

VERDE CANYON RAILROAD

CLARKDALE, ARIZONA – The Verde Canyon in late Fall was a riot of color when I viewed it from a window of the first class Sedona car on the Verde Canyon Railroad. Glimmering yellow and gold leaves of cottonwood, sycamores, willows and oak trees shimmered in the bright sun. Green creosote bushes, manzanita and saltbush contrasted colorfully against red sandstone cliffs in a wilderness area untouched by freeways or strip malls.

My husband and I had purchased tickets to ride this tourist railroad from Clarkdale, Arizona north to a ghost town called Perkinsville, a round trip excursion of around four hours representing hundreds of years of Western history. It was the “Old West” at it’s finest, in fact, I could have been traveling a two hundred years ago and ninety-five percent would have looked exactly the same.

Railroading in this northern area of Arizona began in 1895 when a narrow gauge line named the United Verde and Pacific Railroad was opened to haul copper ore from Jerome to Jerome Junction in Chino Valley over 26 miles of tracks. The little railroad then joined the standard gauge Santa Fe, Prescott and Phoenix.

Built by Montana Senator William Andrews Clark (1839-1925) who had acquired the United Verde Copper Company in 1888, the 186 curved narrow gauge line operated until 1920.

A fire in the United Verde mine in 1894 which burned for twenty years, forced a new surface plant to be built and three new standard gauge railroads plus a company town called Clarkdale. The Verde Valley Railroad, one of the three, was financed by Senator Clark but owned by Santa Fe, Prescott and Phoenix Railroad. It ran 38 miles from Cedar Glade (renamed “Drake”), to Clarkdale along the Verde River, through Verde and Sycamore Canyons and a man made tunnel.

In 1953 the Clarkdale smelter was closed and the railroad began hauling cement mined in Clarkdale by the American Cement Company for the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam near Page, Arizona.

Dave and Linda Durbano purchased the Verde Valley from Santa Fe Railroad in 1988. Dave had never actually ridden on the historic line but was impressed by its financial records as a freight-carrier. When he did take his first excursion, he was so awestruck by the overpowering beauty of the wild Arizona cliffs and canyons, he decided to open a tourist railroad.

Excursions began for 160 passengers powered by one diesel engine pulling two coach cars, two open air cars and one first class car plus a caboose on November 23, 1990. By 2003, 380 passengers could be counted on each trip using three coaches and five first class cars. By 2004, the train was carrying six first class cars, two coaches and a caboose plus five open air viewing cars totaling over 100,000 passengers. In 1997 a new depot opened with a restaurant, souvenir shop and museum.

Our journey began with a backward view of the old mining town of Jerome, 2000' above the valley floor at 5400' on Mingus Mountain. The Black Hills surrounding Jerome were made up of Mingus Mountain, Cleopatra Hill and Woodchute Mountain. It was here that the cooper miners had lived.

Within minutes I had dashed outside from my first class compartment to an open air car to begin photographing the scenery, but what we passed through first were the remnants of fifty tons of slag heaps, waste from the old smelter. A tape that began playing informed us that the slag covered an area of 40 acres and was 40' high. Pieces of metal which had once kept the waste material from covering the tracks, were rusted and falling apart.

The tape continued and we learned the train would be traveling at a speed of ten to twelve miles per hour from mileposts 38 to 18, a distance of twenty miles from Clarkdale to Perkinsville and twenty miles back.

Soon after passing through the slap heap near milepost 38 we saw the Verde River below us on the right, muddy from recent rains. The river, we learned, was 160 miles long and fed by five major creeks. On our left were Sinagua Indian ruins in the form of caves high up along the cliffs. These were Pre-Colombian people who lived in the Verde Valley between 1100 and 1125 displacing a Hohokam tribe. The Sinagua also built masonry structures, some of which can be viewed in nearby Tuzigoot National Monument.

The train ran over the S.O.B. Trestle which traversed a small box canyon. Cliffs on the far side of the winding Verde River provided shelter and nesting areas for Bald Eagles.

Though we were a month too early in November to see the great birds nesting, we did spot four perched on cliffs or trees along the route. My husband, who is especially good at spotting game, also saw quail, red-tailed hawks, ducks and signs of beaver and otter. We both spied a Great Blue Heron.

After a while the canyon narrowed and its steep walls were covered in shadow. The shimmering yellow leaves of the cottonwood and willow trees faded in the dark light. The river continued to rush along below us, still muddy from recent storms and there was ample evidence of trees and shrubs which had been pushed over by rampaging water.

We did not leave the train at Perkinsville, our half-way point, but took photographs of the old Perkins Ranch, once used in the movie, "How the West Was Won." A large printed advertisement announced, "Outdoor Activities – train rides, chuck wagon diners – call 928-636-5007. Steve Rafter – Marion Perkins."

An old wooden depot, at one time painted yellow, had deteriorated next to the railroad tracks. It all looked like a movie set. We waited while the train engines were run forward on a side track to connect to the other end of the train to pull us back to Clarkdale.

Three blasts from the train whistle and we were ready to take off. I looked at my watch and it was 11:14 am. We headed back toward Clarkdale over a steel bridge, past more Indian dwelling and through a 680 foot black tunnel which had been blasted through solid rock.

I learned from Ed Williams of Clarkdale, a train attendant who had been riding these rails for nine year, that the two FP7 diesel engines that were pulling us, #1510 and #1512, came from Alaska. They had been built in 1953 by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors and pulled trains from Whittier to Fairbanks and Anchorage to Fairbanks for seventeen years. Between 1988-1995 they were with the Wyoming-Colorado Railroad and only came to the Verde Valley Railroad in 1996. They were refurbished in the train facilities in Clarkdale and painted by artist Doug Allen an aqua color with striking portraits of Bald Eagles with yellow beaks and yellow and black eyes. They were the most colorful locomotives I had ever seen.

After our return to Clarkdale I learned about the passenger cars. Mary Bertram, who had come out from New Jersey nine years ago and been with the railroad for eight and one-half years, took me on a tour. Our train had been made up of six first class cars and two coach cars. The railroad also had a restored AC&F caboose which could be rented for private parties of six, but it had not been in use on the day we traveled.

The coach cars, restored Pullman Standard, were built in 1946 and 1947 in Illinois, and used for a commuter line on the New York Central. Two of the first class Budd Stainless Steel cars were built in 1956 and 1957 in Pennsylvania and

ran between Chicago and Los Angeles on the Santa Fe's "El Capitan." One Budd Stainless Steel car came from the Canadian National.

The first class cars had tan leather couches facing each other for groups of four on one side of the aisle and single cushioned seats also facing each other on the opposite side. Tables were placed between the seats, but there were no overhead racks for coats or packages. Everyone enjoyed large picture windows. Four of the six first class cars had built-in bars and all had rest rooms.

The two coach cars seated two people on an upright leather seat on each side of the aisle and had racks above. One had a bar built in the back.

The first class cars provided food for passengers which consisted of muffins, plates of fruit and cherry crepes and other delicacies. Drinks were offered including Coke, Pepsi, Sprite, tea or coffee plus wine and hard liquor. Every first class passenger was offered one free drink.

All the car's interiors had been spruced up by two Sedona artists in 2003. Ann Rhinehart and Richard Drayton painted murals, stencils and added faux finishes using acrylic and polyurethane paints while the train was actually in operation. Their job took from mid June to the end of September with the artists working eight hour days, four days a week.

Mary Bertram explained that each car had a theme. "The Tucson Car, a coach, has blue Naugahyde seats and is painted with indigenous cactus. On the Phoenix Car there is a big sun while the Wickenburg car has a cowboy theme and the Sedona car features native petroglyphs." Even the restrooms were beautifully decorated.

When we ended our journey back in Clarkdale, we were invited to participate in an outdoor barbecue being put on by the restaurant in the depot. A cowboy singer entertained us. His card read, "Have Guitar Will Travel." Will Adams, "Arizona Cowboy Balladeer and Poet," had worked on the train for ten

years before he was replaced by the tape. Now he sang daily for a couple of hours at lunch, and we enjoyed the entertainment almost as much as we had the Verde Canyon Railroad. It was truly a memorable four hours of outstanding railroading though the Old West.

The Verde Canyon Railroad is located at 300 North Broadway, Clarkdale Arizona, 86324-2302; 800-293-7245; 928-639-0010; Fax: 928-639-1653.

www.verdecanyonrr.com. For schedules and current prices Email: info@verdecanyonrr.com.