

# Romance & adventure in the high desert

By Nick Calderone with Rosalie Michaels  
Photos by Nick Calderone and Rosalie Michaels



Soaking it all in, beneath the shade of the open-air observation cars on the Verde Canyon Railroad

What's the most romantic city in Arizona? That's what I began to think about when my girlfriend Rosalie and I started planning a weekend trip to celebrate our second anniversary. We considered a number of destinations. Page, with the grand Lake Powell lapping at its shores? Maybe. Bisbee or Jerome with their quirky art scene and mining history? Nah. Scottsdale has great resorts and shopping, but... nope. We settled upon Sedona. The red rocks, cooler mountain air, five-star restaurants, wineries and art all come together to create a perfect weekend for two people looking to celebrate love. That's how I sold it to my girl, but secretly I was scheduling heavy doses of adventure in between the huggy kissy stuff.

I scooted out of work early Friday afternoon, and we shot up the I-17 at the limits of legal speed. Well, close to legal speed, anyway. The drive along Route 179 into Sedona never gets old. Rosalie loves the first glimpse of the red rocks as we sweep around the gentle right-hander before entering Oak Creek. I feel the same—it's like pulling back a dappled curtain of desert to reveal a vibrant, priceless oil painting. It's always breathtaking and gives the sense that you are truly someplace special.

In lieu of a big resort, we chose to rent a house—a cute, tiny one-bedroom with lots of shade, charm and a perfect patio. Nestled beneath the cover of old growth, the house lies right along the banks of Oak Creek. It was perfect. We unloaded the 4Runner as quickly as possible, set up our lounge chairs, went to work on a bottle of wine and let the babble of the creek wash away the stresses of the week. Romantic? Yup.

The landscape of Sedona is truly remarkable, and so are the surrounding canyons and towns. One of the best ways to get immersed in the nature and history of it all is a ride on the Verde Canyon Railroad. The depot is about thirty-five minutes southwest of Sedona, just off 89A in the historic mining town of Clarkdale. We chose to spring for first class tickets and, trust me, the experience is worth a few extra bucks. For starters,

we're each welcomed with a flute of champagne as we board and select our seats. The entire train is refurbished, with the first class cars getting a rustic yet plush overhaul. Deep red couches wrap us in homelike comfort, so we can relax and enjoy the ride.

We ordered a bottle of wine to sip during the 20-mile ride to the turnaround point in Perkinsville. Before we even set off, our chilled bucket of wine was at our table. There's a full bar aboard, including local beers and wine, as well as a snack buffet with sandwiches, wings and yummy brownie bites that we could not get enough of. All of it gives you a sense of yesteryear, and within the first mile you begin to wish train travel was more widely available in this country.

The view from inside the air-conditioned cars is cool and comfortable, but the experience magnifies when you step outside to ride in an open air car. History hangs from the cliffs. In just the first few miles we spot at least four Native American dwellings perched above the tracks. We can't help but wonder how many more homes or hunting outposts are out there, just out of sight. Staring at the rugged canyon, unspoiled by development, it's easy to picture the people who lived here but hard to imagine how they survived.

The Verde River is your constant companion as the train trundles along the tracks, mirroring the canyon's curves carved by the water. One corner in particular provides the best photo opportunity of the journey. My Nikon's shutter was snapping away as the train rolled across a century-old bridge that spans a large side gorge. The ground falls away, the tracks bend, and the powerful, blue locomotives come into focus against red-hued rocks beneath an azure sky. It's the picture you'll want to show all your friends and family.

Bald eagles are known to live in the canyon. Emblazoned on each hulking locomotive is their image reminding you to keep a keen eye to the sky. If you're lucky, you might catch a glimpse of one soaring above. On this day, we were fortunate, because a bald eagle came to us. Once a month, Liberty Wildlife rides the train and brings along a very special passenger. Sonora is a rescued raptor the organization has worked with for several years, and the monthly rides are part of



The Verde Canyon Railroad, rumbling back toward the depot in Clarkdale. • Sonora, a female bald eagle, broke her wing in three places while learning to fly. She's now an ambassador with Liberty Wildlife.

her enrichment. The open air and passing scenery provide important stimulation for the bird's continuing rehabilitation. We learn about the bald eagle's decline and recovery in the canyon, a point Sonora emphasized by spreading her huge wings for a photo. Riding the rails with a bald eagle over our shoulder left us breathless.

The three-and-half-hour tour is one of the best Arizona excursions you can have for the money. The train ventures deep into territory that's otherwise very difficult to experience. Scenery is spectacular, the ride is plush and you can eat and drink all you want for less than you'd spend on a Jeep tour.

So, Sunday we went on a Jeep tour. Well, not exactly. Instead of paying to be driven around in a colorful four-wheeler, we decided to have an adventure in our own truck. A few months ago, I installed an Icon Vehicle Dynamics stage-one lift kit on my 2004 Toyota 4Runner Sport. Since then, I've been anxious to put it to the test. What better place than the well-traveled yet rugged Broken Arrow Trail?

We relaxed on our patio most of the afternoon, waiting for the sun to settle low in the sky before hitting the trail. We aired down to 20 psi, set the transfer case to 4-Lo, locked the differential and rolled slowly down the dusty red trail. If I'm honest, I was nervous. The trail guide I read rated

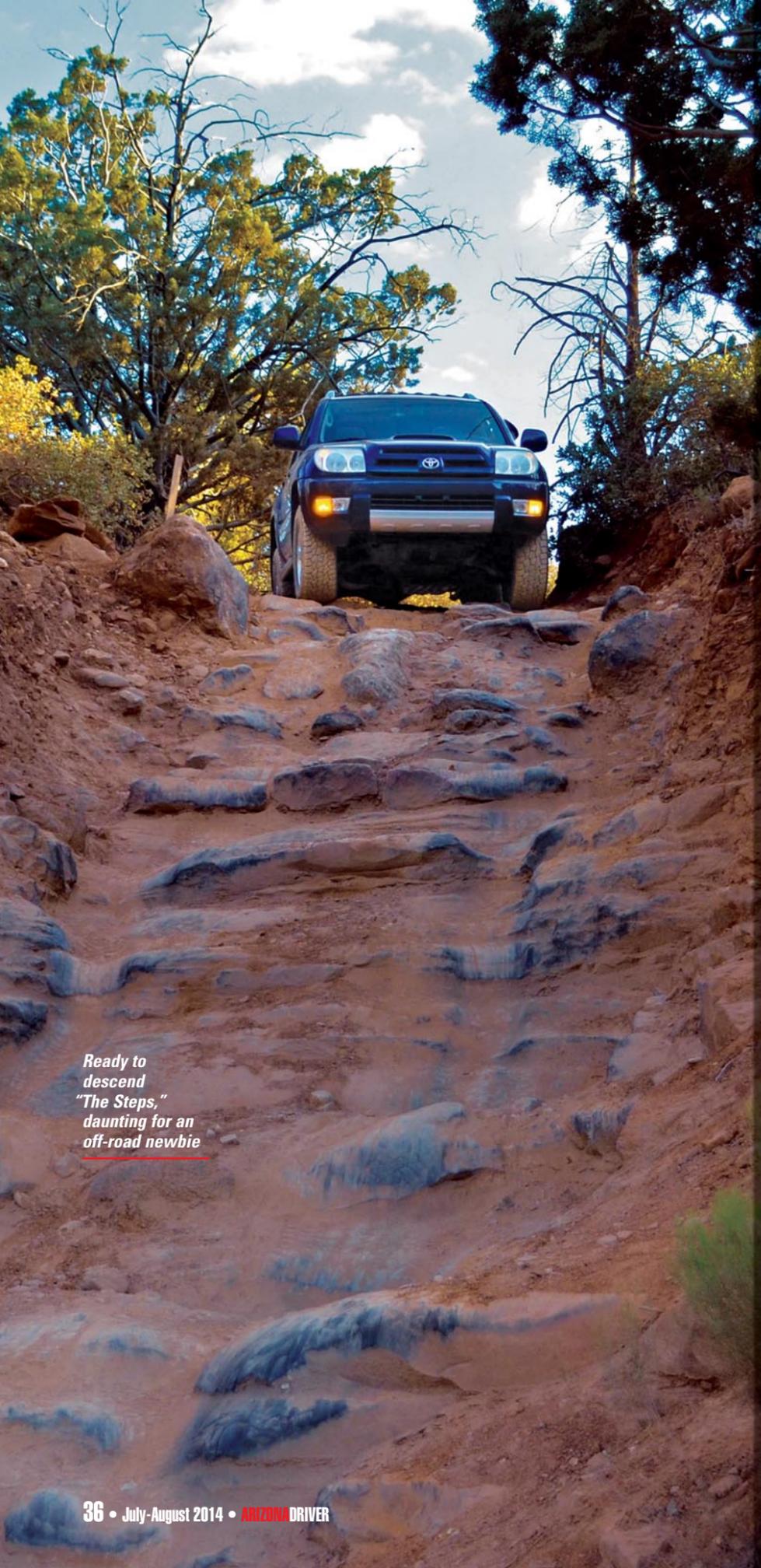


Broken Arrow "difficult." I was confident I wouldn't get stuck; however, I wasn't sure I wouldn't damage the truck or get lost. And how would Rosalie react? I wanted her to enjoy the ride and not be scared.

We tackled the first few obstacles with no problems. The front wheels of the 4Runner gripped the rocks and climbed up with ease. Our windshield filled with the colorful contrast of sky blue over red rocks as the nose of the truck reared up, the cabin felt like a rocket ship and our weight shifted from our bums to our backs. What a cool feeling. I drive this truck every day, but this was different. I think it was just a sense of freedom, being able to get into the back and beyond in the same vehicle I drive to work.

One of the first big sights along the trail is Submarine Rock. I parked my blue 4Runner alongside a few Pink Jeeps and felt a small tingle of pride that we had gotten here without handing the reins to a

KEEP RIGHT >>



Ready to descend "The Steps," daunting for an off-road newbie

tour guide. I jumped out of the truck with schoolboy excitement. I couldn't wait to run up the spine of the Submarine and get a look around. The late afternoon sun cast shadows, adding even more dimension and majesty to the already astounding scenery. We breathed in the view, captured a few cute cheek-to-cheek iPhone selfies and hopped back into the truck.

We were nearing the end of the twisty trail. However, getting there involved climbing and crawling over more challenging but fun steps and steep rocky grades. The trail turns around at a plateau called Chicken Point, aptly named for a rock feature perched high on the cliffs that resembles a chicken head. Again, the views are quintessential Sedona and postcard perfect.

There were three other Jeeps parked here: a heavily modified Cherokee and Wrangler and a Pink Jeep. Comparing their mods to my mostly stock ride began to make me a little nervous, especially knowing that the toughest part of the trail, "The Steps," was still ahead.

Knowledge is power, so I approached the Pink Jeep driver and asked about what lay ahead. She couldn't have been more helpful. Turns out she's one of the instructors at the popular tour company. She gave me a few key bits of info and assured me that although "The Steps" may look daunting, my mostly stock SUV would make it down the most treacherous bit of trail without a problem.

Rosalie and I clicked off a few more pictures as I noticed the last of the three other Jeeps disappear into the high desert scrub. We hurried back to the truck, staying close to another off-roader felt like a good idea, in case we did find ourselves in trouble. However, I couldn't keep pace with the highly articulated Wrangler, and all I saw was dust in the distance. We were on our own.

We navigated our way back toward where we came from, following the black scuff marks from the many trucks that tackle this route every day. We were having fun, when suddenly my heart was in my throat. We had reached the top of "The Steps," and it looked impossible. My first thought was that I wouldn't walk this path, never mind take my daily driver down it. The grade was steep, the boulders rutted and tall, and the trail so worn it had become a deep channel below

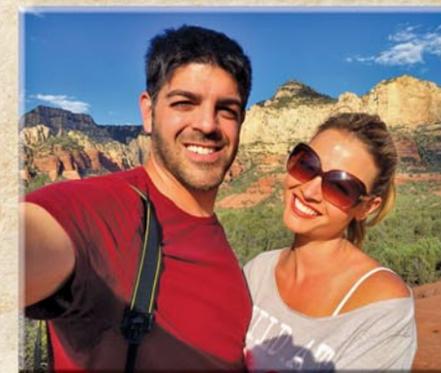


Nick's 4Runner, parked with pride next to iconic Pink Jeeps. • Oak Creek babbles by the patio of a charming one-bedroom rental house. • Nick and Rosalie enjoy the view from atop Submarine Rock.

grade. The picture doesn't do it justice. I considered backing out, but there really was no other way to go but down. It was time to trust the truck and the knowledge I had gained getting to this point; I was ready to take the plunge. Rosalie was not and refused to stay in the truck, believing "it was going to flip over." She chose to walk down, which was fine by me. I needed her eyes to help guide my wheels and reduce the risk of damage.

I gently crept toward the first step. The tires screeched and searched for grip. Each boulder has been worn smooth from consistent traffic and made slicker with a coating of dust. My tires clung to the rocks until they reach a tipping point and broke free all at once. The truck lunged forward and then bounced to a stop when it hit the bottom of the first step. It's an unnerving feeling, but I didn't hear any scrapes, thuds or crunches, so I began to settle down, loosen my grip on the wheel and let the truck do the work. Step by step, down I went to the bottom of the hill, to pick up my girl who was feeding me instructions and snapping a few hero pics of the descent.

The last few miles of the trail was a Sunday drive and we were both glad we didn't break anything. The rest of the trip was a relaxing blend of romance and adventure, a perfect mix only Sedona can deliver. ■



**NICK CALDERONE** is a host of the nationally syndicated news and entertainment show *RightThisMinute*. A lifelong car and motorcycle enthusiast, Nick says the coolest car he's ever owned was a 1986 Nissan 300ZX, and he currently rides a 1984 Honda Goldwing. Nick can be reached at [facebook.com/nscaldereone](https://www.facebook.com/nscaldereone) or on Twitter @nscaldereone.

**ROSALIE MICHAELS** is an actor, model and corporate spokesperson. She has been in many films and commercials and is a national spokesperson for Hyundai. In addition, she owns With a Smile Productions, an event model management company responsible for the iconic "red dress block girls" you see at Barrett-Jackson.

## Rosalie's adventure

Nick loves outdoor adventure! And I love experiencing those things with him and seeing the look on his face as he does so. My man is never more full of joy than at those moments when he is doing something "in nature" and has me beside him. However, my sense of adventure is slightly different. Scratch that—it is entirely different! Here is what my adventure looks like...

I LOOOOVE food! And wine! So for me, adventure consists of seeing new places and immersing myself in the local epicurean delights. To this end, Sedona did not disappoint. Some highlights:

1) Wine tasting at Arizona Strong in Cottonwood—This cool, hip place was a nice surprise after our train experience. It was decorated with great, interesting art, and the music added another layer of cool. Kevin, our host, was fun, sweet, and really knew his stuff. While the wines, in my opinion, were nothing to rave about, the experience was! A perfect end to our walk through Cottonwood.

2) Dinner at Elote Café—When one of our closest friends, born in Mexico, said "It's the best Mexican food you'll have outside my mama's house," we knew we had to give to give this place a try—those are big words! And Elote lived up to them big time. There's a wait to get in, and it is absolutely worth it. We chose to wait a bit longer to get a table on the patio. It was the right choice—we had gorgeous views of the Red Rocks as we enjoyed our appetizer, the one the restaurant is named after. You must have the elote! It's a corn appetizer that I'm pretty sure Nick is still dreaming about.

3) Brunch at L'Auberge—Let me just preface this by saying L'Auberge is probably my favorite place on the planet. Its patio right on Oak Creek is a slice of heaven on earth. A trip to Sedona is not complete for me without a stop here. Nick had never eaten there, so I chose their outstanding brunch and asked to be seated at their best table on the creek. They came through for me! As we sat at our little table, tucked away from the rest of the patio, with our mimosas in hand, I think Nick was able to see why this place is so special to me. And I think Nick fell in love with the place, too. For he, the action guy, was perfectly happy to just sit there for a couple of hours and soak it all in, saying, "I don't think we need to leave here for a very long time." L'Auberge does it again.

When visiting Sedona, don't miss these highlights. They truly are an "adventure." You can thank me later. :)

—Rosalie Michaels