

Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel Offers Western Adventures in Northern Arizona

Written by Alyssa DeMember

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The three-day trip, hosted by Xanterra Parks & Resorts, began in Williams, Arizona at the Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel, followed by a luxury class train ride to and from the Grand Canyon, packed with exciting escapades in between. A variety of vacation packages are offered through the Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel, so visitors can plan their own Western adventure (Psst! The kids will love it here).



As the low-flying helicopter seemed to almost graze the pine trees, we drew nearer to the cliff with every second. There'd come a point where the greenery would abruptly end and we'd be cast off into the godly depths of the canyon, surrounded by layer upon layer of limestone, sandstone and shale. Finally reaching the edge of the trees, the pilot's voice rang out in all of our headphones: "If you're not sure whether you're afraid of heights, you're about to find out." And then, like a bucket of cold water to the face, the massive canyon enveloped us from all sides, and my breath caught in my throat in sheer awe.

Although most visitors are native to the United States, tourists from across the world come to see for themselves what makes the Grand Canyon so *grand*. And although I'm from Arizona myself, I hadn't seen the world wonder until four years ago. We often focus a great deal of our attention on the Phoenix Valley and surrounding areas, sometimes forgetting the northern regions of this state and the adventures it offers. My three-day trip in Williams and the Grand Canyon offered a glimpse into that world of unparalleled adventure, hosted by award-winning Xanterra Parks & Resorts, a travel company that helps bring the magic of the outdoors to life. Having taken operation of the historic Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel in 2007, Arizona regional director of sales and marketing Bruce Brossman led an incredible trip that truly immersed us in the history of the Grand Canyon railway and the historic buildings surrounding the canyon.



Day 1

The [Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel](#), having opened its doors in 1995, was built to resemble the Fray Marcos Hotel, the original lodging for passengers of the railway leading from Williams to the Grand Canyon. The hotel itself was impressive, having gone through recent renovations that make the place feel as though it were newly built, while maintaining the historic flare of the yesteryears of the Wild West. The lobby, inhabited by friendly front desk attendants, features cozy leather chairs situated around a hearth and a crackling fire, with wood paneling framing the space.

Our first adventure brought us to [Bearizona](#) Wildlife Park, where I found myself closer (and feeling more vulnerable) to wolves and bears than I ever had in my life. Of course, we all sat in a lifted bus as it drove through the grounds, completely safe from the animals who couldn't have cared less about us anyway. But, getting up close and personal with these great forest predators without fences or bars between us was quite a rush. Seven years running, the wildlife park spans approximately 160 acres of ponderosa pine forest where visitors can ride on a guided bus

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tour through the grounds, or walk through Fort Bearizona, a 20-acre area with animal enclosures. Our green bus hobbled past tundra wolves, black bears, rocky mountain goats and brown bison that can run up to 40 mph and jump six feet high. Suffice to say, we didn't see any bison perform these Olympic feats, but we did catch plenty of bears having their midday snack. It's funny how these animals can go from petrifyingly scary to something I want to smother in cuddles based on the possibility of imminent danger.

Following our forest safari, we explored the quaint and historically vibrant town of Williams, which Brossman aptly described as "a classic Route 66 town—sophisticated while still being 'Wild-West'." Most notable was the Grand Canyon Brewery, the third largest brewery by volume in the state, offering beers called "Dire Wolf," "Grand Canyon Wheat," "Nutella" and more.



Day 2

The second day, Brossman supplied us with a fountain of knowledge of the Grand Canyon Railway, which opened in 1901, and the establishments that contribute to its history. We walked through the dilapidated building that was once the San Marcos Hotel, one of the original [Harvey Houses](#) of the Fred Harvey Company, imagining the encounters and experiences that might have gone on there some century ago. I pictured Harvey girls, well-mannered and well-groomed serving staff for the Harvey Company, bustling down the corridors in their modest maid-like uniforms.

There are two steam engines still in use for special occasions, which use waste vegetable oil as their source of fuel, leaving almost no carbon footprint. Sustainability plays a big part in the culture here, with solar voltaic panels on the rooftop of the Grand Depot Café and notices in the rooms encouraging guests to save water.

The rest of the [trains](#), however, are diesel locomotives, and feature six classes of comfort that visitors can choose from on their trip, from coach to first class to luxury dome cars. On the way to the canyon, we stayed in luxury parlor class in a car called "The Chief," originally built in 1947. Greeted by jovial staff, I entered what felt like a relaxing living room with golden, half-circle couches to lounge in during the picturesque journey through the Kaibab National Forest. Along with a plentiful supply coffee and pastries, country singers and musicians performed their way through the cars. The staff and entertainers on the train know how to connect with visitors, eliciting genuine laughs with their self-proclaimed "terrible jokes"—one guitarist cracking a face-palm joke about Willie Nelson being struck by a car while he was "on the road again." Cue the embarrassing "I can't believe I fell for that" laugh.

Upon finally arriving to the canyon, we took a moment to stand in awe of the massive expanse before us. I probably say this too often, but pictures simply cannot come close to doing it justice. There isn't a camera lens wide enough to capture the enormity. When you witness the intricate details, layers and vibrant colors of the canyon for yourself, the term "grand" feels appropriate.

A quote on one of the displays in the Bright Angel Lodge History Room describes the sentiment perfectly: "No one can describe the Grand Canyon to you. It must be seen—not once, but many times. Only by frequent visits may a small portion of its ineffable loveliness be apprehended."

After visiting landmark buildings like the Hopi House and Bright Angel Lodge, designed by the unutterably talented Mary E.J. Colter, we spent the evening at El Tovar Hotel, a historic beacon of class and sophistication for travelers of the canyon. Notable figures to have visited El Tovar include President Bill Clinton and Sir Paul McCartney, who apparently caused a bit of commotion during his visit, unknowingly keeping the guests up late with a bit of evening piano playing. As a big Beatles fan myself, I had to sit at the piano where Paul McCartney sat for just a few moments.

Dinner at El Tovar was a classy affair, complete with immaculately dressed servers and a wine list to rival the wine gods. Brossman, with his love of Arizona wines, ordered a bottle of Arizona Stronghold Mangus and Carlson Creek Chardonnay for the table, both superb. For my entrée, I opted for one of El Tovar's signature dishes, a salmon tostada with tequila vinaigrette, corn salsa and roasted poblano black bean rice.

Dinner ended well into the evening, so when we stepped outside to return to our rooms at [Maswik Lodge](#), the night sky was speckled with stars as though heaps of shimmering glitter had been thrown into space. It was the starriest sky I'd ever seen in my life. Sparkling diamonds in varying sizes dazzled the entire sky, and the foggy band of the Milky Way was clearly visible. I opened the Star Chart app on my phone, and we began mapping constellations and pointing out planets. Lack of light pollution: another northern Arizona perk.

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Day 3

The third and final day of the trip had us up bright and early at 5:30 a.m. to grab a quick breakfast at the Maswik Lodge food court before setting out to hike on the South Kaibab Trail down to Cedar Ridge. A moderate, three-mile round trip hike, it felt great to finally venture down into the canyon itself. The allure of the canyon shifts with your physical perspective—looking *up* from the canyon is an entirely different experience than looking down into it. One day, I'd like to make my way down to the bottom, but baby steps, here. *Baby steps.*

Following the invigorating hike, which surprisingly wasn't too hot, we (mentally) prepared to embark on the helicopter tour of the canyon. Again, perspective.

Guided by [Maverick Helicopters](#), we soared over the vast expanse of the Grand Canyon for a good 45 minutes. The canyon surrounding us on all sides, we had a bird's eye view from directly above, yet another singularly unique perspective of 40 million years worth of geologic activity—of material continuously being chiseled, broken down and reformed into what it is today. The pilot did a great job of showcasing a large portion of the canyon, pointing out noteworthy rock formations like Vishnu Schist, a prominent formation on the northern side of the canyon.

While the ride was unbelievably gorgeous and literally breathtaking at times, as someone who frequently experiences motion sickness, I was relieved when our aircraft touched ground. We all exited the helicopter in a hazy state of shock and awe. We just couldn't stop ogling over how *cool* those views were. Every multi-colored layer of rock and sediment became clearly visible, and the Colorado River looked like a massive green serpent weaving its way through.

Once we'd concluded our high-flying expedition, it was time to board the Grand Canyon Railway for the return journey. This time seated in luxury dome class, we were pampered with chocolate-dipped strawberries, macarons, various cold meats and cheeses and celebratory glasses of champagne.

Following a toast to great memories of our time at the canyon, the famous Grand Canyon Railway robbery took place, a fun and hilarious experience. While sipping our bubbly, we peered out the windows to see two men racing the train on horseback, flailing their hands in maniacal pursuit. As the train slowly came to a halt, the two bearded men boarded the train and “robbed” the passengers, snagging dollar bills that had been rolled up and purposefully placed on passengers' eyeglasses, in between their ears or on their hats. As one of the robbers helped himself to a dollar placed neatly on the side of my glasses, I teased him that I had recorded the entire affair and wouldn't hesitate showing the authorities. Be that as it may, the town politician eventually came to our rescue and “arrested” the fiends. Overall, it was an entertaining experience, and certainly something the kids would get a kick out of.

Once the train rolled back into the Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel, we partook in our final dinner Spencer's Pub, located inside the hotel, then embarked on a spontaneous last visit to the Grand Canyon Brewery, where I discovered that I love sour beers (who knew). The sky brightly lit by glowing moonlight, we walked back to the hotel and said our final goodbyes, a bittersweet moment. Part of me longed for nothing more than to sleep for hours upon hours, while the other part would bitterly miss the sense of exploration, adventure and appreciation for the Grand Canyon and everything it has to offer.

With so many aspects of the canyon to explore and so many activities to try, there really is something for everyone to enjoy, especially the adventurous at heart. And the Grand Canyon Railway is a nice way to get there.