

In Search of History, Stories, and Adventure

by Treven Hooker

On February 9, 2017, 15 students from City High School and their teacher Krista Gypton woke on a cool morning ready for adventure. Assembled and energized, students and staff loaded into the van and headed west, to the sacred land known as Shontok.



In Ironwood National Forest National Monument lies a series of hills that hug a river that once flowed throughout the year. This area became a refuge for indigenous cultures spanning 4,000 years. The students' mission today was to explore and analyze the evidence left behind by these cultures, and try to understand why and how they lived in the area we now call Avra Valley.



Shontok is the Tohono O'odham name for this location (also known as Cocoraque Butte). We followed sprawling dirt roads through chaparral and mesquite forests until the landscape became rich with saguaros and ironwood trees. We circled up out of the van, and talked about the proper ways to observe and analyze pottery and petroglyphs. We talked about current methods of recoding history and telling stories. I explained how critical thinking and imagination were key to this expedition.

We began our walk and immediately spotted potsherds. Students compared the formation of rock versus pottery, realizing it is not as hard to spot as one person might think. We spent more than an hour combing the landscape for a lost world's treasure. The paint that decorates many of the sherds sparked interest and curiosity for the students. Conversation about how natural dye such as carmine is harvested, and how it was used to paint. This led to the question "How did they make pottery?" I asked the students to use their imagination and critical thinking skills to make educated guesses to answer these questions.

Eventually, ground focused wondering turned into petroglyph hunting, and we soon made our way over to a pyramid sized hill. From below the images were abundantly clear – and hundreds of them could be seen. This was an exciting discovery, but before the students could explore, we circled up to discuss the correct ways to do so. Tedious, snail like locomotion must be implemented in order to protect the ancient artwork. Students slowly moved over boulder and rock, scanning every inch to detect markings and engravings. Soon, like an Easter egg hunt, joyous cries echoed all around signifying important discoveries.

On top, we ate lunch in silence while observing 360° views. Wind whipped our ears, broken by our heads, shoulders and torsos. Once our bellies were full, we made our way back down the mountain. The new perspective unlocked new petroglyphs, demanding more energy for excitement and dreaming. At the bottom, students ran through the desert to a nearby hill, weaving and wandering through desert foliage. This reminded them of primitive hunters, or primitive prey. Both perspectives found difficulty and respect.

The high sun made its presence clear, and by early afternoon all in the party felt roasted. We made our way back to the vehicle through an arroyo. Ignoring the occasional and overly friendly cholla bud, the arroyo provided us a wide path in which we could keep our heads up and observe. Our talks ranged from symbiotic communities within saguaros, to proficient water management in desert plants, to biotic communities in Sonoran Desert soil, and just how that system works.



Before we knew it, a large steel, plastic, and rubber beast stood in our path – the Ford Transit that carried us here just a short time ago. Society beckoned us back to modern civilization and with some reluctance we obeyed. Paradise only exists in small doses I guess. The students agreed, and we vowed to embark on more adventures soon.

