Viva Las Vegas

From glittering Las Vegas to roaring rapids in the Grand Canyon, you’ll be on a winning streak during this 984-mile adventure.

What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, they say. But there’s no reason to stay in Las Vegas when so many incredible natural wonders are within a day’s drive. First head to Springs Preserve for a whirlwind primer on area history, geology and critters. A hidden gem, this 180-acre nature preserve features indoor interactive exhibits on living sustainably in the desert, the humble beginnings of Sin City and the habits of its ancient and modern inhabitants. From there, explore the crazy rock formations of Valley of Fire State Park, the inner workings of Hoover Dam and the water scene on Lake Mead. Then, head south to the Hualapai Reservation in Arizona to raft through the western end of the Grand Canyon. Dry off and take Historic Route 66 toward the Grand Canyon’s South Rim. On the next few pages, check out highlights of this fantastic trip that takes you far beyond Sin City’s gleaming lights.
Hit Nature’s Jackpot

Take a break from The Strip’s neon lights and explore Springs Preserve.

The flash flood at Springs Preserve in Las Vegas started with a crack of thunder, sending a torrent of 5,000 gallons of water rushing down the slick, narrow canyon walls. But the five people standing on the metal platform just several feet above the deafening rush of water weren’t in harm’s way. Consisting of recycled water, the flash flood happens every 20 minutes at Springs Preserve, a stunning 180-acre natural oasis with three miles of footpaths, botanical gardens and a state-of-the-art indoor interpretive center just minutes from Las Vegas’ legendary Strip.

“It’s unexpected,” says Springs Preserve staffer Dawn Barralough. “Most people come here and say, ‘This isn’t Las Vegas,’ which is nice. It’s a great place to get history and background on the things you might see on your road trip like the Hoover Dam or regional animals or geology.”

Learn about the native people who inhabited the area and see real animals that live in the Mojave Desert like a Gila monster, desert tortoise and gray fox. Tour the outdoor shaded paths that include Cactus Boulevard, climb aboard an early 20th-century-replica train that took passengers to Las Vegas and watch original news coverage of the construction of the Hoover Dam.

At Waterworks, a permanent exhibit, you can discover the journey water takes to get to the faucets of Las Vegas residents. The interactive exhibit is inside the operational Charleston Heights Pumping Station on site. Outside you’ll find the Global Terrace, which features interactive exhibits about water challenges faced around the world and how organizations like ONE DROP™ are helping connect people to provide long-term access to safe water.

When you get hungry, fuel up at Divine Cafe, a hip, second-floor eatery with gorgeous views of The Strip and Springs Mound, an original source of water for Las Vegas. Springs Preserve is just three miles from downtown, but it feels worlds away.

Afterwards, explore the natural world near Las Vegas. Valley of the Fire State Park in Moapa Valley, Nev., is 55 miles from Las Vegas and home to 3,000-year-old petroglyphs, hiking trails and petrified wood. Hoover Dam in Boulder City, Nev., was completed in 1936 and is the highest concrete dam in the Western Hemisphere, stretching 726 feet. Take a dam tour, which includes a 500-foot elevator descent to the base of the dam. Lastly, splash in Lake Mead, the nation’s largest human-made reservoir, covering 1.5 million acres.

Visit Springs Preserve at 333 S. Valley View Blvd.; springspreserve.org.

Let your imagination go wild.

ADVENTURE IS RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER.

Plan your next visit at springspreserve.org.
There are few days that top rafting the Grand Canyon, stepping off your raft to a helicopter and ascending 4,000 feet of the Grand Canyon to the rim. For travelers and families with older kids, this Hualapai River Runners trip on the western side of the Grand Canyon is one to make the memory books. Not only is it full of adventure, but it enables you to step beyond the historical cliches of headdress-wearing Native Americans and glimpse into the modern-day lives of today’s Hualapai Indians.

Your epic trip starts at the Hualapai Lodge, an immaculate base that’s home to a restaurant where you can fuel up with breakfast and dinner and sample Native American traditional foods. From there, it’s about an hour-long bus ride down a dirt road past bighorn sheep and wild donkeys to river mile 226.

“We offer a one-day rafting experience, which a lot of companies don’t,” says Luka Montana, Hualapai tribal member. “It’s a fast and easy outing for people who want to get back to Las Vegas.”

After the first 12 miles of action-packed rapids, the river mellows out, which is why the Hualapai power their iconic turquoise rafts with motors. Enjoy deli sandwiches while relaxing on a white sandy beach before coasting to arguably one of the world’s most stunning helicopter launch pads. Get whisked away for a breathtaking eight-minute ride past the Grand Canyon’s ancient walls.

When you land on the canyon rim, walk on the Skywalk, a glass bridge that seemingly floats above the canyon. No cameras or personal belongings are allowed on the Skywalk, so you’ll store those in a locker. A bus ride to the lodge gives you time to reflect.

Learn more at grandcanyonwest.com.
The Bird Singer

One Hualapai discovers the magic of his tribe’s traditions in an unlikely place.

By Tori Peglar

One night, when he was 24, Luka Montana had a dream of singing. When he woke up, the vibrancy of the songs was replaced with an emptiness that settled on top of him. It was so heavy he couldn’t lift it off when he got out of bed or push it aside when he went to class. It sat beside him as he drove his pickup truck 70 lonely miles past Joshua trees and rolling sagebrush country to work on the western edge of the Grand Canyon. And it taunted him as he went to sleep in his home in Kingman, Ariz.

A month passed and then another. While working at the Skywalk, a spectacular horseshoe-shaped glass bridge suspended 4,000 feet above the Grand Canyon, he had an epiphany. One day, he watched Hualapai performers dance for tourists. Moreover, he listened to their songs. Really listened. And something deep within him moved.

The elders will tell you that you don’t just find bird songs. They find you. That day, they found Montana. Three years later, the 27-year-old has spent countless hours learning the Hualapai language and songs, so he can be a bird singer at his tribe’s wales.

His life is one of many that has been transformed by the Skywalk. Strong enough to hold seventy-one 747 airplanes, it opened in 2007 on a sacred but rarely visited dry corner of the Hualapai reservation. Today, it attracts more than 1 million visitors per year. And while it was built to bring in much-needed tourist dollars, it has been just as instrumental in helping the Hualapai strengthen their cultural traditions that were fading with each generation.

It almost goes without saying there’s great irony that in building the $30 million state-of-the-art Skywalk, Hualapai like Montana have discovered the importance of their tribe’s ancient traditions.

Bridge to Ancestors

On a cloudless deep blue-sky day in August, the buzzing of helicopters fills the air as they land and takeoff at Grand Canyon West. They bring people from places like Las Vegas 120 miles away by road and a launch pad along the Colorado River eight minutes away. Chatter from dozens of languages floats up in the dry air near the edge of the Grand Canyon, competing with the helicopters for dominance on a 100-degree day.

The Skywalk is the focal point of activity, and tourists have to wear shoe covers and place their cameras and purses in a locker before walking 70 feet over the Grand Canyon on a 10-foot-wide, all-glass walkway. For those who are overcome by a fear of heights mid-way across the bridge, kind staffers help them make it back to the exit door.

Beyond, there are snack stations, gift shops and a Native American village with replicas of Hualapai, Hopi, Navajo, Plains and Havasupai traditional dwellings. Dance performances take place daily in the amphitheater by Hualapai of all ages. In 2017, Sa’Nya-Wa Restaurant opened on the edge of the Grand Canyon, serving Southwest and Asian cuisine and traditional Hualapai dishes.

The area looks nothing like it did 150 years before the Skywalk was built. Back then, the Hualapai’s ancestral lands spanned approximately 7 million acres in and around the Grand Canyon. Things changed dramatically in 1874 when the U.S. Army forced the Hualapai to walk 150 miles south to the Colorado River Indian Reservation near present-day Ehrenberg, Ariz. Many died or grew sick along the way. In 1883, the Hualapai struck a deal with the government, setting new boundaries for what is the present-day Hualapai reservation. Today, it spans 1 million acres, including 108 miles of land bordering the Colorado River.

For decades, the Grand Canyon West area was recognized as sacred by the Hualapai, but it had nowhere near the tribal traffic it does today. In the 1960s, Loretta Jackson-Kelly, who works as Grand Canyon West’s customer service manager, left footprints deep in the red soil as she played with her eight brothers and sisters 11 miles down a dirt road near the Grand Canyon. Her dad served as tribal herd manager and ran cattle by Eagle Point, a short walk from where the Skywalk would be built.

However, most Hualapai lived two hours away in Peach Springs, Ariz., along Historic Route 66, where there wasn’t even a gas station or a grocery store. Many families squeezed into one-to-two room clapboard houses. Economic opportunities were scarce.

In 1999, Evel Knievel’s son Robbie Knievel leapt with his motorcycle 288 feet across the Grand Canyon on Hualapai land with tribal permission. The tribe hoped the stunt would translate to increased tourism. It didn’t.

Songs to Carry Spirits

When the Skywalk opened in 2007, astronauts Buzz Aldrin and John Herrington were there, standing on the edge of the majestic canyon they caught sight of from space. Since then tourists, and even actors like Kevin Costner and Leonardo DiCaprio, have come by car, bus, helicopter and plane to walk on a thick glass floor and look down 4,000 feet to the Colorado River below. As they wait in line, they can read the panels of a Hualapai exhibit, detailing the history of the tribe.

“It’s crazy,” Montana says. “People come from all over the
world and ask where the real Indians are. And I say, ‘I am right here.’ They think we are still living in teepees, hunting and gathering. But we have Dish Network. We live in houses.”

While Hualapai like Montana live and work and carve out lives for themselves in the modern world, Montana spends much of his limited free time trying to learn the bird songs that have been sung by Hualapai for centuries. At wakes, these songs are critical for guiding the spirit of the dead to the next world. Without them, a spirit could be left wandering for eternity.

“We believe when someone passes away, their spirit is wandering,” Montana explains. “From 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., we sing bird songs [to guide them to the next world]. It’s important to know which songs are evening songs and which ones are morning songs. You can’t mix them up because then you mess up the person’s journey.”

At the end of the night of a wake, Montana’s throat hurts and he’s tired and he’ll have to drive up to 120 miles either to work or home to Kingman, Ariz., where his young family lives. But he wouldn’t have it any other way. He’s bent on becoming a lead Hualapai singer.

“The more I got into bird songs, the more I realized our traditions are going away,” says Montana, who did not grow up speaking Hualapai or learning the songs. “We have a few lead singers, and they are getting older. In 20-30 years, it could be gone. It’s something I want to do because I realize my people need it. It’s not going to make me rich, but it will make me rich here,” he says as he points to his heart.

Sometimes, he wakes up in the morning with a song in his head. He knows the words, but he can’t recall ever hearing the song before. The elders say it is the ancestors calling you. When you have a direct line to them like that, you can’t ignore it.

Roots in the Colorado River

There’s an ancient word for the Colorado River in Hualapai, ha ‘gidadu, that refers to “the spine” of the river, denoting its life-giving force. It was the mighty Colorado that carved the Grand Canyon. And it has been part of the Hualapai identity for centuries. Without it, there is no life.

At Grand Canyon West, the river carved what looks like an eagle rising out of the canyon. It’s believed that in the early days, Hualapai people lived at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. One day, an eagle flew down to warn the people of a great flood. As the eagle flew up, it stayed near the top of the canyon to watch over the people. Then it turned to stone mid-flight with its wings spread out.

“Kids will say, ‘We thought the Grand Canyon was just a hole in the ground. But here is an eagle,’” says Cory Majenty, a 21-year-old Grand Canyon West tour guide, as he squints and proudly points to Eagle Point. He’s standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon between the Skywalk and the eagle rising up out of the canyon.

Being on Hualapai sacred land every day for work has a positive impact on tribal members like Majenty, Montana and Jackson-Kelly. For Jackson-Kelly, whose lifework of preserving Hualapai language and traditions garnered her the 2015 Historic Preservation Award from the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, seeing her people embrace their cultural identity is immensely satisfying.

“Culture is something you can’t see or hold, so it’s a feeling within yourself,” says Jackson-Kelly from her office in Grand Canyon West. “I believe cultural identity is always there in your heart. My roots are very strong out here. It’s not just Grand Canyon West. It’s the prehistory of our people.”

She and her youngest daughter, who is a hostess at Sa’Nya-Wa Restaurant, just embarked on a venture to run cattle in the same place near the Grand Canyon where her father did. When she traveled to Phoenix to get a cattle brand, she chose Bar U, with the U lying down. It happened to be the same shape as the Skywalk.

At the end of his shift as security supervisor at Grand Canyon West, Montana climbs into his pickup truck to drive home. It’s a long 70-mile drive for him one way.

The road snakes through miles of sage country and rolling hills of northwestern Arizona where the universe still has its grasp on a deep black night sky. Above him, the stars spread across the sky like jacks tossed in a child’s game. Outside his window, the dark hulking shapes of the Joshua trees dot the landscape.

Montana turns on his recordings of bird songs to fill the air and practice singing. There’s no other place he’d rather be.

“The biggest part of being out there and working for Grand Canyon West is it’s my home,” Montana says. “And it’s where I can see one of the natural wonders of the world. It’s so like home when we are out there.”
Which Grand Canyon?

What's the difference between the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and Grand Canyon West? A lot. To start, they are in opposite corners of Arizona, with the South Rim closest to Williams and Flagstaff. Grand Canyon West is closer to Las Vegas, Nevada. Grand Canyon West is operated by the Hualapai tribe, so it has a completely different history and vibe than the South Rim, which is operated by the National Park Service. Learn more below.

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<th>GRAND CANYON SOUTH RIM</th>
<th>GRAND CANYON WEST</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Managed by</strong></td>
<td>Hualapai Tribe</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entrance Fee</strong></td>
<td>$82.37/adult (includes meal and Skywalk)</td>
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<td><strong>Hours from Las Vegas</strong></td>
<td>Just over 2 hours (122 miles)</td>
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<td><strong>Cultural Bonus</strong></td>
<td>Hualapai exhibits, performances</td>
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<td><strong>Closest Lodging</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Photography</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Unique Attraction</strong></td>
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<td><strong>One-Day Rafting Trips</strong></td>
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For more information on Grand Canyon’s South Rim, go to www.nps.gov/grca

Want to know more?

For more information on Grand Canyon West, go to grandcanyonwest.com

Learn more about the North Rim at mygrandcanyonpark.com/park-access-overview.
Travel to one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World—and let Grand Canyon West provide you with an experience like no other. “Walk the sky” 4,000 feet above the Canyon floor on the Skywalk, and visit the wild west at the Hualapai Ranch, which includes horseback riding, a Root Beer Saloon, and tons to do for the whole family. Dine in the new Skywalk restaurant, and enjoy scenic canyon views from 3 viewpoints. We also offer one and two day whitewater rafting trips through the Grand Canyon. All this and more awaits you at Grand Canyon West.

For more information on pricing and packages, visit our website at grandcanyonwest.com.