

ADVENTURES ON THE ROAD TO THE GRAND CANYON

Published in *SOUTHEAST MAGAZINE*

By Janice Sweetter

Have you seen one of the world's seven wonders nestled in the north of our state? Or are you just eager to recapture that wonder from earlier visits? Then pack your bags, fill up the gas tank, grab some snacks and favorite CDs and head out on your Road Trip to the Grand Canyon. But you don't have to break land speed records, making Arizona's diverse scenery just a blur through your window on the way. Since you're in the driver's seat, you can set the pace and speedometer and enjoy adventures and interesting encounters all along the 200 plus miles of the trip.

I think it was Confucius who said "The longest journey begins with a single step . . . in comfortable shoes." Make your first stop at Chandler Fashion Center to get some practical yet stylish footwear and a new suitcase while you're at it - then head north up I-17. When your trail mix and chips start running low, take a break at the Rock Springs Café in Black Canyon City for a slice of sugary nirvana - Penny Cooley's famous pies with more than dozen flavors and the freshest ingredients piled mile-high on a flaky crust. Watch out for the Jack Daniels pecan pie with a not so secret ingredient that you wouldn't want to put near open flame. Take in the verdant Verde Valley - the best view is from the area's most popular attraction, the Verde Canyon Railroad in Clarkdale. Check out the Native American ruins, Tuzigoot and Montezuma Castle National Monuments - and sneak in a little learning and understanding of Native prehistoric inhabitants.

A ROMANTIC DETOUR IN THE RED ROCKS

Many roads lead to the Grand Canyon - take the route through Sedona and enjoy pampering, splendid scenery, and a romantic hideaway in the red rocks at Amara Creekside Resort on the banks of Oak Creek. Shopping at nearby Uptown Sedona, world class dining, jeep tours, hiking, cooling off at Slide Rock State Park and simply standing and drinking in the jaw-dropping vistas are all great ways to create lasting, happy memories of Sedona as you journey north. You can even take one of Arizona's designated scenic roads for incredible views as your adventure continues. The Sedona-Oak Creek Canyon Scenic Road climbs more than 1,900 feet through Oak Creek Canyon on State Route 89A between Sedona and Flagstaff.

FAMILY FUN IN FLAGSTAFF

The major gateway to the Grand Canyon is Flagstaff. Here is one local's perspective on fun family adventures in Flagstaff to whet your appetite for the climb to the canyon or for special memories on the way home: Check out the exciting Raptor Face to Face encounter at the Arboretum at Flagstaff to get up close and personal with birds of prey. Another fun activity is the Scenic Sky Ride at Snow Bowl, which shuttles you to an elevation of 11,500 feet for spectacular views of northern Arizona, including the Grand Canyon and downtown Flagstaff. You can overnight in Flagstaff to rest up for your time at the canyon. Little America Hotel is a Three-Diamond hotel with great amenities and lots of room for kids to run around.

AT THE GRAND CANYON

Enter from the east through Desert View Point where traffic is generally light or come straight into the south rim entrance of the Grand Canyon National Park, known as Grand Canyon Village. The Village is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Park your vehicle and ride the Village shuttle bus to Canyon View Information Plaza at Mather Point for informative exhibits and inspiring views of the canyon nearby. Pick up a copy of "The Guide" park newspaper for parking, information, ranger programs and visitor facilities. Plan ahead for lodging, camping, or special activities like mule trips, helicopter tours, or white water rafting. Also check the Web sites

for upcoming programs, festivals, and events like the Grand Canyon Music Festival in September.

For an authentic lodging experience in Grand Canyon National Park, stay at the El Tovar Lodge, a national historic landmark recently refurbished for its 100th birthday. Those who trek to the bottom of the Canyon can enjoy the historic Phantom Ranch on the north side of the Colorado river.

Feel the vast sense of timelessness as you explore historical buildings from the past century among natural geologic formations thousands of years older than that. Check out the 100-year old Hopi House, built as a workshop for authentic Native American crafts as well as Kolb Studio, a combination home, office, and gallery of stunning photography. Educational programs include two-day hands-on guided adventures and special tours and tailored programs for enthusiasts of photography, bird watching studies, plant and animal life, and many others.

Place your new shoes under the table at El Tovar restaurant for gourmet dining at the canyon. The Coronado Restaurant at the Best Western Squire Inn just outside the park also offers a quality dining experience.

Then grab your hiking boots to work off the meal and feel the Grand Canyon all around you. The walls descend more than a mile to the Colorado River at the bottom of the canyon, 277 miles across. The paved section of the Rim Trail from the Grand Canyon Village to Mather Point is fairly easy terrain. Or hike down the Bright Angel Trail to a point called mile-and-a-half rest house. The full 9.3-mile Bright Angel Trail or 7.3-mile South Kaibab Trail are strenuous but rewarding with incredible views and close-up encounter with the canyon. You can choose how much of the trail you want to tackle – just remember what goes down, must come up. In general, it takes twice as long to hike out as to hike in, regardless of the distance traveled.

Hiking is also a great way to catch a view of local fauna like California Condors, Desert Bighorn Sheep, coyotes, Abert's squirrels, elk and mule deer. Or burn your calories a bit more leisurely with a stroll through several gift shops offering Native American artistry and other mementos.

PLANES, TRAINS, RAFTS AND SURE-FOOTED MULES

You take in the Grand Canyon through all your senses from a heart-warming view to a heart-pumping hike or air tour to a heart-pounding rapid on a white water raft down the Colorado River.

Let a sure-footed mule do the walking with a 12-mile round trip to Plateau Point ending directly above the Colorado River. There are also overnight rides to Phantom Ranch. Or, step back in time on the vintage Grand Canyon Railway, starting at Williams. With strolling musicians and a mock train robbery, the train arrives at the canyon for a three-and-a-half hour layover at the South Rim, returning to Williams in the afternoon with plenty of time for checking out its historic district – including Route 66.

The Grand Canyon has been sculpted for the most part by the force of the Colorado River on the canyon floor for the last thousand years. White water rafting trips last from one day to three weeks, with options by motor or oar. Most start from Lees Ferry near Page. One-day trips travel down Marble Canyon Gorge. Some give the option of joining other rafters midway at Phantom Ranch. Or take a raven's-eye view of the canyon with a narrated helicopter or airplane tour. From the thrum of the Grand Canyon Railway train to the thrill of an air tour, the canyon and your other experiences on the way there will stay with you long after the new suitcase has been unpacked and relegated to the closet to rest up for your next adventure.

If you don't want the adventure to end, you can keep on going another four hours or so to the less-populated and spectacular North Rim – which is 227 miles away by car. Only 10 miles as the local California Condors fly. Visitor services and facilities inside the national park on the North Rim are open from mid-May to mid-October.

WELCOME HOME

When you see the signs for Route 60 and the 101, you know you're getting close to home. Extend that vacation feeling a little longer with a stop at the Angel Sweet gelateria in Chandler or your favorite local hangout.

HOW TO GET TO THE GRAND CANYON (SIDEBAR)

Most roads to the Grand Canyon start from I-17 out of Phoenix. Then you can choose your path and style of adventure through Phoenix, Sedona, Williams, or Flagstaff.

Here are the roads most and least taken.

Phoenix, AZ - 231 miles

Take I-17 north to I-40. Take I-40 west to Highway 64. Take Highway 64 north directly to the South Rim.

Flagstaff, AZ - 81 miles from the Grand Canyon - there are three ways to go:

- Take I-40 west to Highway 64. Take Highway 64 north directly to the South Rim.
- Take Highway 180 west to Highway 64. Take Highway 64 north directly to the South Rim.
- Take Highway 89 north to Highway 64. Take Highway 64 west to the East Entrance on the South Rim - known as Desert View.

Sedona, AZ - 119 miles

Take Highway 89Alt to I-40. Take I-40 west to Highway 64. Take Highway 64 north directly to the South Rim.

Williams, AZ - 63 miles

Take Highway 64 north directly to the South Rim.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

nps.gov/grca - Grand Canyon National Park

grandcanyonlodges.com - Grand Canyon lodging and activities

arizonaguide.com - Official website of the Arizona Office of Tourism

arizonavacationvalues.com - special offers and discounts

flagstaffarizona.org

visitsedona.com

williamschamber.com

arizonascenicroads.com

ACTIVITIES

thecanyon.com - air tours and rafting trip info

888.297.2757 - mule rides

nativevisiontours.com - Tuzigoot and Montezuma Castle

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