

INDIAN TRINCHERAS

Trinchera is a Spanish word for defensive walls or trenches. It is used to define a distinctive type of archeological site that is found throughout the southwestern United States and Northwestern Mexico. An archeological site that is located on a hill or low mountain peak and contains terraces, walls or other construction of local stone is classified as a *trinchera*. Terraces and other forms of construction at *trincheras* are made of stones stacked without mortar and are usually built on volcanic hills that have plenty of stones for construction. The purpose of some *trincheras*, particularly the smaller ones, is a subject for debate among archeologists. Probable uses, depending on the complexity of the site, are defense, residence, terrace gardens, public events, visibility for long distance communications and multipurpose villages.

Trinchera sites were built by several different cultures over the years with the earliest sites dating back to 1000 B.C. and the most recent as late as 1500 A.D. They ranged in size from complex village sites in Sonora Mexico to small defensive sites in southern Arizona. Cerro De Trincheras is located in northwest Sonora and is probably the best example of a residence *trinchera* site. It consisted of about 900 terraces, had a population of about 2000 people and was occupied between 1300 and 1500 A.D. Tumamoc Hill near Tucson was a smaller residence site. It is one of the most extensive *trincheras* sites (pre-Hispanic hilltop settlements with masonry architecture) in southern Arizona. It contained both large and small terraces, about 150 structures and was occupied by different cultures. The earliest indigenous people who built structures on Tumamoc Hill that could be classified as *trincheras* lived there during the Cienega phase (500 to 300 B.C.). The Hohokam, ancestors of the Tohono O'odham, occupied Tumamoc Hill between 200 and 600 A.D.

There are numerous small *trinchera* sites located in the sky islands of southern Arizona and northern Mexico and they are found on hillsides from Tucson to Magdalena Mexico. Southern Arizona is considered the northern outpost of the civilization that built them. They are not as well built as the *trincheras* in the South. Archaeologists have studied them for many years; the University of Arizona and Arizona State Museum have been involved in the studies and they are still not sure of the origin or purpose. They are thought to have been built by the Hohokam between 1100-1300 AD. Pottery shards from the area indicate this time frame. There are two theories concerning the purpose of the walls. Originally they were thought to be defensive walls because they were always built on hillsides or on the top of a hill with a command view of the approach. The defenders could not have withstood a siege because of a lack of food or water. However, transient, marauding bands that would merely hit and run caused most attacks at that time. A later theory was that they might be of an agricultural nature and that they were put on hillsides to hold soil and collect water for early spring planting. Warm air rises and cold air settles in plains and valleys. A five-year study at a *trinchera* site gave an average of 36 days from first to last frost high on the hillside and 157 days in the valley. They could make use of late winter rains to irrigate early plantings and supplement dwindling winter supplies. Perhaps the defensive purpose led them to the agricultural use as well.

The *trinchera* site of most interest to the hikers of the Green Valley Hiking Club is the site located on a hill just south of the Rock Corral in the Tumacacori Mountains (see Figure 7). This peak was undoubtedly an Indian lookout with the Rock Corral settlement directly below and magnificent views in all directions. The peak of the hill is completely surrounded by stonewalls and there are a number of small *trincheras* located on the sides of the hill a short distance below the summit. Early evaluation of the *trincheras* revealed stone tool chips, numerous pottery shards and metate holes that indicated extensive Indian activities. There is also a water reservoir on the summit that contained water on an April 2014 visit. The following pictures of the *trincheras* features were taken on several visits to the hill.

Summarized from various web sites by T. Johnson in April 2014. Photos by T. Johnson.

Additional Material: GVHC Library File 75



Figure 1. The hill on the left contains numerous Indian *trincheras*.



Figure 2. Rock walls of the *trinchera*.



Figure 3. *Trinchera* walls



Figure 4. *Trinchera* located on side of hill.



Figure 5. Matate in Rock



Figure 6. Water reservoir on hilltop

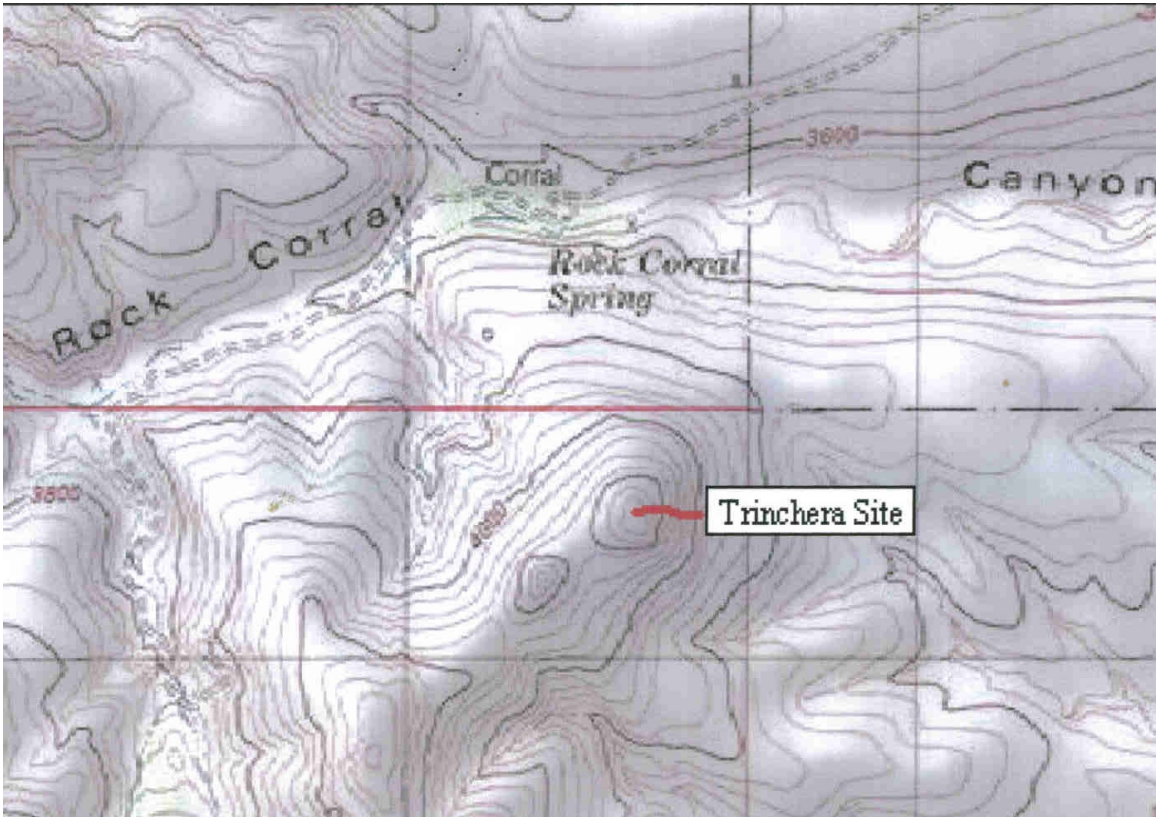


Figure 7. Topographic map showing location of *trinchera* site.

