

FRONTIER LUXURY

111-YEAR-OLD BORDER HOTEL BY TYSON HUGIE

My friend Jason and I like to get together for lunch occasionally. The only challenge is, I live in metro Phoenix, and he lives 388 miles away and in another state (Las Cruces, New Mexico). Though for us, that “challenge” is actually an “opportunity.” Over the years, we’ve targeted some awesome midpoint destinations like Duncan and Willcox. This time, we decided to head to the historic Mexican border town of Douglas, Arizona.

Incorporated in 1905, the town was named after mining pioneer James Douglas and was home to two copper smelters. Perhaps its most significant architectural structure is the Gadsden Hotel, which opened in 1907, was destroyed by fire and then rebuilt in 1929. The Gadsden name comes from James Gadsden, who was the US ambassador to Mexico in 1853 when the United States bought a 30,000-square-mile region—the Gadsden Purchase—from Mexico via treaty.

The hotel itself is a five-story, 160-room building with elaborate features like a Tiffany & Co.

stained glass mural across one of the walls in the lobby. It seemed like the perfect destination for our Saturday lunch jaunt.

And short of being inside Mexico, wouldn’t you think that the best (or at least most authentic) Mexican food would be found as close to the border as possible? So it worked out perfectly that Casa Segovia at the Gadsden is less than one mile from the international border checkpoint.

My drive started out around 8:00 on a Saturday morning—a little earlier than anticipated because we’d forgotten about the time difference between New Mexico and Arizona. Since we don’t observe Daylight Time, Jason got a jump on me, and I hurried to hit the road as well, so that we could arrive in Douglas around the same timeframe.

My 1992 Acura Integra GS-R whirred to 4,200 rpm happily and stayed there for the next 3.5 hours or so. I did make just one stop, at Picacho Peak along Interstate 10 about halfway between Phoenix and Tucson, for some Lunchables and a

VitaminWater. Judge away!

Meanwhile, Jason was on his way, too, but from the opposite direction.

The last hour or so took me through some of southern Arizona’s famous old western towns, including Tombstone (“The Town Too Tough to Die”), which was bustling with tourists who were probably headed to the OK Corral to see a gunfight reenactment. I motored on through town and found my way via Highways 80 and 191 to Douglas—so close to the Mexican border that I could see the international fence toward the end of the street. Jason was already there, snapping pictures and getting acquainted with the lay of the land.

I parked the ‘Teg behind his 2004 Mazda 6.

Jason had driven nearly an identical distance to Gadsden as I had, in his tried and trusty Mazda with 249,000 miles on it. Considering my Integra had 248,000, we collectively showed up in Douglas with about half a million under our belts. We took a few photos of the cars at other locations on G Avenue, including the Grand Theatre just a block north. The theatre’s marquee said, “NOW SHOWING,” but based on the looks of things, the only thing it was showing was its age.

Welcome to Douglas, Arizona. // G Avenue looking south toward the Mexican border. // When keys were keys. // The Gadsden Hotel about 1940, give or take a year or two, looking much as it does today. // Agua Prieta, Sonora is just down the street, but bringing your passport, or the experience is limited.

The Gadsden was elaborate by even today’s standards, so I had to imagine that it must have been home to some really wealthy guests back in the day. When we walked through the front entrance, we saw that the interior of the lobby had been decked out in a dozen or so round tables with silver place settings and turquoise napkins. We later found out that this was for a wedding to be held later in the day. We had the place largely to ourselves—and clearly we had “tourist” painted on our faces, as the gal at the registration desk asked, “Can I help you?”

I was a little star-struck at how intricate some of the architecture was—a large rounded staircase dominated the foyer and for some reason reminded me of the movie *Titanic*. The woodwork was detailed, and the Tiffany stained glass mural lined the entire east side of the roofline. There was a photo album on the front desk that I thumbed through to see some of the historic photos and newspaper articles that the Gadsden had been featured in. I also confirmed my suspicions about the hotel being primarily an escape for the elite: Eleanor Roosevelt was noted as having stayed there. I loved seeing all the brass keys hanging behind the registration desk—real keys, from long before the days when we started using those newfangled credit card ones.

To our left was an entrance to Casa Segovia, the Gadsden’s in-house restaurant. Jason commented, “I feel under-dressed for this,” and I muttered, “I don’t know how much this is going to cost,” as we walked inside. We were both pleasantly surprised: I honestly expected most of the entrees to be about twice the cost they were. Score. There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted something substantial and Mexican, so I went with the chicken fajitas, which came out still-sizzling, along with two tortillas and sides like guacamole and sour cream. TDF, they were—“To Die For,” a phrase I learned from my mother.

Next, we buzzed the 8 or 9 blocks south to the international border fence, but without a passport I wasn’t able to (nor had I intended to, for this trip anyway) cross into Mexico. And lastly we stopped in at the Visitor Center, equipped with stacks of pamphlets and brochures and a sign-in guest book which Jason and I of course tagged.

Our visit was short but sweet—all of 90 or so minutes until we split ways and sailed to our respective homes in opposite directions. Next time I’ll make it an over-nighter and request whichever room Eleanor Roosevelt stayed in. ■



The Gadsden Hotel in Douglas, Arizona was added to the US National Register of Historic Places in 1976.