

Arizona License Plates

Have you ever played the automobile license plate game? You know, where you see how many of the 50 different U.S. state license plates you can spot. Here's a new game, even more challenging: spotting different **Arizona** license plates.

Development

But first, let's talk about how Arizona license plates developed. Summarizing from collector Gary Fox's web site, azplates.com, "Prior to Arizona statehood in 1912, some cities, including Tucson, Phoenix, and Prescott, issued their own plates. ... Shortly after Arizona became a state, motorists were required to register their vehicles with the Secretary of State and were issued a two-inch diameter aluminum disk stamped with a registration number. The disk was required to be mounted somewhere on the vehicle usually on the dashboard. ... it was the responsibility of the motorist to come up with a license plate with a number matching the number on the disk. He could either purchase one from various private businesses, or even make it himself - from a variety of materials including wood, leather, and metal. The numerals were to be at least three inches high and one-half inch wide along with the state initials ARZ."

The State of Arizona first issued automobile license plates in 1914; Tucson auto enthusiast Dr. Hiram W. Fenner got the first plate with number "1" on it. Arizona has continued to issue plates (or renewal stickers) annually.

In the early years, Arizona plates were embossed (stamped) on steel of various rectangular sizes, with numerous different background colors, and with numerous different arrangements of letters and numbers in many different colors.

Arizona plates were made of copper in 1932, '33, and '34. In 1947 Arizona made plates out of aluminum for the first time. Since then, plates have been made of aluminum or steel.

In 1956, all U.S. plates were standardized at today's 6" x 12" size.

Here's a description of the last three designs of standard Arizona passenger plates:

1980-1997	White embossed letters, numbers, and border on maroon background. Undated plates with renewal stickers. Format ABC123.
1997-2008	Dark green embossed numbers and letters on screened desert background of setting sun. Renewal stickers. Format 123ABC.
2008-	Dark green screened letters and numbers on screened desert background of setting sun, with security stripe. Flat plates with renewal stickers. Format ABC1234.

Manufacturing

Until the late 1990s, Arizona license plates had their numbers, letters, and simple designs embossed on pre-painted aluminum. The “raised” portions of the plates were then painted.

Beginning in 1997, the more complicated desert sunset background design was thermally printed (or screened), under computer control, onto white reflective vinyl film that was then adhesively attached to the aluminum plate. Then the license plate “number” was embossed into the aluminum and painted. (According to ADOT, in the early years of this process, the embossing action stretched the vinyl film coating, weakening it, and causing the background to peel if further damaged by impacts or tearing. That’s why you occasionally see plates on the road with dull gray center areas, the color of the original aluminum. The manufacturer changed to a more durable vinyl film.)

By 2008 both the desert sunset background and the license plate “number” were being thermally printed onto the vinyl film. This new technology allows for a lot of creativity in license plate design.

Nowadays a visible (barely), three-dimensional security stripe, an anti-plate-counterfeiting measure, is embedded in the plate’s reflective surface, running up and down at the center of the plate. The wavy, intertwined pattern “appears to float” within the material and has been described as looking like smoke.

A few additional facts about Arizona license plates:

1. The first time the slogan “Grand Canyon State” appeared was 1940.
2. All of the plates are made by inmates at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence.
3. The letters I, O, Q or U are never used on passenger plates because they could too easily be misread.
4. Since 1980, passenger license plate sequences for each of the three plate designs have started with the letters AAA, and then incremented the numbers, before coming back to AAB and so on.

Specialty Plates

Beginning in the 1960s, Arizona began to offer “specialty” plates in addition to standard automobile license plates. Early specialty plates included *Classic Car* (1965), *Historic Vehicle* (1977), *University of Arizona* (1989), and *Environmental* (1992). With the new screening technology, the 2000s saw a tremendous increase in the number of specialty plates offered, continuing today with the latest *Support Our Schools* plate issued on November 11, 2013.

Today, the ADOT web site offers around 60 different Arizona-legislature-authorized specialty plates – representing diverse groups espousing conservation, social awareness, the military, schools, sports teams, and a variety of other organizations. (There are currently eight additional specialty plates under consideration.) Disability and Hearing Impaired plates are also offered. Some of the longer term specialty plates (e.g., *U of A*) have evolved through three design changes!

According to Arizona Daily Star archives, with few exceptions, specialty plates cost an additional \$25 a year. And \$17 of that goes to the sponsoring organization, with the rest going to the Motor Vehicle Division.

Many of these plates can be ordered online, the others by mail. Some are offered to everyone and others only to people who qualify (e.g., *Veteran*).

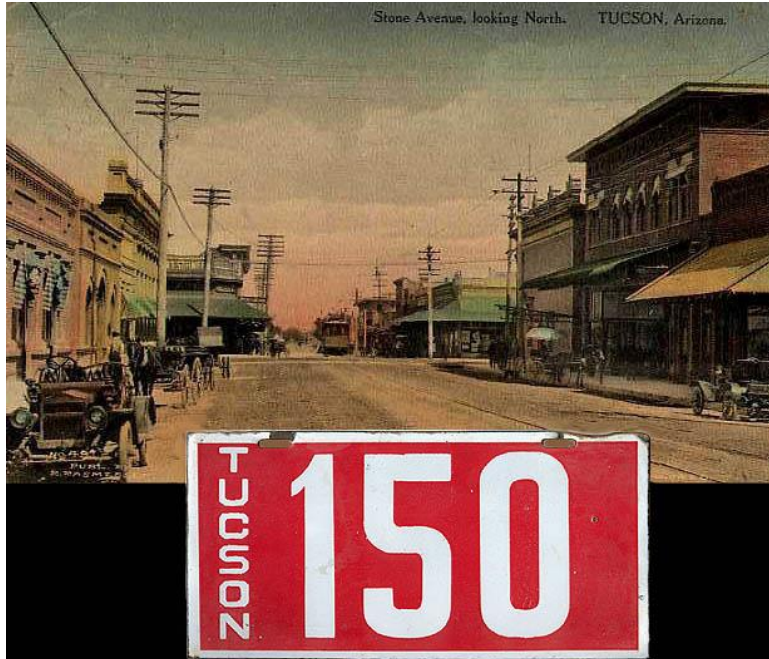
Over half of the plate offerings can be ordered in “personalized” versions, where you specify the letters and/or numbers on the plate. All plates are reviewed for acceptable content.

Arizona issued two (front and back) standard passenger plates per vehicle until the mid-1990s, when it began issuing rear plates only to save production costs. Today, two plates are issued for personalized plates and some specialty plates, but you’re not required to display a front plate.

Since Arizona law changed in 2002, the license plate belongs to the vehicle owner. This allows for the transfer of a license plate from one vehicle to another, so when you’re happy with your plate ...

There are millions of Arizona standard passenger license plates and hundreds of thousands of specialty plates on the road today. Good luck as you play the Arizona license plate game. Experts can add dealer, commercial, government, and foreign consular plates to the game.

Thanks to Arizona plate collector Gary Fox of azplates.com and ADOT’s Timothy Tait and Harold A. Sanders for answering my questions and allowing me to use the included images.



This 5" x 10" Tucson City plate is made of porcelain. Both the plate and postcard behind are circa 1910. Anyone knowing the exact date of plate issue is requested to contact the author.
(Courtesy of Gary Fox of azplates.com)



This is how license plates are made today. This blanking line joins the aluminum with the printed vinyl film. At the end of the line is the press that cuts the license plates into their rectangular shape.
(Courtesy of ADOT, May 2012)



This 4 ½" x 12" plate is one of the first issued by the state of Arizona.
(Courtesy of Gary Fox of azplates.com)



Arizona is the only state to have used copper in license plates. This one is 5" x 10."
(Courtesy of Gary Fox of azplates.com)



This standard size 6" x 12" specialty plate won the award for best new plate of 2011 from the national Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (ALPCA). (Courtesy of ALPCA)