

Arizona's Green Valley
Has Top-Notch Recreation

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PROFILE: GREEN VALLEY, AZ

Just 40 miles north of the Mexican border, Green Valley astonishes first-time visitors with its verdant landscape. Only 55 years old, the city has a slew of happy retirees who enjoy some of the best recreation facilities in the country.

> BY ROB RACHOWIECKI



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— Roz Barnes

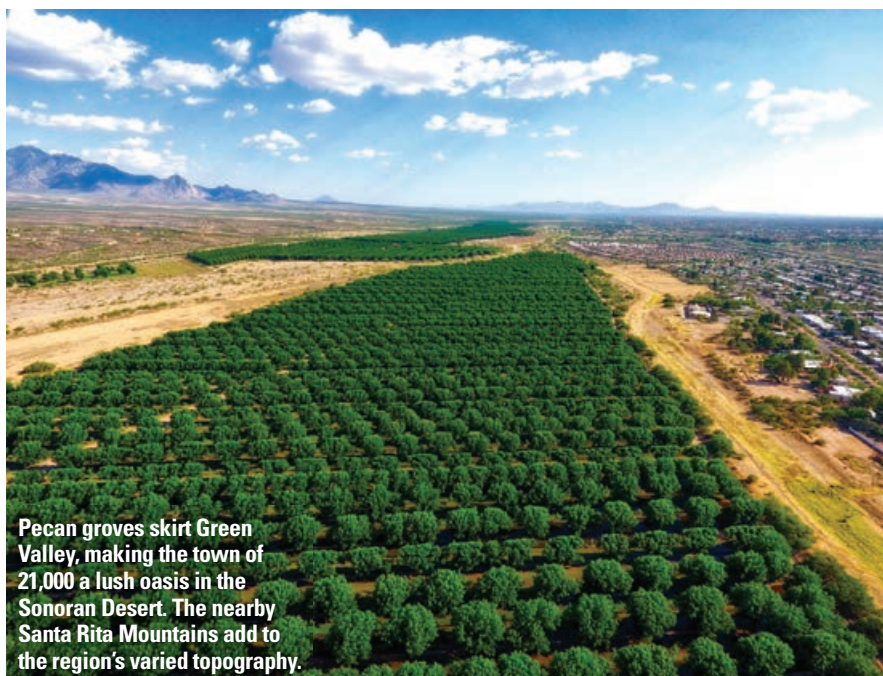
SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 1964, the unincorporated community of Green Valley in southern Arizona was designed to be a destination for retirees. The city just south of Tucson has low humidity, an affordable cost of living and landscaping that seems much more lush than folks would expect in Arizona’s Sonoran Desert. The gorgeous Santa Rita Mountains, part of Coronado National Forest, overlook the city from the east.

Vanessa and Kurt Menard of Ridgecrest, CA, had enjoyed the Tucson area when they visited about 15 years ago, so they returned recently to check out retirement locales. Some were too desertlike and others were too close to Tucson.

But when they headed south, they liked how the countryside turned green with the pecan orchards. Green Valley seemed to be just the right distance from the big city. “We looked at each other and said, ‘This is great. This is it,’” Vanessa recalls.

Retirees here have an easy time assimilating, mainly due to one major factor: An active nonprofit, Green Valley Recreation Inc., provides 13 centers serving more than 13,000 households with pools, fitness facilities, pickleball and tennis courts and much more.

“GVR is like a master-planned community on steroids,” says Patrick Devine, a real estate agent with Tierra Antigua Realty, specializing in 55-plus neighborhoods. The rec centers are spread out along 8 miles of Interstate 19 running north to south and forming the backbone of Green Valley. Almost the entire town is within a mile east or west of the interstate. Residents are never far from one or more of these centers, which are open to all ages, but mainly cater to a retired clientele.



Pecan groves skirt Green Valley, making the town of 21,000 a lush oasis in the Sonoran Desert. The nearby Santa Rita Mountains add to the region’s varied topography.

Every center has a pool, hot tub and meeting rooms. One facility has a clay studio, six have tennis courts, three have lapidary silversmithing shops, one has a state-of-the-art woodworking shop and another has a dance studio. Some centers are within a specific community, but they all are open to any Green Valley area resident who has paid the annual fee, which is about \$500. Joining GVR requires an initial fee as well.

In addition, GVR hosts more than 60 clubs and has an annual catalog of 900-plus classes covering a wide variety of subjects; some are included in the membership and others require a nominal fee.

Every spring, the nonprofit sponsors the Southern Arizona Senior Games with some 30 sporting events. Competitions range from table games, such as chess and cribbage, to sports, including swimming, tennis and bicycling.

Several auditoriums and stages at the centers welcome both local and national actors and musicians.

GVR constantly is expanding, says Don Weaver, president of the Green Valley Council, another nonprofit serving the area. For example, 24 more pickleball courts soon will be built to add to the existing 12.

Plus, volunteer work is encouraged and supported. "There's a lot of volunteerism here to run all the activities in



At the weekly Green Valley Village Farmers and Artisans Market, vendors hawk everything from Sonoran hot dogs to succulents and cactuses.

the region," he says. Some 600 people work at Green Valley's Country Fair White Elephant Thrift Store, which donates \$1.75 million each year to local schools and charities. It holds an annual parade to thank the community.

The chamber of commerce works for both Green Valley and the town of Sahuarita to the north, says Joe Erceg, president and CEO of the chamber. "And we work together with GVR and the Green Valley Council. It's a great environment for leadership and sharing."

Whereas most Green Valley residents are older, Sahuarita is the opposite. It is a

large community of young families and children with small retirement neighborhoods nested within it.

Green Valley has no typical downtown, with the closest thing being two shopping malls — the Continental Shopping Plaza and Green Valley Village, both off I-19.

Robin and Roz Barnes moved to Green Valley from Salem, OR, in 2018. They had visited Arizona during two winter vacations, so they had a good feeling about retiring here and were looking for a small, moderately priced community.

"We have a friend in Mesa, (Arizona), who talked about the haboob dust storms, the traffic and the heat, so we knew that the Phoenix area wasn't for us," Robin says. After putting their Salem home up for sale on April 18 and selling it the next day, the couple flew to Arizona planning to explore various towns.

"We had so many places lined up to visit, but we canceled everything because we liked it here," says Roz, 65, who worked as a loan officer for Oregon Housing and Community Services.

Plus, they discovered they could buy a larger, new house for the same sales price of their older Salem home.



Cycling trails wind throughout Green Valley. One 30-mile round-trip route reaches Madera Canyon, a premier bird-watching locale.



Tubac Presidio State Historic Park hosts the annual Anza Days event, when costumed riders re-enact the start of Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza's 1775 expedition.

Since moving to Green Valley, Roz has discovered unexpected health benefits. "I suffered from arthritis in cold, wet Oregon," she says. "Here, I feel much better." She also does not miss the many months of gray, cloudy days that caused her to have seasonal affective disorder. "For relief, I had to visit tanning salons to get some light," she remembers. Since this area has more than 300 days of sun each year, her SAD now is a thing of the past.

That sun, indeed, can be intense. Summer daytime temperatures can reach above 100 degrees, especially in the hottest months of June and July. But the evenings are cooler, often in the pleasant 70s, courtesy of the dry desert air. Residents find that morning hours are the best time for exercising.

Roz is busy going for walks, making new friends, playing canasta, participating in Bible study, attending soirees and enjoying theater performances. "People are so friendly here; everyone waves," she says.

Robin, on the other hand, plans to work a couple more years before retiring. A 56-year-old budget analyst, he found a job in Pima County administration within a week of moving here. He loves that the commute from Green Valley to his office in downtown Tucson

only takes about 25 to 30 minutes. And while the couple find everything they need within a few miles of their home, they like exploring Tucson with its numerous museums, vibrant performing arts scene and a plethora of shopping and dining options.

In Green Valley, many retirees gather at Mama's Kitchen, a simple but friendly place serving homestyle breakfasts and lunches. Los Agaves Restaurant serves Mexican dishes and Marti's Bistro is a popular lunch spot.

They also enjoy visiting Tubac, a village 20 miles south of Green Valley that is renowned as an arts community. With around 1,500 inhabitants, it boasts more than 100 eclectic crafts

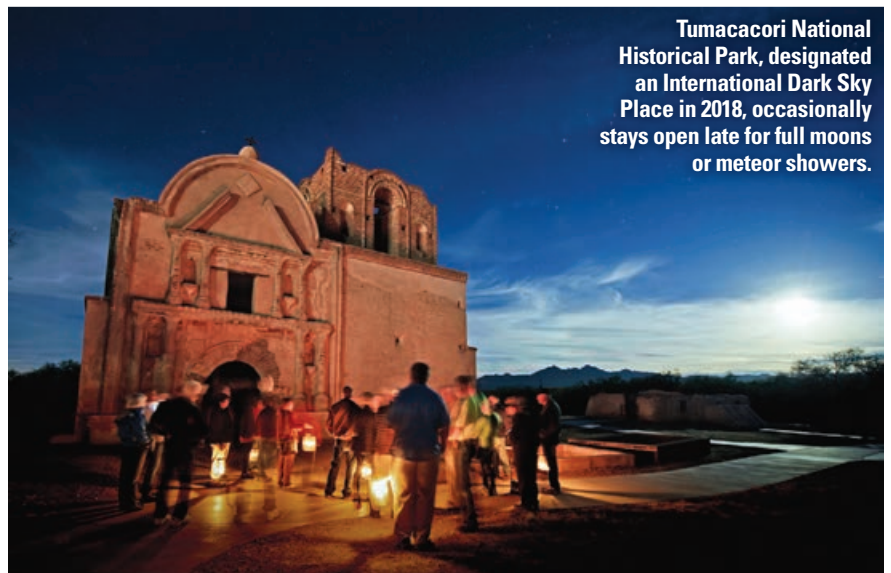
stores and art galleries.

Robin is an artist, painting large, colorful oils, ranging from carefully rendered oversize roosters to wide-horizon landscapes. Galleries in Tubac have expressed interest in showing his work and he looks forward to spending more time at the easel when he retires.

In contrast to modern Green Valley, Tubac distinguishes itself as the first permanent European settlement in Arizona. The Presidio San Ignacio de Tubac was founded by the Spanish in 1752 and remnants of the settlement are preserved in Tubac Presidio State Historic Park, Arizona's first state park. While remains of the oldest buildings are scant, informative historic exhibits cover periods from the first settlement by Native Americans through Spanish colonial, Mexican and American pioneer days.

Tubac has Arizona's second-oldest schoolhouse, built in 1885, with a late 1850s printing press that still works. It produced the state's first newspaper, *The Weekly Arizonian*.

The scenic Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail meanders south along the Santa Cruz River Valley for 4.5 miles from Tubac Presidio park to Tumacacori National Historical Park, another delight for history buffs. The first Spanish mission in Arizona was founded here by the Jesuit missionary Kino in 1691, but later was abandoned. Today, the well-preserved ruins of the Franciscan church, which dates to the



Tumacacori National Historical Park, designated an International Dark Sky Place in 2018, occasionally stays open late for full moons or meteor showers.

Population: 21,391 in Green Valley, 29,318 in Sahuarita and 1,022,769 in Pima County

Location: Green Valley is in southern Arizona, 40 miles north of the border town of Nogales, part of which is in both the U.S. and Mexico. Tucson is 25 miles north and Phoenix is 140 miles northwest via interstates 19 and 10.

Climate:

January: High 66° / Low 37°

July: High 99° / Low 73°

Average relative humidity: 39%

Rain: 14 inches annually

Snow: 1 inch annually

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The median sales price of homes in Green Valley was \$186,000 from January through October of 2018, according to the Green Valley-Sahuarita Association of Realtors.

Sales tax: 6.1% in Green Valley and 8.1% in Sahuarita

Sales tax exemptions: Groceries and prescription drugs

State income tax: For married couples filing jointly, the rates are graduated from 2.59% of taxable income up to \$21,202 to 4.54% of taxable income of more than \$317,990. For single filers, the rates range from 2.59% up to \$10,602 to 4.54% of more than \$158,996.

Income tax exemptions: Social Security benefits and up to \$2,500 in federal, state and local government pensions are exempt. Pensions from state and local governments outside Arizona are not exempt.

Estate tax: None

Inheritance tax: None

Property tax: The rate in Green Valley is \$11.9290 per \$100 of assessed value, with homes assessed at 10% of market value. Annual taxes on an \$186,000 home would be about \$2,219, which includes a state aid-for-education reduction given to all owner-occupied primary residences. The reduction typically is capped at \$600.

Homestead exemption: None, but property tax relief programs are available for those older than 65 who meet certain income requirements.

Personal property tax: The state has a vehicle license tax based on an assessed value of 60% of the manufacturer's base retail price. The assessed value is reduced 16.25% each year after the vehicle is first registered. The rate is \$2.80 for new vehicles and \$2.89 for used vehicles, both per \$100 valuation. An annual vehicle registration fee and an annual

air quality research fee also apply.

Education: Major seats of learning, including the University of Arizona and Pima Community College, are in Tucson. Both have continuing-education programs. The University of Arizona has an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute with a Green Valley campus. Classes run the gamut of arts and literature, science, self-help, history and health, with field excursions, travel and more. A \$180 annual membership gives access to unlimited classes, lectures and field trips.

Transportation: Tucson International Airport is 25 miles north and is served by nine airlines with almost 60 nonstop flights to 22 cities. The major Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, 135 miles northwest, operates nonstop flights to around 125 destinations.

Walk Score: Green Valley has an overall

and access to a GVR center. From \$224,900, FairfieldHomesArizona.com/communities/Solterra.

- **Quail Creek**, an active-adult community in Sahuarita, 10 miles north, with three nine-hole golf courses, a creative arts and technology center and numerous outdoor activities. From the low \$200,000s, Robson.com.
- **Sonora at Rancho Sahuarita**, an active-adult community within the larger all-ages Rancho Sahuarita, with a pool, sports courts and fitness center. Resales only.
- **Rancho Resort**, an active-adult community within the larger all-ages Rancho Sahuarita, with walking and cycling paths and sports courts for volleyball, pickleball, bocce and tennis. Resales only.
- **Green Valley Fairways**, an active-adult community, with a GVR center. Resales only.



Each of the two championship golf courses at the Wyndham Green Valley Canoa Ranch Resort offers 18 holes of public play.

walkability rating of 11 out of 100, or “car dependent,” according to WalkScore.com. Neighborhoods will vary.

Health care: The 49-bed Santa Cruz Valley Regional Hospital provides emergency care and has complete lab and imaging services. Tucson has several major hospitals, including two Banner-University Medical Center campuses, two Carondelet Health Network hospitals, Tucson Medical Center and a VA hospital. More hospitals are in Phoenix.

Housing/master-planned communities:

- **Villas at Canoa Ranch**, an active-adult community, with an 18-hole golf course and a Green Valley Recreation center. From \$229,900, FairfieldHomesArizona.com.
- **Solterra**, an active-adult community, with views of the Santa Rita Mountains

Visitor lodging:

- **Vagabond Inn Executive-Green Valley Sahuarita**, with a complimentary breakfast, from \$54, VagabondInn.com.
- **Wyndham Green Valley Canoa Ranch Resort**, with a pool and hot breakfast buffet, from \$136, WyndhamHotels.com.
- **Best Western Green Valley Inn**, with a cocktail lounge and restaurant, from \$76, BestWestern.com/GreenValleyInn.
- **Amado Territory Inn**, in Amado, 10 miles south of Green Valley, with nine bed-and-breakfast rooms in a ranch setting, from \$119, AmadoTerritoryInn.com.

Information: Green Valley-Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce, 275 W. Continental Road, Suite 123, Green Valley, AZ 85622, GreenValleySahuarita.com. ►

early 19th century, is emblematic of Tumacacori. The National Park Service maintains a visitors center and museum, and cultural demonstrations allow tourists to discover the past.

The Titan Missile Museum at the northern end of Green Valley completes the trio of nearby historic sites beginning with the letter T. It came a bit later than Tubac and Tumacacori, merely dating to the Cold War between the United States and the former Soviet Union. It was one of 54 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) sites housing nuclear weapons ready to be fired at the touch of a button. Now deactivated, it is the only remaining ICBM site and is a fascinating underground museum where guided tours into the missile silo explain how it all worked.

Golf-loving retirees find many greens to their liking. The area's dozen or so private and public golf courses attracted Bonnie Arnold, a real estate agent from Frisco, CO, a small town near several ski resorts. "I do a lot of sports, but I was ready to give up the skiing and snowboarding. I was getting tired of nine months of winter," says Bonnie, 71. "I wanted to move to a place where I could golf year-round."

She moved to the active-adult Quail Creek community in 2017, renting a casita for her first six months. "As a Realtor, I recommend being on-site when having a new home built so as to monitor the progress every step of the way," she says.

Several of Bonnie's friends had moved from Colorado to Tucson, prompting her to explore the region. She wanted to be close to an airport and has found that Tucson International Airport is easily accessible.

She also wanted a drier climate. "I'll never do humidity ever again," she says.

She was pleasantly surprised at how verdant Green Valley is, despite being in the Sonoran Desert. "It's the thousands of acres of pecan tree groves that surround us," she explains.

Her goal was to retire by the time she turned 70, which she did. "But now I wish I had done it earlier," she says. "There are so many activities around here." She belongs to a mahjong group,



Pecan-cracking contests and wagon rides through orchards make for an enjoyable day at the annual Sahuarita Pecan Festival.

takes bridge lessons and enjoys both entertaining and dining out. "Manuel's is a great Mexican restaurant in Green Valley and I also go into Tucson to eat," she says. Tubac is a favorite destination, too.

The one thing she doesn't like about living in Arizona is the large rattlesnake population. Once, she had to call the Fire Department to remove a snake outside her house.

Bonnie likes driving her four-wheel-drive vehicle on U.S. Forest Service unpaved roads and finding herself in the middle of nowhere. "It's a delightful adventure," she says.

The Santa Ritas also are famous for the Madera Canyon, just 15 miles southeast of Green Valley via paved road. At about 5,500 feet above sea level, the canyon offers cooler summer temperatures. Birders from all over the country flock here to see 15 species of hummingbirds, wild turkeys and rarities such as the elegant trogon, a red-breasted bird that nests in Mexico, Central America and southern Arizona.

Hikers find many miles of trails, including a grueling 10.8-mile out-and-back ascent of Mount Wrightson. At 9,453 feet, it is the highest summit in the Tucson area. At the base of the mountain is a small campground and three lodges for folks who want to overnight in nature.

Kurt and Vanessa are taking a proactive approach to their next life stage. "Our No. 1 goal was to get out of California," says Kurt, 62, a teacher who hopes to retire in 2020. The couple are building a house in Green Valley that should be finished this spring and will go back and forth in the interim.

Vanessa, 57, who works at the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake in Ridgecrest, can't wait to retire so she can quilt to her heart's content. Kurt hopes to play more tennis and they both look forward to sampling local wines in Sonoita, 30 miles southeast.

They have found their favorite nearby Mexican restaurant, El Patio in Sahuarita, but admit they initially were apprehensive about being so close to the Mexican border. After talking to residents about their concerns, they decided that they really had no worries. In fact, many people on a fixed income cross the Mexican border to Nogales in Sonora to have inexpensive, good-quality dental work done, because dentistry is not covered by Medicare.

Retirees enjoy bragging on their Green Valley choice. "Disneyland might be the happiest place on earth, but Green Valley comes in a close second," Robin says. **W**

Rob Rachowiecki is a writer in Tucson, AZ, and the author of "Five-Star Trails: Tucson," a hiking guidebook with a chapter on the Madera Canyon.