

A WONDER IN OUR BACKYARD

It's a good time to tour 'Wonder of the World'

By A.E. Araiza
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Biosphere 2 near Oracle features cooler temps than Tucson and fewer tourists around this time of year. This is part of a series of weekly features about fun forays for families.

There may be only one place in Arizona where you can visit a humid rain forest, complete with a tropical canopy and waterfall, then step through a door and smell an ocean.

And that place is only about a half-hour from Oracle and Ina roads, or an hour from midtown.

Situated at the north base of the Santa Catalina Mountains, the University of Arizona's Biosphere 2 is along Arizona Highway 77 between the junction of Arizona Highway 79 and the town of Oracle.

"This is the best time of year to tour the Biosphere," said John Adams, the attraction's assistant director.

It's cooler than Tucson and because it's less busy than in other seasons, it presents an opportunity



Tour guide Bill Young talks to a group visiting the orchard area of Biosphere 2. Tours are smaller and more intimate during the summer.

A.E. ARAIZA / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

If you go...

What: Biosphere 2

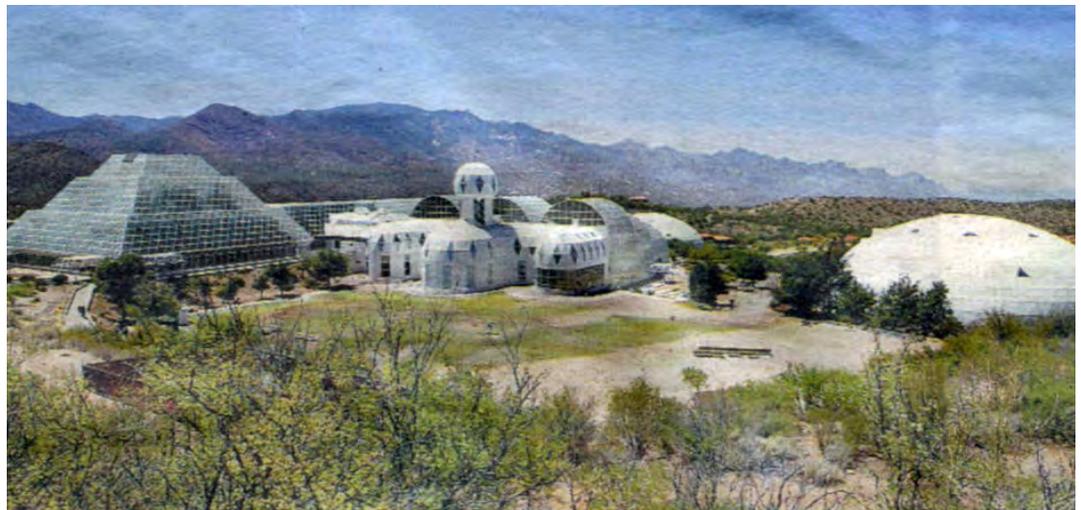
Where: Arizona Highway 77 at milepost 96.5 (between Arizona Highway 79 and the town of Oracle)

When: 9 a.m. - 4 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving and Christmas; tours run periodically throughout the day

Cost: \$20 for adults; \$18 for seniors; \$13 for children aged 6-12; discounts are available

For more information:

Call 838-6200 or go to www.b2science.org



The University of Arizona's Biosphere 2 is a research facility that gives scientists a better understanding of how natural environments create the conditions for humans to sustain themselves.

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for a more intimate and comfortable experience, he said.

Plus, he said, "it's in our backyard!"

The UA took over management of the facility in 2007, Adams said.

"It has become a research facility to better understand water and how changes in our environment are going to influence the availability of water," he said.

Traditional research is usually conducted on a small scale, but because of the size of the complex, experiments at the Biosphere can be done on a more intermediate scale, he said.

The tour guides are knowledgeable enough to inform visitors of current research being conducted in the building and at times visitors can talk to the researchers directly, Adams said.

After an introductory video, a guided tour takes visitors on a less-than-one-mile round-trip, starting with a rain forest, then along an ocean cliff that has an upper savanna, before descending to a lower savanna along a marsh area. Then visitors wind down to a coastal fog desert, he said.

Visitors then descend into the technosphere, where all the electrical, mechanical and plumbing systems are housed.

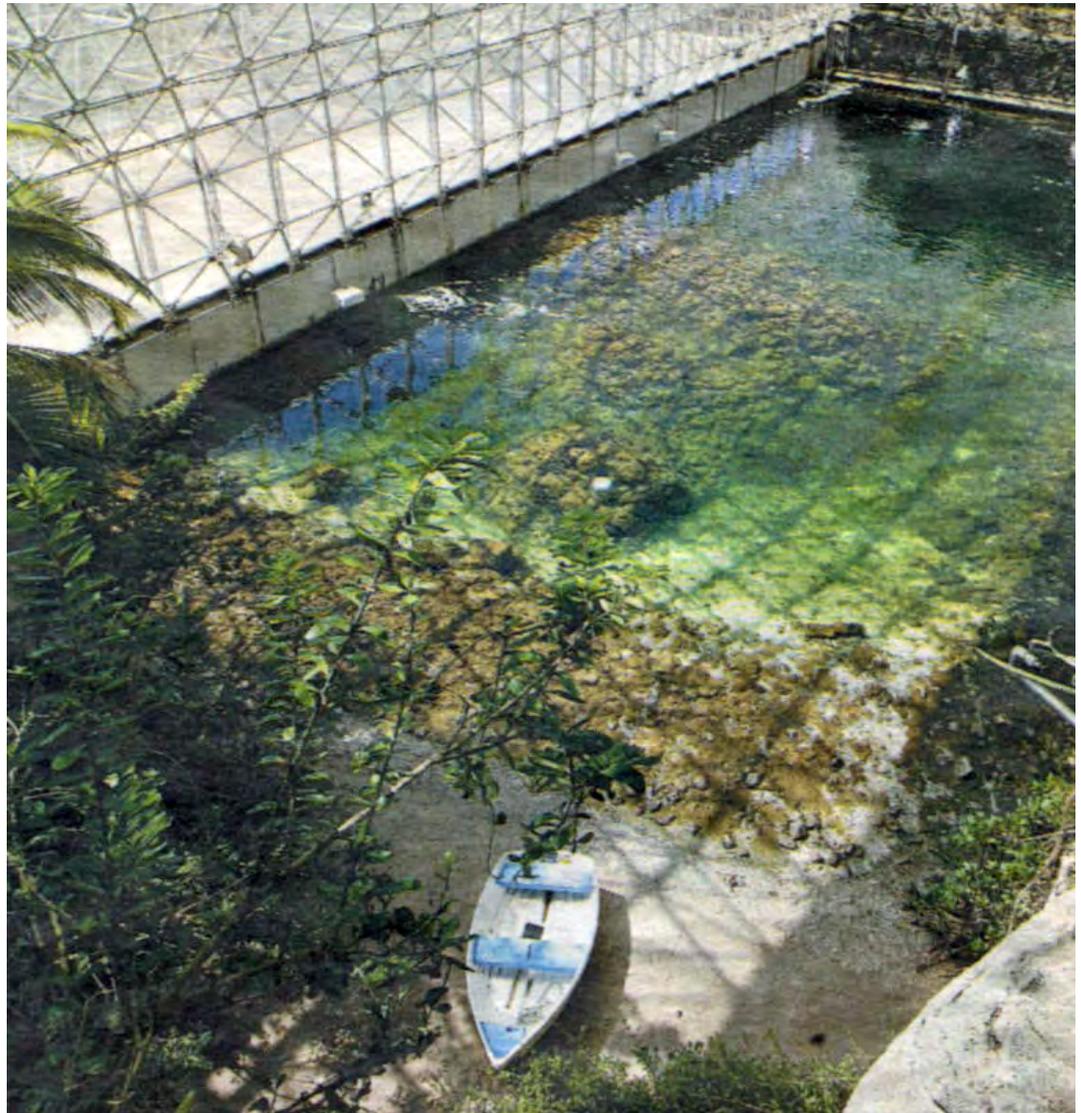
Visitors also get to see the south lung, an air expansion area that was used to regulate air pressure when the Biosphere was a sealed environment.

Visitors also can go to an underwater ocean-viewing gallery and see a section of the upper-level human habitat from the days in the early 1990s when Biosphere 2 was a research and development center studying space-colonization technology.

Time-Life Books recently named Biosphere 2 one of the 50 must-see "Wonders of the World!"

Indeed, Adams said, "there's nothing like it in the world!"

Contact A.E. Araiza at 954-3154 or araiza@azstarnet.com



The ocean savanna, above, is one of several environments inside Biosphere 2.



People touring the facility walk along the ocean savanna corridor.