

STARRING IN MOTHER NATURE'S SHOWROOM

Grand Canyon

BY KRISTINE MCKENZIE

Grand is an understatement. Glorious, exalted, divinely inspired all are more apropos adjectives to describe THE canyon. One glimpse of its majesty is all it takes to understand why the Grand Canyon is considered one of the natural wonders of the world.

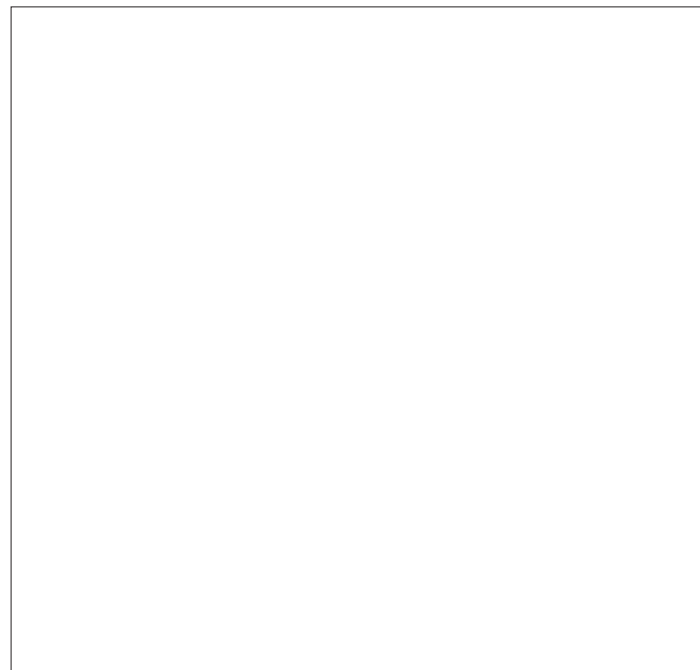


Photo Courtesy the National Park Service

GUIDED TOURS AT THE GRAND CANYON

Tour length includes transportation time to and from your hotel. For more information or to book a tour, visit www.VEGAS.com.

ADVENTURE PHOTO TOUR	PINK JEEP
Grand Canyon VIP Mini Coach Tour Luxury mini coach bus Tour length: 14 hours	Grand Canyon West Rim Tour SUV Tour length: 8 hours
CASINO TRAVEL AND TOURS	REBEL ADVENTURE TOURS
Grand Canyon South Rim Adventure Bus Tour length: 13 hours	Wild West Grand Canyon Hummer Tour Hummer Tour length: 9 hours
Grand Canyon West Rim & Lunch Bus Tour length: 11 hours	SCENIC AIRLINES
GRAND CANYON COACHES	Indian Adventure and Skywalk Tour Plane and bus Tour length: 7 hours
Rim to River Expedition Helicopter, bus and boat Tour length: 9.5 hours	Canyon Connoisseur Plane and bus Tour length: 10 hours
GRAND CANYON HELICOPTERS	STARS AND STRIPES AIR TOURS
Diamond Dreams Helicopter Tour length: 3.5 hours	Deluxe Air Plane Tour length: 4 hours
HELI USA	Above and Beyond Plane, helicopter, raft Tour length: 7.5 hours
Grand Canyon Helicopter and Ranch Adventure Helicopter Tour length: 4.5 hours	Indian Country Deluxe Air & Ground Plane, bus Tour length: 7.5 hours
MAVERICK HELICOPTERS	SUNDANCE HELICOPTERS
Wind Dancer Helicopter Tour length: 3.5 hours	Grand Canyon Picnic Helicopter Tour length: 3.5 hours
MAVERICK AIRLINES	A Skywalk Express Helicopter Tour length: 3.5 hours
Western Territory Plane Tour length: 6.5 – 7 hours	Skywalk Sunset Helicopter Tour length: 5.5 hours
Grand Canyon Explorer Plane Tour length: 7 hours	Vision Airlines South Rim Air & Ground Tour Plane and bus Tour length: 7 hours
Canyon Dream Plane, helicopter Tour length: 6.5 - 7 hours	North Rim Bar 10 Ranch Tour Plane Tour length: 8 hours
PAPILLON HELICOPTERS	
Golden Eagle Helicopter Tour length: 2.5 hours	

The canyon is a staggering 277 miles long. At its deepest, it is about a mile from the rim to the Colorado River far below and it is as much as 18 miles wide in some spots. The park encompasses 1,904 square miles and visibility on a good day can reach up to 100 miles.

The beauty and vibrant colors of the rocks, the mighty river flowing through the center and the wide variety of plant and animal life that inhabit the canyon combine to make it a spot that 5 million people from around the world visit each year.

The Grand Canyon is something you learn about in school, see on TV and read about in books, but nothing can really prepare you for the actual sight of the giant chasm opening up in the earth before your feet.

Vicky Ricome, originally from Lima, Peru, visited the canyon recently. She said she had seen it on TV many times and had always dreamed of visiting.

"It is a dream come true. I always thought one day I'll go there and this is the day. I'm so happy. It's beautiful."

History

The Grand Canyon has been visited and inhabited by people for centuries. Archaeologists believe that 3,000 to 4,000 years ago, the Desert Archaic people lived within the canyon. Around 1,000 B.C., the Anasazi Indians are believed to have inhabited the area. Ruins of adobe houses in the area show that Pueblo Indians also lived there, probably as early as the 1200s.

The first white men to discover the canyon were Spaniards from Francisco Vasquez de Coronado's expedition in 1540, but the canyon still wasn't widely known until 1869 when Major John Wesley Powell, a Civil War veteran, made the first recorded journey through the canyon on the Colorado River.

In 1919, the Grand Canyon received National Park status and it has been a major tourist attraction and an iconic symbol of the American Southwest ever since.

Geology 101

The massive Grand Canyon is obviously a significant geological formation, mainly because of the geologic record that is preserved there. The canyon, formed over a period of 5 to 6 million years, displays much of the early geologic history of North America.

The rocks exposed in the side of the canyon provide a striking record of the Paleozoic Era and Precambrian rocks as old as 2 billion years can also be found at the bottom.

What to do and see

The South Rim is the most visited and most accessible part of Grand Canyon National Park.

There are many scenic overlooks and it is also home to the park's visitor's center, lodging, a gift shop and restaurants.

A good starting point is the Canyon View Visitor's Center

"It's like driving around through a postcard."

located at Mather Point. The visitor's center is full of information about the canyon, including maps, weather forecasts and a bookstore. It also serves as the base for ranger-guided activities. Activities include everything from fossil walks and camps to kids programs and full moon walks.

Rob Eberts, a tour bus driver for Vision Airlines, has lived near and worked at the Grand Canyon for seven years and calls it his back yard. Eberts takes two to four tours through the park a day and recommends either hiking the canyon or taking a scenic flight over it as the best ways to see it.

As far as views go, Eberts says Mather Point stands out. It's one of the best viewpoints for sunrise and sunset, he said.

Eberts also encourages a stop at Desert View, one of the highest points in the park. Desert View features an eight-story stone tower, which was designed by renowned architect Mary Colter to look like an Anasazi watchtower. Visitors can climb to the top and enjoy the spectacular view of the Colorado River below.

While the majority of visitors to the Grand Canyon view it from one of the scenic overlooks, the more adventurous can find many hiking trails in the canyon. There are ranger-led day hikes and walks along the Rim Trail available, as well as hikes into the depths of the canyon.

Hiking in the Grand Canyon can be very strenuous so many people opt to ride the famous Grand Canyon mules down to the bottom. A trip by mule to the bottom of the canyon takes about one and a half hours and although the ride can be challenging, those who take advantage of it will see many amazing views.

Once at the bottom of the canyon, the Colorado River makes for an excellent river rafting adventure with both exciting whitewater and smooth water rafting available. During the spring runoff, rafters may encounter 12-foot rapids. A full raft trip through the canyon can take up to 10 days, although shorter trips are available.

For those who make the trek to the bottom of the canyon, an overnight stay at the rustic Phantom Ranch is an option. The ranch, which was built in 1922, is the only lodging facility located below the rim of the canyon. Accommodations consist of cabins or dorms.

For a touch of nostalgia, climb aboard the Grand Canyon Railway—a vintage train that runs from Williams, Ariz. to Grand Canyon National Park. The Grand Canyon Railway made its first journey to

the Grand Canyon in 1901 and the same rail line is used today.

Head West

Visitors can also venture to the Grand Canyon West, which is managed by the Hualapai Tribe.

The newest attraction at the Grand Canyon West is the breathtaking Skywalk (pictured here), which opened in March 2007 after three years of construction. The Skywalk is a glass bridge suspended 4,000 feet above the Colorado River, allowing visitors to actually walk out over the canyon and experience views unlike any other.

For those who are a little nervous, it helps to remember the Skywalk can hold 71 million pounds and can withstand winds in excess of 100 miles per hour.

The Grand Canyon West is also home to Hualapai Ranch, where you can saddle up for a horseback ride and see cowboy demonstrations.

Tours

Tackling the Grand Canyon on your own can be daunting and if you don't want to make the drive yourself, there are a variety of convenient tours available from Las Vegas.

You can explore the canyon on guided tours by helicopter, bus, river raft, SUV or airplane. If you have a day to spend, a bus tour can be economical—just make sure you plan on a 12 to 13-hour trip. If time is of the essence, you can take a quick flight over the canyon and still see the magnificent sights.

Helpful hints

While the Grand Canyon is an exciting place to visit, there are a few things to keep in mind that will help make your trip a much smoother one.

Lodging at and around the canyon is booked well in advance, especially during the summer. Be sure to make reservations as far ahead as possible. Mule trips can be booked 13 months in advance and they'll up early.

Summer temperatures on the South Rim are fairly moderate, however, visitors need to remember that temperatures at the bottom of the canyon can top 100 degrees.

While most tourists visit in the warmer months, the South Rim of the canyon is open 365 days a year and Eberts said visiting in winter and viewing the snow-covered landscape is just as beautiful. It's like driving around through a postcard, he said.

Most importantly, visitors should take care not to disturb any of the rocks, wildlife or plant life in the canyon and be sure to pick up after themselves.

As former President Teddy Roosevelt once said of the Grand Canyon, "Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and for all who come after you, as one of the great sights which every American, if he can travel at all, should see."