

# CHRISTMAS IN TUCSON

By Alison Walstad

When the snow starts falling and a trail ride with your mule is just wishful thinking, it might be time to load up and head for the sunny Southwest! That's just what we did last year and managed to combine mules, great riding, quality family time, and Christmas holiday traditions in a wonderful and memorable couple of weeks in Tucson Arizona. That's a tall order to fill, for it's easier to include reindeer in holiday festivities than a remuda of mules.

We spent our time in Tucson at the Catalina State Park, one of our favorite places to camp and ride. Nestled at the base of the scenic Catalina Mountains on the northern outskirts of the city, the facility offers horse corrals and dry camping at their equestrian area. Numerous trails leave from the corrals and we spent many pleasant days riding and enjoying the fabulous Sonoran Desert scenery.

One day we decided to give the mules a rest and drive across town to check out Mule Power Farms ([www.mulepowerfarms.com](http://www.mulepowerfarms.com)) (520-298-1536). We had seen their ads in the magazine and had also enjoyed watching their talented mule teams compete at Bishop Mule Days. We were very favorably impressed with their facility. Ben Freeman took time out from his busy day to show us around and we thought the whole operation was first rate. Unfortunately our daughter's residence is located closer to the other side of town.

If we have one complaint about Tucson, it's that the city is hard to navigate. The freeway does little good to access most of the town and traveling across the city is a tedious journey of endless stoplights hence our choice of the State Park. However, we would like to stay at Mule Power Farm some time in the future.

Trailriding amongst cactus in 70 degree weather made it difficult for us to believe that it was the week before Christmas! Our kids kept reminding us, however. Even though they're now young adults living on their own, they seemed to expect us to continue to provide the same warm holiday family traditions they had grown fond of as children. However, times change. Mom and Dad don't live at home anymore. When the kids left home, we did too! We couldn't wait to move into



*Saguaro cactus highlight the desert trails near Tucson*

the tiny living quarters in our horse trailer and camp out and ride full time with two mules and a horse!

Christmas at our house always centered around good home cooking and it was going to be a challenge to live up to our holiday traditions in a primitive camping situation. Of course, we could always eat Christmas Eve dinner in a restaurant. But following in a family bloodline of talented homemakers that sort of thing just isn't done so camp cooking for Christmas it would be. The guest list included our career daughter who left the country life of her childhood for the city and doesn't like to get dirty or 'rough it' in any form or fashion. Also joining us in Tucson was our college son who's happy to be anywhere the food is good.

Our daughter invited some close friends but was skeptical of the whole idea. She's just a little embarrassed that she's the only one on the planet who has parents living in a horse trailer. Christmas Eve dinner at the mule barn at the State Park? Could it get any worse? Her friends, however, thought it was a fantastic idea.

"You mean we get to have a cookout in the country with a real campfire? Can we roast marshmallows? How about those Girl Scout things with the graham crackers and Hershey bars. What do they call those things?"

"Smores"

"Yeah, that's them. I want to roast smores."

I could just see her cringe at the prospect. But her friends seemed to be so



*The state park is located near the base of the rugged Catalina Mountains*

excited about the evening that she was willing to make the best of it.

Well, to make a long story short, the event was a fabulous success. We grilled steak, lobster, and shrimp, and enjoyed an exquisite meal on a cloth covered picnic table under the beautiful desert sky. We even managed to flame a few marshmallows for smores.

As night fell, brilliant stars illuminated the heavens above us and we talked of that wondrous night long ago in Bethlehem. Hearing the noises of our mules in a shelter nearby gave us a warm connection to the nativity story. We remembered and appreciated the help a humble donkey provided on that first Christmas Eve.

With dinner finished some of the guests left for late night church services, and the rest of us headed into Tucson to view Christmas lights. Our destination was the Winterhaven Festival of Lights. Each year thousands of people visit this popular event which has been delighting holiday crowds since 1949. The generous residents of this neighborhood go all out for Christmas lighting and decorations, and close their streets to cars during most nights in the month of December. Everyone is welcome to view the display at no charge, however, the event is the main fund raiser for the Tucson Community Food Bank. Each visitor is asked to bring canned goods or cash for donations. In recent years the charity has netted over 5000 pounds of food and

\$20,000 in contributions.

Our family had planned to walk the neighborhood streets and since there is no official parking, we found a parking spot on a side street and headed towards the Winterhaven entrance. Imagine our surprise when we rounded a corner, and what did we see? Mules! Several teams of

mules were hitched to hay wagons! It seems that carriage rides and hay wagons are a very popular way to view the holiday lights. We stopped briefly to say hi, but the polite drivers were very busy preparing for the evening's passengers. One teamster told us that teams arrive from all over the country to help with the festival. Hay wagon rides cost \$15.00, and part of this money is also donated to the Food Bank.

As we wandered the streets with hundreds of others, various wagons passed by. We thoroughly enjoyed seeing the wonderful teams of mules and horses almost as much as we enjoyed seeing the holiday decorations. This year's event runs from December 9<sup>th</sup> until December 26<sup>th</sup>. For information, you can visit their website at [www.winterhavenfestival.org](http://www.winterhavenfestival.org). Several different companies offer wagon rides including Red's Saddle Mules. They can be reached at (520) 825-0208 or at [www.redsaddlemule.com](http://www.redsaddlemule.com).

So, have yourself a wonderful holiday. Take time to enjoy and appreciate your family and friends, and don't forget to give your favorite long ear a holiday treat!



*Christmas silhouette at the Winterhaven Festival of Lights*

