recharged (well, me at least. I wonder if Miguel ever runs out of juice), we're soon back on our bikes and sailing down the mountain.

We whizz through microcosm after ecological microcosm, the heat rising in proportion to the metres we rapidly plummet, as if passing down the levels of a most beautiful Dantean Inferno. The road is wide, the air soupy, and with these factors combined there is little need to brake, little need to do anything more than sit on the saddle, point the front wheel and let gravity do its thing for 26 absolutely glorious miles. Why Jojo would have wanted to leave his home in Tucson, Arizona is beyond me. 🍪

James Spender is features editor of Cyclist and Cookie Monster impersonator for hire

The Mount Lemmon descent is as one might expect from a 27-mile long road: stunning. The wide road means there's very little need to brake

How we did it

TRAVEL

We flew with American Airlines from Heathrow to Tucson via Los Angeles, which cost around £1,100. Assessing prices now, it could have been nearly half that had we booked further in advance. What was set in stone was American Airlines' \$150 e/w charge for a bicycle, although if your flights are fulfilled by British Airways (as our outward journey was) a bike bag is included in your luggage allowance.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed in two quite marvellous hotels. If grand luxury is your thing, the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort and Spa (jwmarriottstarrpass.com) on the edge of the Saguaro National Park is hard to beat, with spectacular views, a golf course and a steady stream of talented musicians at

various crucial drinking hours of the day. But if laidback chilling is more your vibe, the Loews Ventana Canyon Resort (loewsventanacanyon.com) is a classy example, with spacious rooms and a quite exceptional restaurant. Rooms from £160 and £120 respectively.

THANKS

The warmest thanks to Mary Rittmann, director of travel at the Visit Tucson tourist board, who expertly planned every detail of our trip, right down to where we had our coffees (try the superb Exo Roast Co, exocoffee.com). Huge thanks also to Mary's colleague, Dan Carraher, Ben Leitner from Sky Island Cycles (skyislandcycles.com), who took time off from his cycle-tour business to drive our photographer around, and Miguel Folch, a top rider, top guide and all-round top bloke.