



THE FEEL *of* THE GILA

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS
BY CECILIA KAYANO





Stopping to water the horses and mules before a long climb.

The Gila was the first designated wilderness in the world and is still one of the largest wildernesses in the US. But it is much more than 550,000 acres of wild country in the southwestern region of our state. The Gila has its own feel, because of the ancient people who assembled curved dwellings perched along rock walls...because of the hardscrabble settlers who eked out livings in the remote meadows.

If you enter the Gila, you cannot help but exit it as a changed person. The history and vastness of the place elicits feelings of wonder. We can connect to people long gone. This remote, raw land is like a portal into the past. The calendar date becomes abstract. Past regrets and future worries fade away and we can live in the moment.



The steep trail out of Trotter, once a settlement deep in the wilderness.

Remoteness

If anyone can help you understand the feel of the Gila, it's Jim Mater. He's the owner of U-Trail adventures and outfitting business, and over 30 years has guided about 2,000 trail riders, packers and hunters into this wild land.

In 1984 Jim moved from California, where he was a statistician consultant for NASA, to Glenwood, a village on the west side of the Gila. He bought a mule and a donkey and started learning how to pack from a man called One-Eyed George.

He met other old-timers who knew the Gila, learned trails and techniques, then embarked on his own. He says he has ridden every trail in this wilderness. "There are totally different landscapes from deep, awesome canyons to mountains. There's no monotony being in the Gila, and there is very low human

impact. It's like you left the human world behind and entered the natural world in its eternity."

Ray Bouton is a horse/mule packer who helps Jim on trips. He has cowboied in Wyoming, Colorado and Arizona and now lives in southern Arizona. He is fairly new to the Gila but is already enthralled by the magic of the place. "The Gila is so vast it's mind boggling. Whenever I ride into it, I think about stopping at any moment and I wonder what it would take to ride out on my own, with no help. It's overwhelming. You had better have skills and up your game because it could take two days to get out."

Wonder

On a recent guided trip, Jim and Ray led a group of guests from Aeroplane Mesa Trailhead into a small canyon on the northern edge of the wilderness.

They rode seven miles then set up camp near a narrow stream surrounded by canyon walls. Jim says that this was the birthplace of Geronimo. History shows that Geronimo, Cochise and other Native leaders lived in the Gila. In this canyon there are petroglyphs, cliff dwellings, and places of early settlements.

When you come upon them, you can't help wondering what the wilderness was like years ago. You imagine the Mongollon and Apache living there and can feel their lingering presence.

Dave Gifford owns Albuquerque Pet Memorial Service with his wife Kelly and was one of the guests on a recent pack trip. He rode a U-Trail horse named Red (whom Dave nicknamed Red Neck) up to a rock wall that displayed a petroglyph then on to a wide meadow called Trotter, which at one time had a settlement and mail service to Snow Lake.



Change

To experience a five- or six-day pack trip into the heart of the Gila means you will change. Ray says he usually sees two types of guests, one who has a long bucket list, and wants to check off the Gila and move on, and the other type who has only one item on the list -- a pack trip into the Gila Wilderness. No matter, both experience change.

Jim says its hard to explain to people how the wilderness will change them. He just lets it unfold. "People gain confidence in life. Nature boosts them up. You come away with a better outlook. We ask ourselves, Why do we worry so much? Then we look at the stars, look at the vastness."

Dave is a laid-back businessman who probably has a lot of stress percolating in him somewhere. He covers it up well but admits the Gila helped him. "I went back home knowing everything is OK. I was more aware of my horse and more aware of my wife Kelly. I was able to help folks be in the moment."



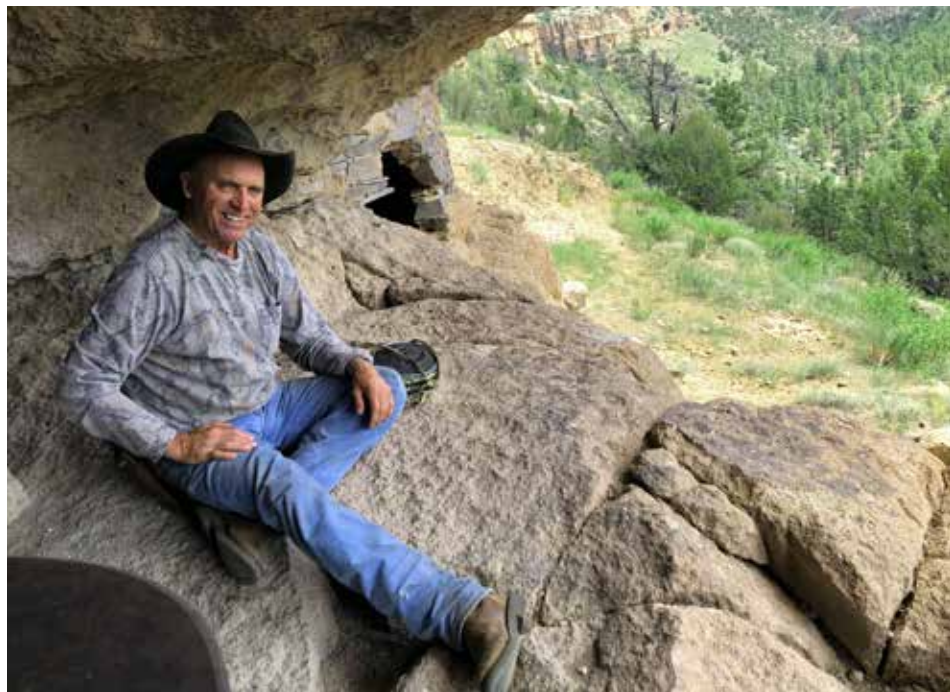
TOP: Jim Mater leads the way through a rock portal. LEFT: Jim's favorite mount -- an 18 hands high mule named Cisco.

On the third day of the 6-day trip, he rode with the group up to the canyon narrows, hiked up a hillside and explored a well-preserved cliff dwelling. "I imagined being in the day of Geronimo when the area was even more pristine. I could almost see the people living in the dwellings and the valley."

Even though Jim has ridden here many times, it is always new, and always gets his imagination going. "I wonder, how could they live like this? Then I realize everyone lived like this at one time. These were everyday people just trying to make a life."



Ray rides his favorite mount, a U-Trail mule named Sally, through the meadows at Trotter.



TOP: Ray at the cliff dwellings near Geronimo's birth place. BELOW: Dave by the Middle Fork of the Gila River.

Life lessons

It was on June 3, 1924 that the Gila was designated the first wilderness in the world. At that time trails were almost non-existent and grizzly bears still roamed. Now, there are about 800 miles of trails and animals ranging from black bear to mountain lions inhabit the area. The elk are the largest in the state because of the minerals and nourishment found in the Gila's soils and grasses. Because it's a wilderness, there are no roads here, and when you are in its center, the closest one is 10-20 miles away.

How fortunate we are to have this magic place in our state. If you decide to go, you will experience remoteness, wonder, change and life lessons. Like Dave who says, "Don't sweat the small stuff. Take a deep breath and relax," or Jim who says, "My worries are not so big," or Ray who says, "Let go of the little things and listen to your horse chew its grain."

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