

# Southeast Arizona sandbox by Tyson Hugie

**M**y maturity level took a deep dive this winter, when I sat in my driver's seat and looked out upon a gigantic expanse of perfectly flat land in all directions. I was unsupervised. I had a slick-shifting 6-speed transmission at my fingertips. And my sense of adventure begged me to go have some fun. So, I hit the traction control button to deactivate any kind of traction aid, gripped the steering wheel, and let 'er rip. Result? I haven't had that much fun driving a car since my autocross adventure in 2009. Talk about a riot.

My friends Jason and James were there to witness it—encouraging it, even. The Willcox Playa—some 3.7 square miles of dirt flatlands—is a dry lake bed in Arizona's Cochise County in the southeast corner of the state. But for me, it was a playground where I could pretend I was a professional rally driver.

This weekend trip started out as an excuse to meet up with one of my road trip partners in crime, Jason Pawela of *Driven for Drives*. Jason had been crazy enough to join me on an 8,000-mile Alaska trip last year (see our November/December 2016 issue), and I hadn't seen him for about six months since. We decided to plan a lunch meetup at the exact geographic midpoint between us: Willcox,

Arizona. The town of 3,700 people lies 194 miles from Phoenix and 195 miles from Las Cruces. It was absolutely perfect from a logistical perspective.

Joining for this one was another seasoned road-tripper, James Lee of *Six Speed Blog*, who typically joins our group drives in whatever "flavor of the week" he's road testing at the time. This week, it happened to be a saucy red 2017 Toyota Corolla with a host of Toyota Racing Development (TRD) goodies. Yes, I just used the words "Corolla" and "racing" in the same sentence. I was surprised, too. Jason's car was his 2004 Mazda6, now with 217,000 miles and still as robust as ever, and I was in my 2013 ILX.

It took us about 3 hours to get to Willcox, and we met up with Jason spot-on at our 1:00 predetermined time. Dining options in a town of 3,700 people are sparse, and I'd already eaten at two of the three top-rated spots on Trip Advisor. (Revisit the Chiricahua National Monument road trip in our May/June 2016 issue.) Next on the list? "Grandma D's Cafe." It sounded safe. And it ended up being one of the most hospitable places I've ever dined.

Housed in the historic part of Willcox at the northwest corner of Haskell Avenue and Maley Street, the place appeared to have been there for-

ever. Luckily we had enough time to eat before the 2:00 pm closure (grandma cooks breakfast and lunch only). I went with the Cochise Burger, adorned with green chiles, avocado and an over-easy egg for a little extra protein.

Grandma was nice enough to join us for a photo, and I jotted down our blog websites on a notepad for her. Thanks for the hospitality and the great food—hope to see you again, G'ma!

At this point, we did a car-key-swap, and I got to drive Jason's Mazda the few miles toward Willcox Playa. To get there, we headed west on I-10 about 4 miles, then south on Highway 191 to a dirt road turnoff that we'd scouted out thanks to Google Earth. The entrance to our playground was right where we thought it would be.

Luckily for us, the dirt was hard packed for the most part—I'm sure if it had rained recently, we wouldn't have gotten past the gate. Also luckily for us, we didn't venture into any dangerous parts of the Playa. It wasn't until after our visit that I read online that the US military uses portions of the area as a bombing range. Yikes!

I can only imagine how much more fun the experience might have been in a rear-wheel-drive or all-wheel-drive vehicle. Time to plan a trip back. ■



Welcome to Willcox. / Grandma D's protein-packed green chile Cochise Burger. / Quick stop at Historic Railroad Avenue Park. / Finding the right dirt road is key. / The Playa was colder than it looks, with a stiff breeze. / Picacho Peak, along I-10 back to Phoenix.

