

Grand Canyon Railway



Long before modern travel connected everyone to everywhere, the American West was a vast panorama of open land as far as the eye could see. Settlers who lived and worked in these lands could feel an unbridled sense of both privacy and isolation living far from the nearest city. But by the late 1800s, the far-off sound of a train

chugging along the tracks or a tiny glimmer of its headlights in the distance could trigger a sense of connection to society. The mammoth project of building the Transcontinental Railroad, completed in 1869, opened up the West to far easier travel from the East and the growth of western population centers.

However, up through the turn of the century, the rugged land between Williams, Arizona, and the Grand Canyon was still only serviced by stagecoach, costing \$15 for an uncomfortable eight-hour ride. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad (ATSF) changed all that when they took over a freight line to open the Grand Canyon Railway, taking its first passengers 64 miles from Williams to the Grand Canyon's South Rim on September 17, 1901.

In 1904, the railroad hired the Fred Harvey Company to build and manage hotels and restaurants at the Rim, including legendary architect Mary Colter's Bright Angel Lodge. Charles Frederick Whittlesey, the ATSF's architect, designed El Tovar, the Grand Canyon's flagship hotel — said to be the finest west of the Mississippi at that time. And the magnificent Grand Canyon became a National Park in 1919.

Passengers depended on the Grand Canyon Railway for decades, but by 1930, the number of tourists arriving by automobile had already begun to surpass those traveling by rail. The interstate highway system and the availability of commercial airlines finished the railway's relegation to an antiquated form of transportation. The railway made its final trip on June 30, 1968, with just three passengers aboard. The steam and diesel engines sat idle for decades.

However, 20 years later, salvation came just in the nick of time. After a failed attempt at restoration, the railway line was on the verge of being demolished for salvage when Arizona residents Max and Thelma Beigert, who had made a fortune in crop spraying and as founders of a chain of for-profit daycare centers, put \$15 million dollars into reclaiming of the railway. Tracks were rebuilt, and the depots were restored.



On September 17, 1989, 88 years to the date of the first train out of Williams, the Grand Canyon Depot once again welcomed the railway's trains. In 1999, the railway was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, the passenger trains include 1920s-era Pullman cars and '50s-era dome cars, all beautifully restored. They

are pulled by vintage diesel-electric engines, except for one Saturday a month, when the train runs via the "French Fry Express" steam locomotive. "The engine is one of the last standard gauge steam engines in passenger service on a daily working railroad in the U.S.," said the railway's Community Relations Manager Sam Langer. "The 'French Fry Express' runs on recycled waste vegetable oil and captured water, making it a certified 'Green Engine.'"

Every day, excluding Christmas, the train departs from the Williams Depot. But just before the train leaves the station, there's an Old West-style shootout between the Marshall and the Cataract Creek Gang. "The show was originally created and now managed by Williams' mayor, John Moore, to celebrate Arizona Governor Rose Mofford and Senator Barry Goldwater's ride on the train," said Langer. "It started out as a fun, one-time experience, and since then, it's evolved into an integral part of the railway experience."

The anachronistic travel also offers such things as live music performances of old-school western and cowboy music, performed on fiddles and banjos. It also offers a picturesque view of the country since the railroad runs mainly in the backcountry. Passengers witness old homesteads, curving washes, and the high plateau elevations to the Grand Canyon. It's a journey that's hard to experience anywhere else. A by-product of its existence is that it also takes an estimated 70,000 cars off the road into the Grand Canyon every year, thanks to the 200,000 passengers who ride annually.

"Everyone aboard wants to go to the Grand Canyon, and they'll do so while experiencing the romance and adventure of rail cars from a bygone age," said Langer. "One can drive almost anywhere, but arriving in the shadow of the El Tovar Hotel is one of the great memories in the world of travel."

Historic hotels, staged shootouts, and that great old train travel feel are all memorable, but it's the once-in-a-lifetime vistas that they'll never forget.