

By Maggie Kielpinski

Driving through the old Mule Mountain Tunnel into Bisbee, looking down on a storybook setting of cottages balanced precariously on red-gold hillsides, it occurs to me that this mining town once known as "Queen of the Copper Camps" still reigns supreme in southern Arizona. In a state blessed with a wealth of history and a host of natural wonders, Bisbee, 90 miles southeast of Tucson, is a must-see.

Neither a sideshow reproduction of yesterday nor a gentrified version of its former self, Bisbee is authentic and alive. The residents in this town of roughly 7,000 are a lively blend of retirees, world-renowned artists, artisans and writers, seriously talented musicians, a few retro hippies and a sprinkling of urban refugees. They cherish the anonymity this town affords and the creativity it stimulates.

Once considered the largest and liveliest city between St. Louis and San Francisco—a result of the phenomenal copper veins found at the Queen Mine—Bisbee has its share of grand buildings. The Copper Queen Hotel, a magnificent white, Italianate structure with red tile roof and contrasting red and green trim, boldly dominates

the center of town. It once entertained Gen. John J. (Black Jack) Pershing, President Teddy Roosevelt, politicians and mining bigwigs.

Also impressive, in size and design, is the Phelps Dodge Mining headquarters that is now the Mining and Historical Museum (a Smithsonian affiliate). It's the "go to" place for local history, displays of minerals found in the surrounding Mule Mountains, and an up-to-date exhibit of copper's role in the electrification of America. The Copper Queen Library, the art deco county courthouse, the Gothic revival St. Patrick's Church (with stunning stained glass windows by Emil Frei), all reinforce how prosperous this town once was.

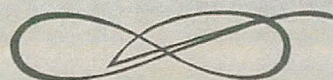
Bisbee is also a town of Arizona firsts: the first stock exchange, the first Smithsonian affiliate, the oldest traffic circle and the oldest public library, the longest continually operating ball field and the longest operating golf course.

It's not surprising to learn that Bisbee was built by Serbs and



Bisbee's Main Street is dotted with gift and antique shops, art galleries and cafes.

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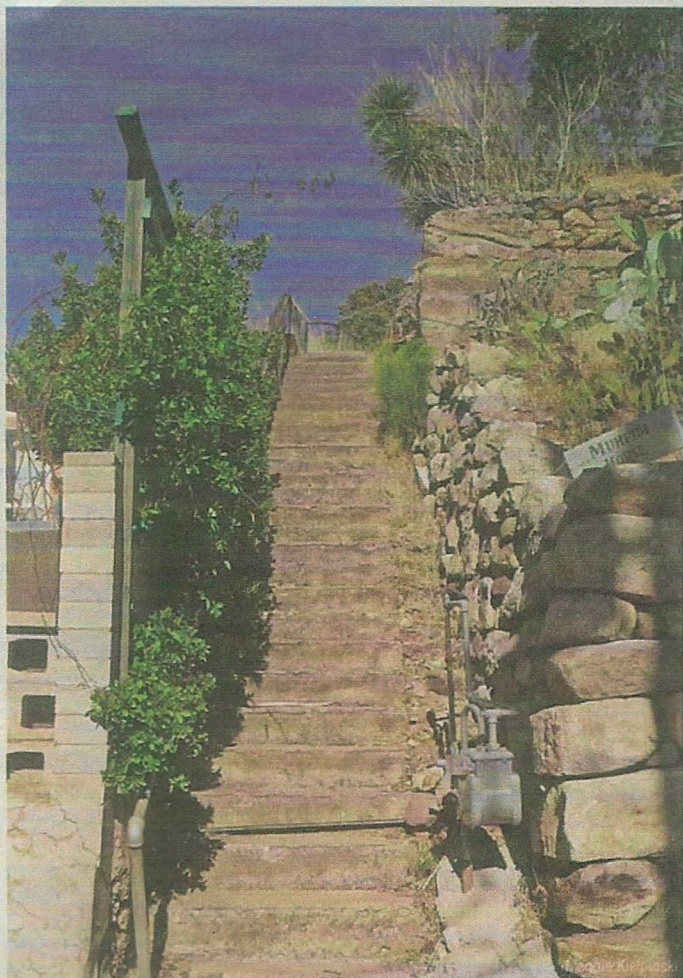
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Staircases meander up the hillsides of Bisbee.

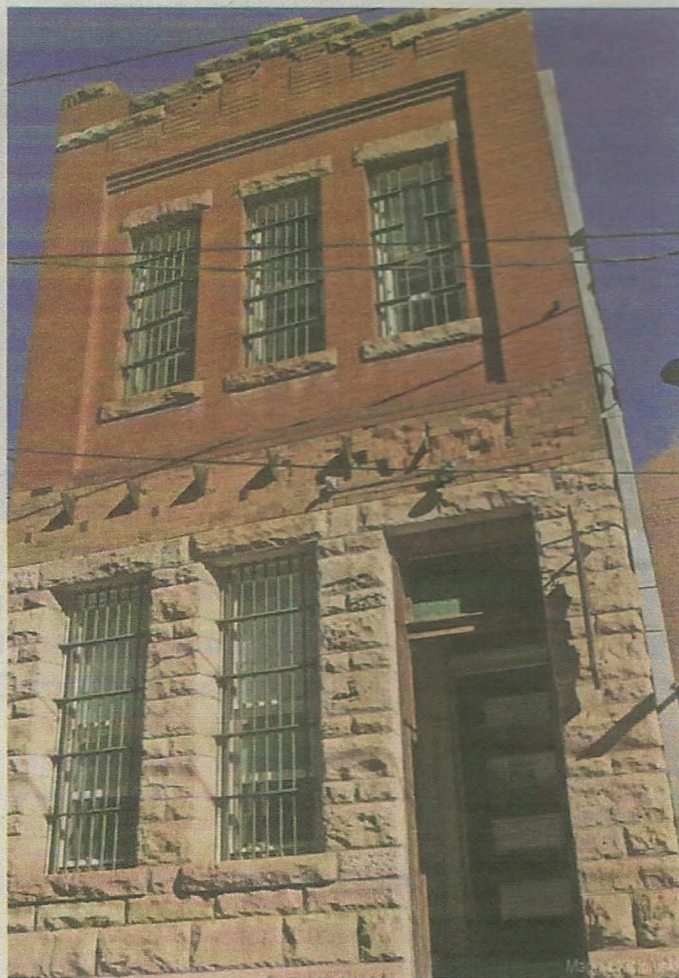
Italians at the beginning of the 20th Century since the town looks something like a provincial village in the Italian Alps.

Now a sanctuary for the arts, it's made for serious rambling. Stairways meander up the hillsides along mule paths that led to the mines. Built as a make-work WPA project in the 1930s, the staircases have deteriorated, but funds for their repair have been raised since 1991 through an annual stair climbing challenge called the Bisbee 1000. The event draws hundreds of runners, joggers and walkers to Bisbee on the third Saturday of October every year to climb 1,000 steps.

Ever in search of a photo op and attracted by the juxtaposition of line, shape and color, I wandered the old staircases up and down through tiny walled lanes overgrown with succulents and creepers, past decorative iron fences and sculpted copper gates, green with age. Some cottages are fine examples of the Victorian style of the times, cheerfully upgraded in a riot of color, and some are simply old stucco miner's cottages left to their own devices. All have their own charm.



A fanciful fence reflects the artistic side of Bisbee.



The OK Street Jailhouse now provides lodging for tourists.

I stumbled onto the Muheim House, a restored Queen Anne style pioneer cottage on Youngblood Hill. Looking for refreshment, I doubled back to Main Street, a gentle uphill sweep of Victorian storefronts sitting shoulder to shoulder. The atmosphere is "old world village," full of fine art galleries, gift shops, antique stores and cafes.

Historic Brewery Gulch once housed the stock exchange and many "fine establishments" in its heyday. St. Elmo Bar, a holdover from those rowdy times, has been serving customers for over 100 years and is still home to an eclectic mix of Bisbee locals.

One word of warning: Don't take your rig into town; parking is limited.

On the way out of town I drove east about two miles to the Warren District, the first planned community in Arizona. Its park is a miniature of the mall in Washington, D.C., and is bordered by timeless craftsman style cottages. At the head of the park, in front of the rusty orange slag heaps from the open pit mines, is an extraordinary Italianate villa called "Loma Linda" next to the "Greenway" an equally lavish Queen Anne style mansion, built by the owners of the Phelps Dodge Corporation. Copper was good to them.

There are a lot of surprises in this Southwest original; this land of Cochise and Geronimo—it's worth a visit. ■

Maggie Kielpinski and her husband travel extensively in the Southwest. Their home is at Big Bear Lake in Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains.

IF YOU GO

Among the places to stay in Bisbee are:

Queen Mine RV Park, (520) 432-5006

San Jose RV Park & Lodge, (520) 432-5761

Shady Dell RV Park, (520) 432-3567