



NATURE'S EXTREMES

Eight Seasons Shape a Southwestern Land

Arizona Highways 2000

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IT IS THE PERFECT summer day – 108° and promising.

Doug Kreutz and I, reporters at Tucson's afternoon newspaper, are rolling out to lunch in my Fiat roadster. We peel back the top for maximum ventilation and – go figure – dine on incendiary green chile at South Tucson's primo Mexican restaurant. Returning to the office, stuffed with enchilada cheer, we notice a puffy, gray-white cumulonimbus bank massing over the Santa Rita Mountains, 30 miles to the south. We debate briefly. It's been months since the last rain. No one would miss us. And so we speed south on Interstate 19, two 35-year-olds playing hooky.

The temperature edges down, maybe to a cool 100°, as we begin driving up an incline into Madera Canyon, a piney cleft in the northwestern slope of the Santa Ritas. The heavily drooping sky, its lumpy clouds now a gunmetal gray, begins churning and boiling. We stop to build the Fiat's flimsy canvas top. Doug asks how much protection it might afford in the event of a lightning strike. I had recently asked an electrical engineer that exact question myself, and I relay his confident answer: "Almost none."

The rain begins to fall in wide, fat drops, thudding on the ragtop. We surge up the canyon, the tires seeming to slurp the moisture in joy. It's been a long time for them, too. Lightning crashes. The shower turns into a torrent.

We hit the end of the road and park, facing south into the teeth of the storm. Nobody else is out here; people apparently think it's a bad day. The storm hammers our Italian tent with furious Arizona fists, and amazingly, it holds. Doug and I stare through the windshield, listening, looking, not talking. Instinctively, we are absorbing the storm's energy, the life-giving emotional transfusion of the rain.

We return to the newsroom at 4 o'clock. It's empty. Final edition was stuffed into bed hours ago. Doug, suffering a small internal storm of guilt over taking an unauthorized afternoon off, sits down and writes a fine essay about taking an unauthorized afternoon off. I mull the afternoon's events for 20 years and write a book. We prove again what Arizonans have understood for centuries, even millennia: the sky overhead may prove lovely or violent, or any gradation between, but always it has the power to amaze and inspire.