

## **Family Fare: The Looney Tune Tour of the Desert**

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Wile E. Coyote is there, slicing across the desert, a cloud of dust in his wake. Roadrunner is four-wheeling it over dirt roads. Bugs Bunny is darting between the cacti.

No, this isn't Looney Tunes. It's even better. It's the Sonoran desert.

There are two ways kids will love exploring Arizona's alive and arid terrain. They can view it from above in a hot air balloon, or from ground level in a 4x4 H1 Hummer. Either way they're guaranteed to witness first-hand lightning quick jack rabbits and wily coyotes.

Hot Air Expeditions is the largest outfit piloting balloons over the Arizona desert. Their guests—both kids and adults—are met daily at hotels in the Phoenix/Scottsdale area around 5 a.m. — a dark, early hour even if you're not a teenager! Vans drive passengers deep into the desert and unload them at the day's launch site, where balloonists are already setting up. Giant blow torches are shooting flames into enormous balloons lying flat on the desert floor. As the yards-and-yards of fabric heat up, the balloons inflate and lift, revealing a monster-size saguaro cactus painted on their sides. Each balloon is as high as a 10-story building. But as Patrick Stevens, the company's head pilot says: "It's not all about size!"

The crew urges passengers into the baskets. The ropes are untied, and with little fanfare the balloons lift off. "Expect to hear nothing but silence," Stevens says. "There's no noise from the wind because we'll be travelling with the wind."

At first it's fun to feel the balloon's lift, and watch the other balloons in your group lift-off as the sun rises. Next it's fun to stare down at the desert floor, picking out different varieties of prickly cactus and ooh-ing and ahh-ing over how colourful desert flowers can be. But the most fun to be had is watching desert animals dart this way and that. Cotton tail rabbits are everywhere in the desert. Jack rabbits really do jet about, and coyotes really do run after them.

Rattlesnake-eating roadrunners are harder to spot, except if you're on the ground in a Hummer.

Roadrunner Desert Adventures, also in the Phoenix/Scottsdale corridor, offers door-to-desert off-road tours tailor-made for adventurous kids. Giant yellow convertible Hummers pick you up at your hotel and trundle you into vast, empty tracts of the Sonoran landscape, with wild west ghost towns and turquoise mines along the way. Drivers like Gene Hume offer Sonoran trivia as you go. He describes how the captivating Saguaro (pronounced SWAR-o) cactus grow—from the top up—and explains their lifespan can extend up to 250 years. The best time to spot blooming desert flowers is between March and May, he says. And he aptly describes cholla cactus (pronounced CHOY-a) as if it's "straight out of Dr. Seuss."

Both balloon and Hummer tours are best for kids aged at least six and over. For the balloon rides, the taller your kids are the better—the balloons' baskets are high and it's difficult to see over the edge. The baskets' space is also tight, so kids need to be able to stay still for more than an hour. Seatbelts are worn in the Hummers, but there are no car seats for small kids, so children need to be old enough to be out of car seats for the tour. Also note, there are no toilets in balloons or in the desert. As the drivers like to say: "The restroom is the third cactus on the right!"

For more information on Hot Air Expeditions, visit [www.hotairexpeditions.com](http://www.hotairexpeditions.com). For more information on Roadrunner Desert Adventures, visit [www.roadrunnerdesertadventures.com](http://www.roadrunnerdesertadventures.com).

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