

Wet and Wild Water Wheel Weekend

By Tyson Hugie

What if we told you there's a place within about two hours of Phoenix where you can usually slice up to 20 degrees off the temperature and dip your toes in the refreshing East Verde River? Maybe it would be best if we kept this place a secret, but since we're feeling generous, we'll clue you in to this secluded little watering hole.

In the season of "beat the heat," many of the destinations you're likely to see us hit are in higher elevations where we can get a reprieve from the Phoenix oven. This one in particular had been on our to-see list for some time.

One Saturday morning, a spot in Scottsdale became the meeting point for a variety of cars and people ready for adventure.

A menagerie is defined as a collection of wild animals kept in captivity for exhibition. Sounds about right when referring to this bunch of seven cars and twelve friends.

Though, in this case, all were unleashed from captivity—allowed to roam freely in the hills of the Tonto National Forest surrounding Payson, Arizona.

The one-way trek to our destination was only about 80 miles, but ascended 3,800 feet in elevation. For the most part, the drive is on the Beeline Highway, Arizona 87, a 65-mph split highway, but the curves can be fun, and they do require constant attention.

From Payson, we continued north through a couple of roundabouts and hung a right on Houston Mesa Road. The road narrowed to two lanes and had some nice curves for the next eight miles, until we arrived at Water Wheel Campground.

Luckily, we found ample parking to stash our seven vehicles, but things were filling up quickly with a lot of weekend adventure-seekers like ourselves. Parking was \$8 via cash/self-service, with envelopes to deposit in an opening in a post near the trailhead.

The Water Wheel hike itself does not stick to any specific route, but rather follows the East Verde River upstream however a hiker decides to follow it. We did find a path along the west side of the river that had some welcome shade from overhead trees—even at 88 degrees, we managed to break a pretty aggressive sweat. The sound of the gushing river next to us helped give a sense of refreshment even without taking a dip (yet). There came a time when we needed to crawl up and over some large boulders, and we paved our own way or followed people who were ahead of us.

At one point, it looked like we needed to cross the river itself, so we carefully collected our balance and hopped across. The rocks were slippery at times.

For the return, we opted to just remove our shoes and socks and put them in our backpacks so we could walk barefoot across the water—which rushed by at knee level—and not worry about any slip and fall incidents. The water was chilly, but it felt great. We wandered a bit farther upstream and saw a series of waterfalls coming down. We were brave enough to jump in the water.

By the time we made it back to our vehicles, we'd only been hiking about an hour and a half, round trip. The overall hike distance is about 2 miles each way, and we probably only went about half that. There is much more to see, and we all want to get back up there, but we were ready for lunch, and a few people needed to be back by late afternoon, so we returned to Payson.

For grub, we dined on the patio at Buffalo Bar & Grill (311 S Beeline Hwy). The wait staff had already lined up several small tables for us in anticipation of our arrival, and the service was top-notch.

It was great to break away from the Valley's heat and get up to the mountains for some clean air and a little time with Mother Nature. Water Wheel Falls was just what the doctor ordered for a quick day trip. ■

The fleet: Kyle: 2005 Pontiac GTO | James and Rob: 2016 Chrysler 300 | Peter and Jack: 2002 BMW 325iT | Tyson, Clayton, and Miles: 2013 Acura ILX | Paul: 2013 Acura TL SH-AWD | Brad and Kenny: 2013 Audi RS5 | Sunny: 2013 Hyundai Sonata 2.0T

