



Unforgettable ADVENTURE

Grand Canyon trip flush with scenic views, rich history

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY **JULIE CAMPBELL**

From the time I watched the Brady Bunch “Grand Canyon or Bust” episode as a kid, I’ve been fascinated with the canyon. I promised my 8-year-old self that someday, when I was a grownup, I’d see it for myself.

Fast forward about 45 years, and my dream of visiting the Grand Canyon finally came true last summer. Standing on the edge of this amazing natural wonder of the world checked off a major bucket-list item for me.

During our trip to Arizona, my husband and I set aside two days at Grand Canyon National Park. On the first day, we drove in and spent around nine hours exploring the park and hiking the famous Bright Angel Trail. The next morning, we rode in on the Grand Canyon Railway, the only train that carries passengers to and from the canyon.

Featuring vintage train cars with varying ticket prices from basic Pullman to Luxury Parlor class, the railway delivers an unforgettable adventure, especially for train enthusiasts. Riders board the train at the station in Williams, Arizona, a tiny town right on Route 66, about

30 miles west of Flagstaff.

Winding through the same route that early adventurers to the Grand Canyon followed, we saw the terrain change from the scrubby bushes of the high desert to the wide-open prairie to the towering pines of Grand Canyon country. The ever-changing scenery and the trivia provided by the fun-loving, knowledgeable guides made the two-and-a-half-hour train ride fly by.

On our 65-mile trip up to the canyon, we spotted a pack of galloping wild horses and a few lazy antelope. Once inside the park, we saw several desert bighorn sheep on the Bright Angel Trail and a family of javelina (also known as musk hogs) at dusk near a shuttle stop.

The train arrives daily at the Grand Canyon Depot, a National Historic Landmark constructed in 1910. Just steps away from the historic village and about 200 yards from the spectacular views of the south rim of the canyon, the station is one of only three remaining log depots in the United States.

Once inside the park, we had about three and a half hours to explore.

Considering the park is more than 1,900 square miles, that’s not a lot of time, which is why I highly recommend spending at least another day or two in the park. Although there’s typically only one train in and out of the park, passengers have the option of staying



LEFT: The Grand Canyon features majestic views along the south rim. ABOVE: The 8-mile Bright Angel Trail descends from the south rim to the Colorado River.



The Grand Canyon Railway Depot is one of only three log depots left in the country. ABOVE: The traditional Navajo taco is a popular item served for lunch at the El Tovar Hotel restaurant.

overnight in one of several Grand Canyon hotels and returning to Williams another day.

Be prepared for extreme weather, as average temperatures on the south rim can climb into the 80s in the summer months and drop into the teens in the winter. And if you hike down the famous Bright Angel Trail in the summer, temperatures will soar into the 100s inside the canyon. Each 1,000-foot drop in elevation increases the temperature about five and a half degrees. Late summer is also known as monsoon season, which can produce powerful thunderstorms.

Since we had already explored the canyon the day before, we took time to have lunch at the legendary El Tovar Hotel in the Grand Canyon Village. Built in 1905, the hotel is an architectural gem — a cross between a Swiss chalet and a Norwegian villa. The

dining room features stunning views of the canyon and delicious Native American dishes, such as the traditional Navajo taco served on freshly made fry bread.

After lunch we had time to walk the rim, visit shops and sightsee a bit, but we had to make sure we were back on the train before its 3:30 p.m. departure. The train staff does not count passengers or wait for anyone — period. If you're not on board when the train departs, our guide warned us, you'll have to hire a car to go back to Williams, which can set you back hundreds of dollars.

On our return trip on the Grand Canyon Railway, we treated ourselves by reserving seats several weeks in advance in the Luxury Dome, a two-story train car that features comfortable seating on the top level with huge picture windows to enjoy the scenery. A dessert, snack and drink buffet, plus a sparkling cider or champagne



The Grand Canyon Railway has a fleet of 41 passenger cars, from Pullman class to Luxury Parlor class. RIGHT: Bighorn sheep are a common sight along the Bright Angel Trail.

toast, are all included in the ticket price for the Luxury Dome. Downstairs, comfortable couches and chairs await those who'd like to play games, socialize or grab a drink at the bar.

When we needed to stretch our legs, we took advantage of our access to the open-air platform and stepped outside to enjoy the scenery and fresh air from the back of the train.

More than halfway into the return trip, the train came to a sudden halt on the tracks as the infamous Cataract Creek Gang rode up on their horses. The bandits hopped aboard and "held up" passengers for money (tips) and would have made a clean getaway if not for the quick actions of the Grand Canyon Railway Marshal. The fake robbery entertained and evoked laughter from passengers of all ages.

While riding a train to the Grand Canyon was definitely a splurge for my husband and me, it's an experience we'll never forget. ■

