

RON NIEBRUGGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Sabino Canyon is a popular hiking destination near Tucson.

SONORAN DESERT STROLL

By Eric Lucas

» The **Gila monster** is one of nature's most marvelous creatures. It's also misnamed. This lizard's bite is venomous, but it generally avoids humans and other large animals—so there's nothing particularly monstrous about this vividly colorful desert creature. Also, it ranges far from the Southwest's Gila River.

The lizard I am gazing at now is poised beneath a small paloverde tree a few miles up Sabino Canyon, in the Santa Catalina foothills. The Sabino Canyon Recreation Area, about 12 miles northeast of Tucson, gives Sonoran Desert visitors easy access to the wonders of the desert's unique natural environment.



Gila monster.

Though the canyon is a desert destination, water often abounds here, and in the wet seasons this canyon is verdantly green (but check ahead for flash flood warnings, especially in winter and summer).

This Gila monster's skin markings are peach, mahogany and black (they can also be black and yellow) in a beautifully intricate pattern that sometimes resembles Navajo weavings.

I have ridden Sabino Canyon Tours' tram (\$10) to its upper endpoint and begun hiking up a side canyon. Lots of people ride this wheeled tram up a restricted-access road and then walk back down, an easy 3.8-mile return excursion.

After watching the lizard for a few minutes, I stride up a small gully to look for the perfect saguaro to silhouette against the sky. Saguaros, those master sentinels of the desert, can grow skyward past 50 feet, live 200 years and store up to 200 gallons of water—though it's a myth that cutting one open yields a fountain. They are as picturesque in person as they are in the multitudes of photos in which they star.

During my springtime visit, winter rains have brought water sluicing down the canyon, and a leap across a channel brings me to the smaller

gully where I scout saguaros. Rabbits scurry beneath small bushes; hummingbirds buzz crimson ocotillo blossoms, and the chartreuse of young cottonwood leaves is complemented by the sweet, yeasty scent that poplar-family trees exude.

I round a boulder and spy two javelinas—wild peccaries—stumping across the hillside through mesquite brush. After my hike, back at the road where I started, I take off my shoes and socks and rest my feet in a pool of steel-blue runoff water as cool as lemonade. ✕

TRIP TIPS

- Enjoy guided trips and narrated tram rides in Sabino Canyon with **Sabino Canyon Tours** (sabinocanyon.com). This company also operates a 2-mile tram ride (without narration) up nearby Bear Canyon to the trailhead for the popular hike to Seven Falls (which is an additional 2.5 hiking miles each way).
- Sabino Canyon can be crowded at times. Hikers seeking more solitude can try **Ventana Canyon** or **Pima Canyon**, which are also moderate hikes from easily reached trailheads near Tucson.