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tucson
MEET OUR
makers

Alex La Pierre aims to figuratively knock down the walls separating the United States from Mexico. Keep reading to learn more about he and his wife Rocio's business, Borderlandia, or click on the "What's New" link below for the latest and greatest updates from Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Meet Alex La Pierre

I spoke with Alex La Pierre on the morning of the solar eclipse. He's holed up in his house with all the windows closed, a Mexican superstition that his wife, Rocio, a native of Chihuahua, Mexico has applied to their home in Rio Rico, about 45 minutes south of Tucson.

“She’s saving my eyes from blindness by looking at the sun,” he says, laughing.

Their marriage, much like their business – Borderlandia – highlights the cross-border connectivity of Southern Arizona and Mexico.

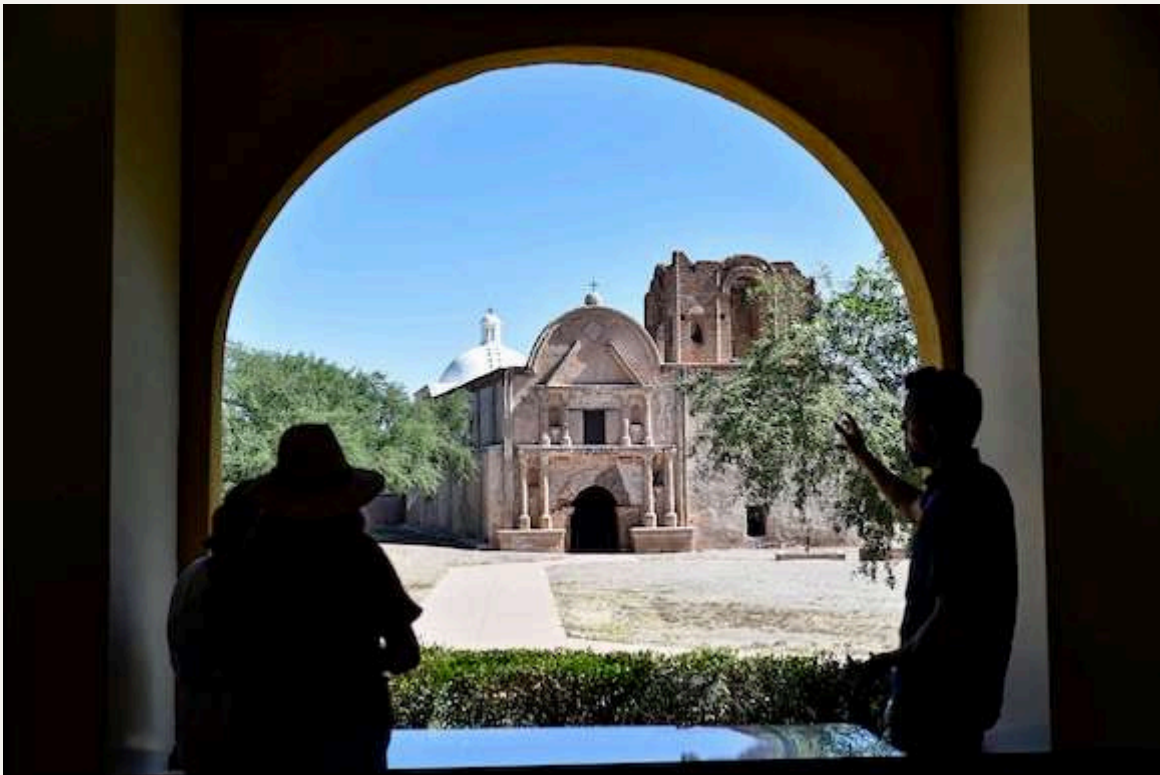
Through offering tours of Tucson, Southern Arizona, and Mexico, they’ve sought to build public understanding of the borderlands, “ensuring that the 99 percent good news of our neighbors in Mexico is shared,” Alex said.

Their tours range from traversing neighborhoods like Barrio Viejo on the ever-popular Tucson Origins Tour, featured twice in *The New York Times* over the past 18 months, to multi-day excursions into Mexico like the Álamos Tour, held in conjunction with Día de los Muertos in early November.

With Alex as the guide, “food and history are at the forefront of each of our tours. Food is such a good story, a good entrée into a new culture,” Alex said. “And my background is history so that’s definitely present in each of our tours.”

Alex’s decision to relocate to Southern Arizona occurred a decade ago after what he refers to as a “life-changing University of Arizona ethnographic field school” in the northern Mexican state of Sonora, which abuts southern Arizona.

Alex, a one-time Ranger for the National Park Service, moved to Tubac, 45-minutes outside of Tucson, to ensure the historic preservation and interpretation of Tumacacori, Arizona’s oldest mission, established in 1691 by Jesuit Priest Eusebio Francisco Kino or Father Kino.



During his early days, he recalls feeling intoxicated by the Sonoran Desert’s landscapes and culture. He was drawn to a sign at Organ Pipe National

Monument that references a Saudia Arabian prince's quote during his first visit to the Sonoran Desert.

"He said, 'this isn't a desert, this is a garden.' I really think that's so true. We have so many trees here – mesquite, palo verde, that put this notion of a barren desert to rest," Alex said. "There are these deep river valleys that are almost like stitches between the border – San Pedro, the Santa Cruz – they're almost like fingers of Old Sonora that extend into the United States. You see shrines along the different roadways; the I-19 is the only freeway in the United States that has kilometers; our mountains have jaguars; we are home to the only parrot species in the United States; and the only wild chile botanical preserve is right here – the chiltepin pepper."

In 2016, Alex's passion for the preservation of the area's history and culture caught the eye of Demion Clinco, CEO of the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, who was seeking to apply for National Historic Landmark status of the downtown Tucson neighborhood Barrio Viejo.

Demion recruited Alex to scour the neighborhood, recording the architectural and genealogical details of what Alex refers to as "one of the largest and best-preserved examples of Sonoran adobe row houses," a style of architecture that is unique to the Arizona, Mexico borderlands. His contributions to the application will likely lead to the neighborhood being designated as a National Historic Landmark by the end of the year.

Fast forward five years later to 2021 when Alex and Rocio launched the initial Southern Arizona Borderlandia tours. Alex knew he wanted to share his intimate knowledge of Barrio Viejo, a place where migrants of Mexican and Chinese descent, as well as blacks, all lived. Like that, the Tucson Origins Tour was born.

"The name Tucson in O'odham means black base and what it refers to is the spring that used to be there right next to the Il Tiradito Monument (in Barrio Viejo)," Alex said. "The story of water, and that spring that went away because of the 1886 earthquake, and the fact that archeologists have found the oldest evidence of irrigated agriculture – 4,000-year-old micro fossilized corn – at the base of nearby Sentinel Mountain, that's so important to the Tucson's UNESCO (City of Gastronomy) designation and to North American food history."



His other Arizona regional tours feature in-depth looks at Tubac, Tumacacori and the border town of Nogales, which sits halfway in Arizona and halfway in Mexico.

“The Nogales tour is very valuable because so many people have closed their minds to going over to Mexico, unfortunately, so I try to break the myths of the borderlands there,” Alex said. “I always say ‘the further you are away from the borderlands, the bigger the myth.’ During the Nogales tour I spend a lot of time talking about how important Mexico is as a trade partner to the U.S. – the billions and billions of dollars of produce that come in from Mexico. That’s really shocking for a lot of people.”

His myth-busting approach, he said, is working. Most of his tour-goers are what he refers to as “repeat offenders” or those who booked a day tour with Borderlandia, only to follow up with a multi-night trip to Mexico.

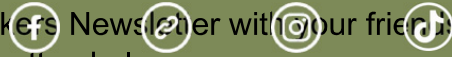
Alex and Rocio’s long-headed goal is to upend the negative narrative surrounding the Arizona borderlands and create tours that showcase the vibrance of the region, creating long-term economic viability in places that have historically been indigent. He points to Valle de Guadalupe as a prime example of this.

“I grew up in San Diego. I was living there at the height of the narco violence, and people weren’t going to TJ like they had been in the past. What was interesting there is they realized they couldn’t rely on that easy American trinket tourist dollar anymore, and so they looked inward and developed a food scene. I’m sure you’ve heard of Valle de Guadalupe. Coming here to Arizona, to Nogales, I thought, ‘oh my gosh, why can’t we have the same here?’” Alex said. “We think it’s important for Americans to connect with Mexicans. The more and more we do that, the less and less we can vilify each other.”



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