



# On the Comeback Trail

Rough drive to rediscover a wounded mountain  
reveals Mount Lemmon's slow resurgence

WE HAD NOT been to the mountain since the fire. Dread kept us away. In the summer of 2003, forest fires ravaged the soaring green playground of Mount Lemmon, Tucson's back yard. The fire consumed historic cabins and ancient trees, replacing scenic splendor with Halloween-scary images.

But both man and nature worked on recovery, and to celebrate the rebirth, one sparkling fall day my husband and I set out on

our journey. Like any good quest, this one surmounted challenges in hazardous places to seek the treasure at the end.

Control Road, also called Mount Lemmon Road, bumps roughly up the north side of the Santa Catalina Mountains from Peppersauce Canyon near the town of Oracle, northwest of Tucson, to the Summerhaven Fire Station.

Some 10,000 cars toil up this adventurous back road to Mount Lemmon each year,

compared to millions on the paved Catalina Highway on the southeast side, according to Bob Magon of the Forest Service. If the weather turns bad or you lack a high-clearance vehicle, then stick to the beaten path of the Catalina Highway. That main route provides smooth pavement, guardrails and pullouts—and a quicker trip.

But this being a quest, we did it the hard way. Veering right from American Avenue in Oracle at a Y-intersection,

we joined the Mount Lemmon Road that zips across ranchland to Peppersauce Canyon, at which point the road is labeled Forest Service Road 38. Along the way, the pavement gave way to a well-maintained gravel road and passed by one of the entrances to the Arizona Trail. In Peppersauce Canyon, picnic tables nestled under towering cottonwoods and birches in a cool, green retreat.

The mountains disappeared as the road curved and dipped

#### LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Far-reaching views of the Galluro Mountains and San Pedro Valley stretch to the horizon and offer a change in scenery below Mount Lemmon Road, also known as Control Road, which snakes over the Santa Catalina Mountains' northeastern shoulder.



the car. Blackened trees from the fire bristled on both sides of the narrow road.

We bumped up 6 miles of unpaved road in 14 minutes. Juniper trees raised our hopes that we were gaining altitude. However, the road dipped down into mesquite and crossed a deep wash—a reminder that this is not a road for rainy days. Negotiating a hairpin turn atop a ridge, we glimpsed light gleaming off distant telescopes atop Mount Lemmon. Small yellow flowers brightened the dusty brown roadside.

Groups of men wearing bulky jackets sat around their muddy pick-up trucks on the flat ridge among scrub oaks and prickly pear cacti. In the fall, deer hunters gather at dispersed camping sites in the Coronado National Forest and peer through binoculars, hoping for mule deer to venture out from cover. While they wait, they engage in the real activity of hunting season—swapping jokes and tall tales on a sunny day in a quiet place.

Ten slow miles from Peppersauce, we entered a ghost forest, haunted by the



black skeletons of trees. Even so, we could see nature striving to recover. Green sprouted everywhere. We were unaware how high we had climbed until expansive views opened toward Aravaipa Creek and Muleshoe Ranch to the southeast.

A bad washout in the road forced us to slow the Jeep to a crawl and pick our way over a one-lane bridge and up a hill. The road circled the rim of a deep bowl, where rounded brown hills and grassy meadows seemed downright civilized in contrast to the rough hillsides we had passed. However, remnants of the forest fire erased any illusion of a Shangri-La.

**GO THE DISTANCE** The Arizona Trail, a nearly 800-mile nonmotorized route that will traverse the state when it's completed, can be accessed just outside Oracle from Control Road, designated as Forest Service Road 38.

In 2003, the Aspen Fire ran violently across the mountain, whirling this way and stretching its arms out that way. It snapped its fingers and great ponderosa pines exploded. It licked a red tongue across the earth and left a black trail. It toyed with manzanita

**CATALINA AND CORONADO** A maze of ponderosa pine trees emerges from a forest floor thick with pine needles in the Santa Catalina Mountains area of the Coronado National Forest.

through the foothills above Peppersauce Campground, taking its time to approach the summit. Ranchers still run cattle here, and houses and fences peek out of valleys. Signs of mining still mark the hillsides. In a field, an ancient corral slowly fades and crumbles.

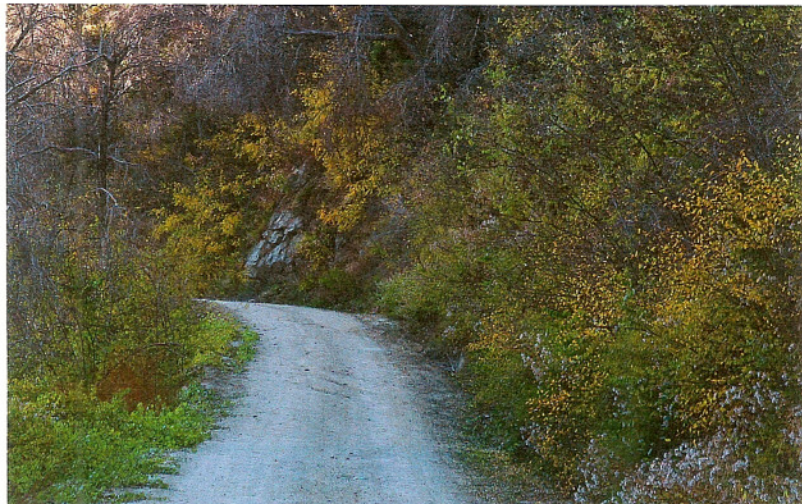
As the road climbed, views of the distant valley opened up, and the first burned trees sliced across the sky. In a tooth-rattling test of our mettle, the sharp granite bones of the mountain poked up through sparse gravel. Dead, spooky-looking century plants leaned over



**THE COMEBACK TRAIL** Damage from the 2003 Aspen Fire is still evident along the Mount Lemmon back road leading to the newly rebuilt town of Summerhaven.

and yucca, assigning some clusters to extermination while leaving neighboring clusters untouched. Two years later, stubborn grasses asserted themselves and vivid green leaves peered out from blackened limbs. The mountain will not look the same in our lifetime, experts say. But it will not stay black and dead.

After an hour on the road, we saw warning signs: "Unmaintained Road—7 miles." "Falling Trees—next 6 miles." "Flash Flood—next 6 miles." What kind of



greeting was that? However, as if to soften the lecture on caution, the other side of the road opened to a panoramic view that stretched for miles to the northeast.

Just as we thought the road couldn't get worse, we hit a stretch that looked more like a rock-climbing area than a road. There must be a better designation than "unmaintained." The Jeep drew a deep breath, hesitated, then crawled up over the barrier of rocks. While the Forest Service and the county do minimal maintenance on most of Control Road, this stretch across private property remains truly primitive.

For decades before the 1920 completion of Control Road, Tucsonans had climbed on foot or with the help of horses and mules to collect wood, minerals or peace and quiet. It took five years of political wrangling to complete the first road to Summerhaven, and this was the only route until 1933, when taxpayers funded Catalina Highway.

The narrow road still leaves no room to pass another vehicle or to pull off the side. It is this section that gave the road its name. Because cars going in opposite directions could not pass, signs "controlled" traffic on this stretch. The upward-bound drivers had to leave at a set time, offset by 90 minutes from the four daily departure times for the traffic headed down.

We climbed from 4,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation, covering the 28 miles from

#### travel tips

**Vehicle Requirements:** High-clearance, four-wheel drive.  
**Warning:** Back-road travel can be hazardous. Be aware of weather and road conditions. Carry plenty of water. Don't travel alone, and let someone know where you're going and when you plan to return.

**Travel Advisory:** Allow four hours minimum for a round-trip from Tucson to Oracle, up Control Road and back down Catalina Highway. The unpaved Control Road makes up about 25 miles of this loop.

**Additional Information:** Coronado National Forest, Santa Catalina Ranger District, (520) 749-8700; [www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado](http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado).

Oracle to the fire station on the top in two-and-a-half hours, with more bumps and grinds than a night at a cowboy dance hall. The reward for the adventurous waited at Mt. Lemmon Cafe, a treasured business that survived the fire. There, we found shining circles of—no, not gold rings—but something even better—tin pans of pie.

Mountains teach quiet lessons: *Keep putting one foot in front of the other and you will reach the top.* Time will heal, and life will defeat destructive forces. Taking the hard road has its rewards. Scenery and pie. 🍌

**HISTORIC HILLSIDES** Rolling hills (right) dotted with agaves, ocotillos, mesquite trees and scrub oaks dominate the landscape that is home to several historic southern Arizona ranches.

## route finder

Note: Mileages are approximate.

- From the intersection of **State Route 77** and State Route 79 at Oracle Junction north of Tucson, drive northeast on State 77 for 9 miles to American Avenue and turn right (east).
- Drive **2.4 miles on American Avenue** to its junction with Mount Lemmon Road (also called Old Mount Lemmon Highway and Control Road) and turn right (south).
- At **1.1 miles south of the turnoff** onto Mount Lemmon Road, pass a road on the left leading to Oracle State Park.
- At **1.7 miles south of the turnoff**, a sign marks the boundary of the Coronado National Forest.
- At **3.2 miles south of the turnoff**, bear right as the road forks at an unsigned Y junction.
- At **4 miles south of the turnoff**, a signed Arizona Trail entry is on the left.
- At **4.8 miles south of the turnoff**, cross the east-west Campo Bonito Road, an intersection where a sign designates the road you're on as Forest Service Road 38.
- At **8.1 miles south of the turnoff**, pass Peppersauce Campground.
- Continue on **FR 38** for an additional 19.5 miles to the Summerhaven Fire Station and turn right for a short drive into Summerhaven. Turn left for a drive to Tucson via Catalina Highway.

