

# Local Nature Sanctuary Offers Unique Experience

By Marion Vendituoli

Vince Pinto and his wife, Claudia Campos-Pinto, have devoted the last eleven years to creating a unique wilderness experience for visitors to their 42-acre nature preserve near Lake Patagonia. Their mission at Raven's Nest Nature Sanctuary to educate their guests about creating a sustainable model of living, honoring the land and leaving a legacy for wildlife has led them to establish Ravens-Way Wild Journeys, a business that has been "successful beyond our wildest expectations," Claudia said recently.

The couple met in Tucson in 2004. Claudia, who is from Columbia, was pursuing a career in international finance and living in China when she happened to take a vacation in Arizona. Educated at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and MIT, she had previously lived and worked in New York, Tokyo and Europe, but left that world behind after falling in love with the beauty of Arizona. Vince, who studied wildlife biology at the University of Montana and has a master's degree in ethnobotany from Prescott College, has been teaching wilderness skills, ethnobotany, astronomy and sustainable living skills since the late '80s.

After looking at several locations around the state, the couple settled on property south of Patagonia to establish their nature school. They chose this spot because of its proximity to 9000 acres of wilderness, the rich biodiversity of the region, and be-

cause of proximity to the Tucson area. They also maintain a second campus, Raven's Mountain Nature Sanctuary in the Chiricahua Mountains.

At their Lake Patagonia site, they have ripped out non-native plants, established plantings of native shrubs, trees and vines, contoured the land to capture rainfall, built five miles of trails and viewing ramadas, a campsite, an outdoor kitchen and dining area, put in solar showers, a rainwater harvesting system and two luxury tents for 'glamping,' an idea Claudia came up with after a trip to Botswana.

They also turned a horse barn on the property into a museum and learning center and created an organic orchard and garden. They did all this with no heavy machinery or gas-powered equipment. "We try to do it old school," Vince said.

Guests come from all over the world. Each visit is custom designed to fit the guests' interests and level of experience. Birding tours, wildlife tracking, stone age skills, astronomy, habitat restoration, sustainable living, team building, survival skills and biodiversity ecotours are all available options. Vince runs programs for Tucson Audubon and the Southwest Birding Festival, as well as other groups, and has consulted for, and has been on-camera in, several films.

The main camping area is often used by university groups. Harvard organizes a NOLS program for medical students called "Medicine in the Wild." They bring their own instructors, but



Contributed Photo

## Vince Pinto leads an ethnobotany workshop at Ravens Nest Nature Sanctuary.

Vince works with the students each night and for one day during the course.

Two luxury safari tents are built on large platforms and have electricity, large beds, screen doors, decks, private baths, incinerator toilets, fans and heaters. All sinks and showers at Raven's Nest operate on a grey water system which waters the trees and plants.

Claudia supervises the meals which feature organic and local grown food and native edible plants, served in an outdoor dining area or in the Catclaw Lounge, a covered ramada. Conservation practices include the use of colorful Mexican dinnerware and cloth napkins, solar lighting, biodegradable soaps and cleaning agents, composting and grey water systems. They have employed native artisans to build the compound with local materials.

Claudia also handles the bookings and the schedule for the business. "I give Claudia all the credit. She is the mastermind," Vince said. "I've never met a more determined person."

Claudia in turn credits Vince for the success of the business. "The secret is his knowledge. People see that authenticity. The key is the unique education programs and experience that is possible because of Vince's knowledge of the Sky Islands," she said.

"They keep coming back. That to us is our biggest testimonial." One German couple has visited six times, for example. "We have put together something so compelling. We bring people back to the basics," she said. "They connect with themselves."

For more information about Raven's Nest Nature Sanctuary, visit [www.ravensnatureschool.com](http://www.ravensnatureschool.com)

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