

STEAM POWER vs PEDAL POWER

19TH CENTURY MEETS 21ST

BY JOE SAGE

This event was irresistible—a road trip to Williams, an effortless, traffic-free run to the South Rim on the Grand Canyon, and a chance to catch a parallel pack of cyclists doing the run under full exertion. This was Man Vs Machine—a contest (of sorts) between the Grand Canyon Railway's 92-year-old, 300-ton No. 4960 steam locomotive and cyclists from Grand Canyon Racing.

Last run in 1991, the bicycle portion of the race would start on Highway 64 in Tusayan, 12 miles south of Grand Canyon Village, and travel 53 miles south—with 2023 feet of climbing—to a finish line on Historic Route 66 in Williams, adjacent to the Grand Canyon Railway Depot. Any type of bike was welcome, as long as it would be safe in large groups. The Coconino County Sheriff's Office, Arizona Department of Public Safety officers, ADOT and the Williams Police Department all helped.

Grand Canyon Railway offers special steam excursions at times, but not as special as this—old No. 4960 would be hauling its load of passenger cars, filled with rail, bicycle and Canyon enthusiasts, without its usual diesel assist. Powered by clean, green used vegetable oil from the Railway's hotel and restaurant operations, the steam locomotive was on its own for this one.

We had the option of riding along on the bike route, in support vans; or (probably: no guarantee) riding along in a video crew helicopter; or taking the steam train. We went with the train. We had ordered our ride online (along with a hotel room in

Williams), grabbed our tickets in the morning, at the station right outside the hotel, and watched the train huff and puff as it backed up to the platform. Loaded and ready, the train departed at 8am, stopping about an hour north for a photo run-by (most people got off; some took the extra ride). Three hours after we had left Williams, we were at the South Rim, where we had an hour of canyon views and ice cream cones—while the train was turned around and serviced—before heading south.

It turns out the train running solo had put quite a load on the brakes, and we had to wait additional time for smoking shoes to cool down, then try some test spurts to see if they were working. All aboard! They seemed to be working adequately.

Our timing was now a little off, but it really didn't matter. The tracks and highway are almost never right side by side, and only radio communications kept us informed of the cyclists' speed and location. The helicopter also gave us clues, as it circled around between us, on the rear platform of the last car, and the bikes, on the road somewhere to our east through the piñon forest.

Although mile 29 at Valle had been noted as a sort of competitive rendezvous, we didn't see the bikes until a few miles north of Williams. We had hung back as much as the brakes seemed to allow, but then were free to roll into town at speed.

The train did get back to town first. But as anyone might have predicted before the race even started, everyone was a winner. ■

Our Grand Canyon Railway run had all the fundamentals—pure steam power, lovingly maintained vintage passenger cars, a conductor in classic uniform and cap checking his pocket watch, and the blue skies and open vistas of northern Arizona.



Williams (population 3000, elevation 6766 feet) is a small town that is very big on a number of things. It's a famous Route 66 stop (the last town to be bypassed by the Interstates). It's on Amtrak's Southwest Chief route from Chicago to LA and along I-40 from the East Coast to LA. It's a major gateway to the Grand Canyon—and it's the southern end of the Grand Canyon Railway.

For the Man Vs Machine event, we booked a room with the Grand Canyon Railway & Hotel—a comprehensive operation that runs the train, hotel, a hotel pub, a buffet restaurant and gift shop next door—all right where you pick up your tickets and board the train, and a block or two walk to downtown Williams. Operated by Xanterra Parks & Resorts of Colorado, they also have lodging at the Canyon end.

Reservations are easy to book online, with well-organized options for trains, lodging at either end and combinations thereof. A friendly and helpful phone staff is also available.

Off-season prices were very reasonable for both the hotel and train. The hotel entry has a beautiful portico and classic Western Lodge-style lobby. The beds are so comfortable, we seriously almost stayed an extra night, just for the room.

The Railway has special seasonal runs—a fall Pumpkin Patch train and the Polar Express for the holidays.

Most trains run behind modern diesels. Much of the year, there's Steam Saturday, with your train led by the same No. 4960 steam locomotive we took for Man Vs Machine, though backed up by a diesel locomotive. The steam train has been converted to run on waste vegetable oil—sourced from their restaurant operations.

The trains offer a full complement of modern cars, with coach, first class, Pullman cars, observation domes and luxury dome cars, and a luxury parlor car with an open rear platform. Drinks and snacks are available.

Lest you doubt that this is the train to end all trains, their website makes it clear: www.thetrain.com. ■

