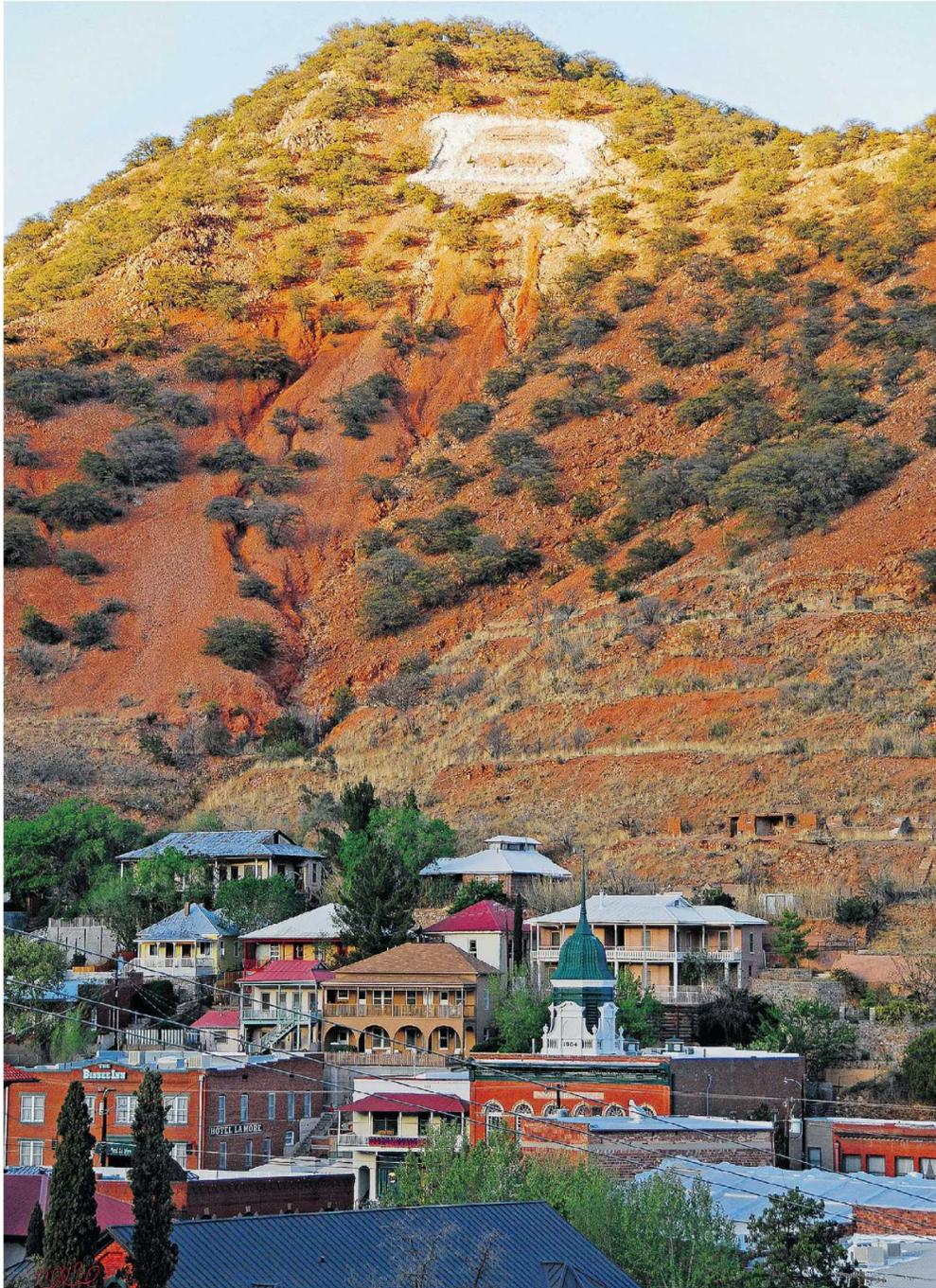


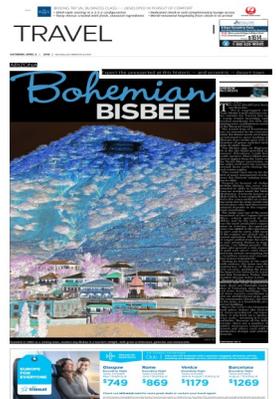
ARIZONA

Bohemian BISBEE



CHUCK FELL

Founded in 1880 as a mining town, modern-day Bisbee is a tourist's delight, with great architecture, galleries and restaurants.



Expect the unexpected at this historic – and eccentric – desert town

ANDREW MCCREDIE



BISBEE, ARIZ.

The snow should have been our first clue.

We'd unplugged the Tesla Model S 90D minutes earlier outside the Tucson Inn on a warm winter morning, and headed southeast for this old mining town 13 kilometres north of the Mexican border.

The tourist trap of Tombstone was 20 minutes in the rearview when the desert scrub we'd been accustomed to since landing in Phoenix days earlier gave way to blotches of green mottled with dabs of white. Snow?

The Bisbee sign on Highway 80 at the city limits provided an

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answer: Elevation: 5,538 feet (1,687 metres). That's about 200 metres higher than the Lions on the North Shore mountains, so the white stuff isn't too unusual around these parts during the cool winter nights.

This would turn out to be the first of many unexpected revelations this historic mining town has to offer.

Named in honour of Judge DeWitt Bisbee, the town was founded in 1880 in Tombstone Canyon nestled amid the Mule Mountains. Formerly known as Mule Gulch, it was originally settled a few years earlier as a mining camp run by army scouts and cavalymen who had discovered mineral deposits in the copper-hued mountains.

The judge was one of the main financiers of the Copper Queen

Mine, which opened in the 1880s, and by the early 1900s was the most productive copper mine in Arizona. An open-pit mine was added to the operation in 1917, and by 1975, with most of the copper ore mined out, it ceased operation. The final tally of copper pulled from the earth in and around Bisbee is staggering: 7.92 billion pounds. The mine also proved a rich source of gold and silver, with those precious metals accounting for 2.79 million ounces and 102 million ounces respectively.

During its heyday in the early 20th century, the mine saw the population of Bisbee swell to over 20,000, making the town the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco. Today, that number sits just below 6,000.

Because of that early economic

success and large population base, there are fantastic examples of Victorian-style houses and main street buildings. The art deco country courthouse is also an architectural gem, and the community library, the first in the state, is a beautifully preserved building.

Since the town's development took place before the arrival of mass-produced automobiles, it was built on a "pedestrian scale," meaning it is very walkable. Because of the hilly terrain, there are a number of public staircases connecting streets and alleys, each with a distinctive design and artistic flourish.

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Bohemian Bisbee

(Incidentally, those staircases provide the track for the annual Bisbee 1000 Stairs Climb, a five-kilometre run through the town that traverses 1,034 stairs.)

So, Old Bisbee — as the original town is called today — has all the physical trappings of a very interesting place to visit. And with its mining past, it has a rich history. But that really describes lots of towns in Arizona.

What really sets Bisbee apart is its vibrant artistic and cultural communities, much of that seeded in the late '60s with the arrival of counter-culture drop-outs attracted to the town's climate and beauty. (That spirit remains, as a peace symbol flag flies over one prominent Old Bisbee building.)

Galleries offering one-of-a-kind works from local artists — from paintings to sculptures to metalworks — line Main Street, as do clothing stores and funky restaurants. And most refreshing: not a franchise in site. All the establishments are locally owned and operated, and from my experience, the people running the galleries, shops and eateries are as interesting and unique as their wares and fare.

While tourism is by far the leading industry in Bisbee, it's a

fairly low-key affair in terms of organized tours and the like.

I'd suggest when you first arrive, book one of the 45- or 90-minute walking tours. It will provide you with all the historical background of Bisbee you'll need to appreciate the place, and you'll also have a good sense of where you want to revisit on your own. With so many little alleys and side roads, it's easy to miss out on some great, and seemingly endlessly unexpected, surprises. There is a golf cart tour of Old Bisbee that is ideal for those who are challenged by hills and stairs and want to see it all.

The big tour in town is the Queen Mine tour, a great train ride back in time and far into the mountainside. The tour takes an hour, and after getting outfitted with mining lanterns, hats and slickers, you straddle a ride-along train that goes deep into the mine — not vertically, but horizontally — along the same tracks and to the same seams that miners plied for decades. The tour is operated by retired miners who know of what they

speak, and provides real insight, with a dash of humour, into the evolution, and the working con-

ditions of their profession over time. There are some steep stairs involved once you're in the mine, and the temperature inside plummets from the typical Arizona heat. At \$13 for adults and just \$5.50 for kids, this tour is a must.

Self-guided tours of the gallery scene are as simple as walking up and down Main Street, but every second Saturday of the month there is an organized ArtWalk that takes in 20 galleries and shops and includes artist receptions.

If spirits are more your thing there's Brewery Gulch. What would a mining town be without its rough side, and this notorious street once boasted nearly 50 saloons and many brothels. Some remain — the saloons at least — and even if you're a teetotaler, the gulch is worth a stroll.

And for those who like the other kind of spirits, there's the Haunted History Tour.

If you're one of the many Canadians who visit Arizona for Major League Baseball's spring training, head to the Bisbee suburb of Warren to check out the Warren Ball Park. Built in 1908, it is the oldest ballpark in Arizona, and has seen a number of semi-pro

and "outlaw" teams play there. Teams like the City Beautiful in 1908; the Bisbee Bees in the late 1920s; the Arizona Texas League in the 1930s; and the Bisbee-Douglas Copper Kings in the 1940s. Today, local school teams and Bisbee Little League play there.

Eating in Bisbee was also a very enjoyable, and again, unexpected, event.

I had one of the best slices of pizza I've eaten in years at Screaming Banshee Pizza; a dinner at Café Roka with the ambience of a big city bistro, the food

of a cosmopolitan kitchen, and the kind of friendly down-home service you'd expect in a neighbour's home; and a breakfast at Ana's Seasonal Kitchen as fresh and well-prepared as something you'd expect at a five-star hotel, only in a setting that, again, felt like a friend's kitchen. Get to Ana's early for breakfast if you don't want to wait, and definitely make a reservation at Café Roka.

Don't be fooled by the small-town trappings of Old Bisbee; it's a busy and vibrant place, and just because there is very little traffic doesn't mean the town isn't bursting at the seams.

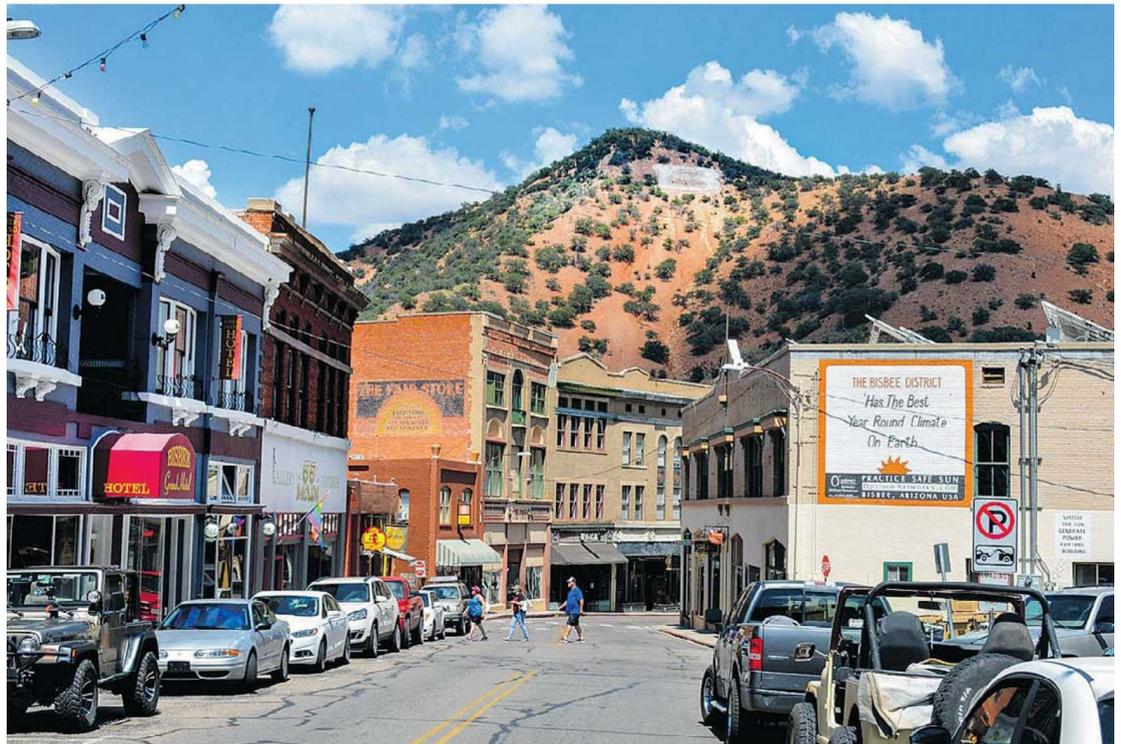
On that note, accommodations fill up fast. Like most every other business in town, the hotels and B&Bs are mostly owner-operator outfits, and most weekend nights there are very few vacancies. We tried to get into the Copper City Inn — which has the only Tesla charging station in town — but it was full. One of the owners, Fred Miller, was kind enough to let us use the charger anyway. Even if you don't stay there, don't miss a chance to talk with this real original character. He moonlights as the bartender at Café Roka, and once seated at our table we soon realized why so many people chose to eat their dinner at the bar. He's just one of the many interesting people who have found a wonderful life in Bisbee, and make it all the better for residents and visitors alike.

We stayed at the Letson Loft Hotel, a second-floor boutique hotel situated in the heart of Old Bisbee in the Letson Block, the oldest brick structure in town. The block has been recently renovated, and the rooms feature hardwood floors, 11-foot ceilings, and exposed patches of silk wallpaper from the late-1800s and 120-year-old brick walls.

My only regret about my visit to Bisbee is that it was just for one night. While it's not the kind of place you could spend a week or two — though there are

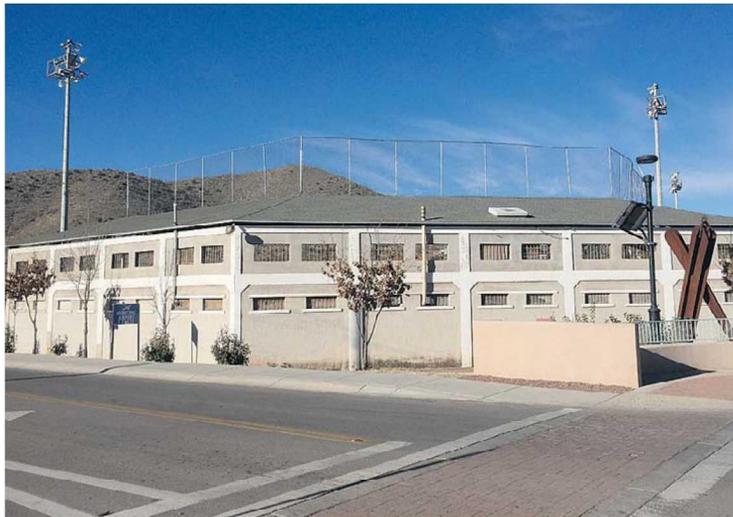
hiking and biking trails in the mountains we heard great things about — one night was just not enough to discover all the unexpected things this amazing place has to offer.

For more info visit discoverbisbee.com
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TOM NELSON

Art galleries, book shops and artisan shops typify the storefronts along Bisbee's Main Street.



ANDREW MCCREDIE/POSTMEDIA

Warren Ball Park is the oldest baseball park in Arizona.

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