

Verde at 30

Historic 108-year-old rail line's modern sightseeing train's inaugural run was on Friday, November 23, 1990



Arizona's longest-running nature show, "Verde Canyon Railroad has long been a draw for the entire Verde Valley and a wellspring of memories for well over two million passengers who have enjoyed the scenic adventure aboard this historic line since its inaugural run on November 23, 1990. This November, the Railroad celebrates the 30th anniversary of its beloved "Wilderness Route," which takes passengers across a ribbon of rail between stunning high desert red rock pinnacles and a rare riparian venue along the Verde River.

This historic line, originally the Verde Valley Railway, first ran product in 1912, the year Arizona shed its territorial status and become the nation's 48th state. Verde Canyon Railroad's heritage harkens to the early days of train travel, when the iron horse was the newest and quickest mode of transportation for goods, services and people across the growing nation.

In 2019, the 150th anniversary of the driving of the Golden Spike, completing the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory, Utah, served as a reminder that until relatively recently the US, and especially the West, was a land of great distances and few roads. The original Verde Valley Railway, financed by United Verde Copper Company, tied Clarkdale, Arizona to the cross-country Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, hauling abundant copper harvests from Jerome to the world, and in turn bringing the world to the remote towns of the Verde Valley.

After the mines closed in 1953, the Verde Valley Railway, nicknamed the "Verde Mix" for its diverse hauls of people and product, took on a new task—hauling cement and byproducts from the Phoenix Cement Plant in Clarkdale, source of concrete for Glen Canyon Dam, which created Lake Powell. In 1989, Dave Durban purchased the rail-



road from the Santa Fe Railway, sight unseen, based on freight figures alone. After arriving in Clarkdale, Durban was so inspired by Verde Canyon's magnificent scenery and the Verde Valley's mild four-season climate that he and wife Linda were convinced others would want to see this route's incredible beauty from the comfort of a train. The notion of an excursion train grew roots.

With a handful of midcentury passenger cars, plus flatcars refashioned for open-air viewing, the train pulled out of the station in 1990 with every seat full for three straight days. The Durbanos figured they'd move about 15,000 people per year into the canyon via the rails, but to their amazement, 44,000 passengers rode the very first year, with only word-of-mouth as their megaphone.

Over the past three decades, Verde Canyon Railroad has expanded in size, employees and special events. Cars have been added and upgraded, with the length of the train now a cool quarter-mile from locomotive to caboose. Car maintenance and improvements are always at the forefront, as passenger comfort is a signature of the Railroad.

The depot complex also has seen its share of upgrades over 30 years, from its modest beginning in a caboose and a boxcar, to the 1997 creation of the southwestern-style depot, Copper Spike Café, Boxcar Gift Store and John Bell Museum. Food and beverage options, both onboard and at the depot, are always expanding.

Only accessible by rail, Verde Canyon is also well known as a premier migration destination for raptors including the bald eagle. The Railroad is a huge supporter of Arizona Game and Fish's Eagle Watch Program and Liberty Wildlife, Arizona's premier wildlife rescue agency, never taking its eye off a commitment to preserving, protecting and presenting to the world the rare red rock riparian wilderness it calls home.

For information on tickets, special events, private parties and more, visit verdecanyonrr.com. ■



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