

## Sonoran Desert Inn

Located on the campus of Ajo's old elementary school, a classic Spanish Revival complex that includes a bell tower, this unique inn offers a classroom vibe with modern comforts and artistic touches.

**ANNETTE McGIVNEY**

Usually, a hotel with historic architecture, unique art, local cuisine and beautiful landscaping is plenty. But for the Sonoran Desert Inn, these amenities barely scratch the surface of a place that's become a bucket-list experience as well as a comfortable place to stay. Since it opened in 2015, the inn has been at the heart of a revitalization that's transformed the Southern Arizona town of Ajo from a pit stop on the way to Rocky Point into a destination rich in Southwestern culture, Indigenous food and outdoor recreation.

A project of the Ajo-based International Sonoran Desert Alliance, the nonprofit inn and its conference center are on the 7-acre Curley School campus, which once housed Ajo's elementary school and other educational buildings. Constructed over the first half of the 20th century, the clas-

sic Spanish Revival complex, complete with a bell tower, was a point of pride when Ajo was a booming copper mining town. But in the 1980s, the mine closed and many of Ajo's residents left with it.

The shuttered campus was on the verge of being torn down when the alliance bought it and began renovations using federal funding and other grants. The project helped jump-start the Ajo economy through a program that hired residents for the renovation and taught them journeyman trades. Today, there are 25 rooms at the Sonoran Desert Inn, while the Curley School features affordable apartments and studios for artists.

A goal of the renovation was to retain the classroom feel of the structure while incorporating modern comforts and artistic touches. All rooms are filled with light, thanks to original, 8-foot-tall

windows that look out onto desert landscaping. And the new North Wing Suites, which opened this past summer, include murals painted by local artists. "It makes you feel like you're sleeping outside, but you get to enjoy it from the comfort of a plush king bed," says Kathryn Warden-ski, the inn's director.

The inn offers grab-and-go Mexican meals, and there's an on-site market selling crafts by local and regional artisans. Pop-up culinary events, festivals and other gatherings often happen on the grounds. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge are a short drive away, but there also are opportunities to experience the Sonoran Desert on the property, including a courtyard fragrance garden, designed by author and ecologist Gary Paul Nabhan, and two heirloom pomegranate groves.

But perhaps the most enthusiastic guests visiting are people who attended Curley School years ago. Sometimes, those guests ask for a room that formerly was the classroom of a beloved teacher — and still has its original chalkboard on the wall.



**AJO** Sonoran Desert Inn, 55 Orilla Avenue, 520-373-0804, sonorancc.com