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# Global Traveler

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# Hot Time in Tucson

A revitalized downtown radiates with creative possibilities.

BY RON BERNTHAL

*Entrepreneur magazine named Tucson one of the five best U.S. cities for young entrepreneurs.*

Several times a week, Tucson resident Veronica Furlong climbs aboard a brightly colored Sun Link electric streetcar at the Avenida del Convento stop on the city's west side and rides across town to her job as an archivist at the Arizona State Museum. "I started using the streetcar as soon as service started; it's a great option for me and other workers to get to our jobs," Furlong said as a new streetcar approached her stop, hardly making a sound.

The city's four-mile streetcar line began operations in August 2014 and recorded its millionth passenger in May this year, putting ridership way ahead of predictions as local commuters and visitors enjoy gliding through downtown Tucson in the comfort of an air-conditioned, non-polluting streetcar.

Seven new housing projects have been or will be approved this year, all located near the streetcar line. The Sun Link project, which has already brought more than \$200 million in private investment to downtown, is just one of Tucson's current revitalization efforts transforming the city's downtown neighborhoods. This year the city council approved tax incentives for several crucial downtown commercial projects including the Johnny Gibson grocery store, the first downtown food market since 1952. The

**GOING PLACES:** Mercado San Agustín Public Market (left); and the historic Rialto Theatre (right)

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Tucson Convention Center completed a \$9 million upgrade, Comcast is adding 1,100 jobs at a new customer support center, and the Art Deco-era Fox Tucson Theatre's restoration draws people downtown for evening concerts.

Next year, the downtown opening of the urban lifestyle hotel brand AC Hotel by Marriott will spur even more development. This sunny Southwestern city — long known for its golf and spa resorts in the desert mountains and as a quiet retirement destination (fourth best in the nation according to a recent Gallup poll) — is finally catching up with Austin, Seattle, Denver and Portland, Ore., whose design-driven, eco-friendly downtowns draw tech-savvy millennials and their entrepreneurial ambitions. This phenomenon is not lost on Tucson's movers and shakers.

"We are focusing on driving the market to continue attracting the millennials," said Michael Keith, CEO, Downtown Tucson Partnership. "Downtown has to capture the young, creative people, and of Tucson's present downtown entrepreneurs, 75 percent are under the age of 40."

Fletcher McCusker, a longtime business leader and one of Tucson's major philanthropists, spoke about the mission to protect the city's historic assets while allowing some vertical density. "We have created a blended community that is part art, part tourism, part business, education and government, and at night it converts to an entertainment zone," he said. "This delicate balance has



to be maintained by developers and others so we can keep attracting young and innovative people.” With affordable commercial and residential real estate, a business-friendly environment, plenty of hiking and biking trails, 37 professional golf courses and the southernmost ski area in the United States on nearby Mount Lemmon, Tucson’s attractiveness to young entrepreneurs is growing. In addition, Tucson’s conveniently located airport offers non-stop service to 15 major U.S. cities.

Startup Tucson, founded in 2011, has been instrumental in supporting the launch and growth of new, high-impact businesses in Tucson. Many of these startups — including HTG Molecular, Metropia, Pinged and KorkBoard — use high technology in new ways, while others, like RBar Energy (nutrition bars) and BlackRock Brewers (craft beer) are finding hot new markets in the Tucson area for more traditional products.

In addition, the city and the University of Arizona formed an alliance to incubate local technology startup firms. The Tech Launch Arizona program engages local talent and expertise from UA and elsewhere to work with area startups.

Many of the city’s 17 historic neighborhoods, all close to downtown, are gentrifying as new housing restorations, shops and restaurants pop up in formerly neglected areas. A startling housing project designed by architect Stefanos Polyzoides, the “Godfather of New Urbanism,” is in development with PureBuild as a Mediterranean-style village with fountains, pedestrian-only lanes and brightly painted masonry houses.

The city’s fledging solar industry is also heating up. This year, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, a major city employer,

completed the largest solar installation in the Department of Defense, expected to save about half a million dollars a year. The Tucson Unified School District is installing solar at 43 schools, providing 80 percent of each school’s power needs. Residents and businesses are also taking advantage of the city’s high annual sunshine rating by installing solar panels whenever possible.

Tucson’s iconic resorts, including The Westin La Paloma, Tubac Golf Resort & Spa and the newer Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, all located in stunning desert terrain outside the city, continue to draw leisure travelers and corporate meeting groups. But with so many new restaurant and entertainment options downtown, along with a plethora of innovative startups and the convenient streetcar, the dynamics of visiting the Tucson metro area will surely change.



## SCENIC DRIVES

With high desert peaks in every direction, perhaps the prettiest city drive is to head west on Speedway Boulevard, which becomes Gates Pass Road as it climbs into the Tucson Mountains and Saguaro National Park West. Cacti dot the foothills, and a scenic overlook at 3,172 feet offers great views of the surrounding terrain. Continue another few miles to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and walk through the indoor/outdoor live exhibits of desert wildlife. Enjoy lunch at the museum’s restaurant before returning to the city to complete the 30-mile roundtrip.

For a full-day excursion, take I-19 South to Tubac (45 miles). Founded by the Spanish in 1752, the town of 1,200 year-round residents boasts cafés, galleries and craft shops. Nearby is the Tubac Golf Resort & Spa, built in 1959 on the site of the Otero family’s 1789 hacienda, which still stands. Continue south on I-19 toward Nogales, almost to the border with Mexico, but follow signage to Route 82 North, where Patagonia (population 900) with its friendly, anti-establishment vibe, eclectic artist studios and holistic body treatment practitioners is a throw-back to the 1960s. A little farther, Sonoita (population 800) is known for its wine trail; about a dozen wineries produce excellent southern Arizona wine and are open for tastings. At Sonoita, take Route 83 to I-10 West and return to Tucson. Routes 82/83 pass through the Santa Rita Mountains and Coronado National Forest; the roundtrip from downtown is 142 miles.

**Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum**  
desertmuseum.org

**Downtown Tucson Partnership**  
downtowntucson.org

**The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain**  
ritzcarlton.com

**Sonoita Wine Trail**  
arizonawine.org

**Startup Tucson**  
startuptucson.org

**Sun Link**  
sunlinkstreetcar.com

**Tech Launch Arizona**  
techlaunch.arizona.edu

**Tubac Golf & Spa Resort**  
tubacgolfresort.com

**Visit Tucson**  
visittucson.org

**The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa**  
starwoodhotels.com

**UP AND COMING:** *New houses in the Mercado District near downtown (left), and an artist’s rendering of the AC Hotel Tucson (below)*

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