



Tumacácori National Historic Park

By Jan Cleere

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After a quick shower that barely dampens the desert floor, streaks of rainwater stain the adobe brick of the ancient church that sits alone among weather-bent mesquite trees and statuesque cactus. The scent of rosemary fills the courtyard of Mission San Cayetano de Tumacácori, the oldest established mission in Arizona. I feel I have embarked on a trek back to a time when life was simpler but not necessarily easier. A short southerly drive from Tucson has brought me to Tumacácori National Historic Park. I purchase a guidebook at the mission's visitor center for \$1.00 and view a short video depicting the history of Tumacácori.

The church today retains some of its colorful splendor that attracted the Indians long ago. Columns along the front of the church were once painted a brilliant red, and if I look closely along the cornices of the windows, I catch glimpses of yellow and pink. The roof has been replaced several times over the years and is now intact, but inside, the nave was without protection for about 60 years and has suffered from harsh desert elements.

Father Eusebio Francisco Kino established the Tumacácori mission in 1691. He built no church at the settlement but chose instead to live among the Pima Indians in three small mud huts erected for prayer and small comfort. In 1753 the village was resettled west of the Santa Cruz River under the protection of the Tubac presidio just four miles away. The community was renamed San José de Tumacácori and the existing church, erected in the 1800s by Franciscan missionaries, stands today much as it did almost 200 years ago.

The church was the social and religious center of the community and the five-foot thick cobblestone foundation and adobe walls provided a coolness and sense of serenity still present today. According to my guidebook, two priests, buried beneath the altar steps, remain undisturbed even though fortune hunters seeking nonexistent Jesuit treasure destroyed much of the inside of the church. The bell tower climbing toward heaven's gates was never finished and there are no plans to restore the church to its past splendor expect where it threatens to crumble with age.

Behind the church, four ancient mesquite trees provide scant shade for a handful of tilting tombstones in the old cemetery. Beyond the cemetery stands a limestone kiln that was used for cooking enormous lime rocks hauled from the Santa Rita Mountains, 30 miles away. Once hot, the limestone was broken open and pounded into a fine powder. Mixed with water, the lime was plastered onto the thick adobe walls for protection against moisture.

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My historic trek ends at the mission garden. Complete with water fountain trickling promises of cool breezes on even the hottest Arizona August days, the garden grows native plants as well as herbs and fruits introduced by the missionaries. A fragrant rosemary bush permeates the air, garlic pops up along the perimeter, and apricot and olive trees spread their shade across the mosaic patio. On the east wall an ancient fig tree stands vigil, a lone descendent of trees brought into the territory by Father Kino.

Historians believe the Pima word Tumacácori means "rocky flat place." Yet it is more than a nondescript plain. Today, Tumacácori is still a haven in the desert for the weary traveler along life's modern highway.

GETTING THERE

Tumacácori National Historic Park is 45 miles south of Tucson, about one hour's drive.

Travel south on Interstate 10 turning south on Interstate 19, the Nogales turnoff, and continuing to Tumacácori Exit 29.

The Park is open daily from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. except for Thanksgiving and Christmas days.

Entrance fee is \$2.00 over age 17, or \$4.00 per family. Rangers conduct guided tours daily but a detailed historic guidebook of the grounds is available for independent walks.

Please give advance notice for large tour groups.

The Visitors' Center houses an extensive museum and video of early Indian and missionary life.

Picnic tables are scattered throughout the Park.

For further information call (520) 398-2341.

The first weekend in December, Tumacácori hosts La Fiesta de Tumacacori, conducting a Mariachi Mass and procession. Tohono O'odham, Yaqui, Apache and Pima craft demonstrations, foods and ceremonial dances fill the Park throughout the weekend.

The four-mile Juan Bautista de Anza Historic Trail between Tumacácori and Tubac is a pleasant hike running along the banks of the Santa Cruz River.