

The Verde Canyon Railroad

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Next stop: No place in particular. Well, Perkinsville, but that's been a ghost town for more than a half century. Even if you're going nowhere, some trains take you to great places, even if you never arrive at a final destination. Their journeys are endless.



Such a train is the Verde Canyon Railroad — a nearby, affordable opportunity for you to leave the tedious, tiring train we're always riding, with its stresses and creaks, and get on another that takes you to solitude, quietude, beauty and bliss. "It's not the destination, it's the journey!" is this scenic line's motto.

You and your family begin this memorable journey in Clarkdale, the historic mining town next to Cottonwood in the Verde Valley, about two hours north of Phoenix and a half hour from Sedona. To make the 1 p.m. train, plan for Cottonwood traffic and urban speed limits. We didn't and just made it, but the train attendants, and our fellow passengers, were very accommodating — at 1:03 p.m. when we reached the parking lot.

This excursion train is great for families because it's only 40 miles roundtrip: about four hours. This is long enough for everyone to enjoy but not long enough for the children to begin inquiring what we're all doing next and for you parents to start wondering why you did this at all.

What's next on the Verde Canyon is the revelation just round the bend. Showcased everywhere is human history and ageless geology: the Verde River with its lush riparian areas of cottonwoods and sycamores, a spring falling from the canyon wall, folds and faults, mining claims, ranch homesteads, caves used by the Sinagua people centuries ago, a cave once used to store explosives to build the line, herons and hawks, the S.O.B. Trestle and a 680-foot tunnel — even Hollywood.

Yes, George Peppard, Eli Wallach and Debbie Reynolds — actors that your children will not know but you'll probably remember — filmed a scene for *How the West Was Won* at the Perkinsville depot in the 1960s. The train turns around at this beautiful valley town, where cows and horses still safely graze. Two beautifully restored FP7 engines, built in 1953 for Alaska duty, are shifted from one end of the train to another via an adjacent spur.

The tracks continue north another 18 miles to Drake, where they intersect with the main Santa Fe/Burlington line. That section is still used for commercial runs from Clarkdale. In fact, the freighting opportunity first attracted the line's owner, Dave Durbano, two decades ago; when he took his first ride, Dave immediately recognized the tourist implications as well as a social responsibility to make this spectacular area available for everyone.

We learned much of this information from Fermin Estrada, our guide, on the open flatcar hooked to our vintage seating car. The latter, I believe, was a Pullman from the '30s which has been completely updated, of course, for safety. Fermin's lived here, I believe, his entire life, and he expressed that canyon joy with us.

Up and back, he led us through the trip with his insights. Toting a knapsack with a naturalist's guide and a picture scrapbook he's taken from years of experience in the area, he directed us to the next point of wonder.

So, he showed us a rock formation that looks like Abe Lincoln and another that resembles a frog, another a lizard. Up there, he pointed, on a crag a hundred feet or so, is one of the bald eagle nests in the canyon, with the white head of an eaglet poking up waiting for food. The most famous of the bald eagle couples — they mate for life, unlike humans — are Black and Decker. This was not their aerie but another recently discovered in this favored place for the once endangered species.

The train is a great day trip year round, offering seasonal family adventures such as the Easter Bunny Express, the Haunted Halloween Express, and the Santa Claus Express every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday in December prior to Christmas.

Says Lisa O'Neill, a spokeswoman for the Verde Canyon Railroad: "Families experience the rugged wilderness in comfort and safety — creating memories that can be shared forever."

Right on track, Lisa.

For reservations, call 800.293.7245 or see www.verdecanyonrr.com.