

Business

Grand Canyon SKYWALK Preview

Betting to 'improve our lot,' Hualapai Tribe puts up \$30M

Opens to public next week; be prepared to pay

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The Colorado River flows more than 4,000 feet below the Hualapai Tribe's Skywalk, which swings 70 feet out from the edge of Grand Canyon West, near Kingman.

DEAN KNUTH / arizona daily star

GRAND CANYON WEST — The Hualapai Tribe is betting \$30 million that an unpaved transportation artery leading to a remote stretch of the Grand Canyon rim will pump life into the tribe's tourism-based economy.

On Tuesday, Hualapai officials invited hundreds of VIPs and members of the news media to tour the tribe's new steel and glass-bottomed walkway, jutting 70 feet past the canyon's dusty edge. Their hope: It will funnel thousands more tourists, and their dollars, to the remote reservation.

The Skywalk, which is scheduled to open to the public March 28, soars about 4,000 feet above the canyon floor. Visitors who are not faint of heart and willing to pay \$75 each can get a bird's eye view of the canyon from the horseshoe-shaped walkway.

Under construction since mid-2005, the Skywalk has received worldwide attention, thrusting the 2,300-member Hualapai Tribe into a media whirlwind.

"This is the only one of its kind in the world, and it's on our reservation," said Waylon Honga, chief operating officer for Grand Canyon Resort Corp., which guides reservation business and tourism development. "Now we have the world's attention."

The Skywalk is part of a 9,000-acre tourism development called Grand Canyon West that includes a replica Indian village, a marketplace, a Western town with horseback and wagon rides, and tours via helicopter, boat and Hummer. Unlike other Arizona tribes, the Hualapai do not operate casinos, a \$1.6 billion industry in Arizona. The tribe tried its hand at gaming in the mid-1990's but the venture failed after eight months, mostly because of its remote location and proximity to Las Vegas.

If the tribe had other sources of revenue, tourism development probably would not be its sole focus, Honga, the tribe's tourism development COO said.

"But we are a small tribe. We've been struggling for a long time," he said. "This is a way for us to improve our lot, and our lives, on this planet, at this time."

"It'll be tremendously popular"

To improve their lot, the Hualapai hope to increase the number of tourists visiting annually from 250,000 to 600,000. But to attract them, the tribe will have to persuade them to travel some distant and rough roads to the Skywalk.

The nearest big town is Kingman, 70 miles away. Las Vegas is 121 miles, Flagstaff is 216, Phoenix 253 miles and Tucson 374 miles. The trip ends with 14 miles over a washboard dirt road.

Once there, visitors will find the area has limited water, electricity and telephone service. And though there are a handful of cabins for rent, most of the nearest lodging is about 50 miles away.

Visitors will have to pay \$49.95 per person to enter Grand Canyon West, then another \$25 per person to go on the Skywalk.

The tribe is counting on Las Vegas visitors to make the investment of time and money pay off. About 130,000 people traveled from Las Vegas to Hualapai and Grand Canyon West last year.

"Tours to the Grand Canyon are really popular," said Erika Pope, a spokeswoman for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. "Especially with international visitors, it'll be irresistible to see one of the natural wonders of the

world and the Skywalk. ... I think it'll be tremendously popular."

It is not unusual for tourists to travel to an Arizona reservation. More than 5.4 million people visited the state's 22 tribes in 2004, according to the Arizona Office of Tourism.

Those visitors spent \$310.5 million during trips and had a total economic impact of \$391 million, according to a 2005 survey by the office and the Arizona Hospitality Research and Resource Center at Northern Arizona University.

"When visitors come to Arizona, they talk about the lure of the Southwest and its Native American cultures," said Dawn Melvin, manager for the Arizona Office of Tourism's Native American Tourism Development office.

"I think the Skywalk will drive tourism efforts," Melvin said. "It's something new and, like any new attraction, will generate buzz."

Weighs 1.07 million pounds

The Skywalk project, developed through a partnership between the Hualapai and Las Vegas architect and entrepreneur David Jin, was dreamed up during a trip Jin took to the Grand Canyon in the mid-1990s.

Las Vegas-based M.R.J. Architects was tapped to design the Skywalk, and the glass was manufactured by Germany-based Saint-Gobain, a company that specializes in structural glass for building projects worldwide.

Executive Construction Management, also based in Las Vegas, took over construction of the Skywalk last year after Apco Construction left over concerns about liability.

At its rollout earlier this month, builders of the Skywalk said the structure is safe.

Designed to withstand 100 mph winds, the Skywalk features shock absorbers to keep the walkway steady as people walk across. Protective clear walls and guardrails are attached to the Skywalk's glass floor.

The deck is supported by steel beams anchored 46 feet into the rock on the edge of the canyon. The 30,000-square-foot structure, weighing 1.07 million pounds, can hold 120 people at a time, the builders say.

The terms of the tribe's agreement with Jin call for him to give the Skywalk to the tribe in exchange for a portion of the proceeds. "The terms are confidential, but David will profit for the next 25 years from the Skywalk," said Steve Beattie, chief financial officer of Grand Canyon Resort Corp.

What do the ancestors think?

The tribe plans to build a three-level, 6,000-square-foot visitor center at the Skywalk, designed by Tucson architect Richard Fe Tom. The visitor center will house a museum, a movie theater, restaurants, lounges and a gift shop, and is scheduled to open in December.

The tribe is also planning a \$45 million airport expansion at Grand Canyon West Air Terminal capable of handling corporate jets and larger aircraft.

Other ideas floated by the tribe for Grand Canyon West include 40 cabin-style rooms or a 200- to 300-room resort hotel, opening a high-end spa with golf courses and running a cable car to carry visitors from the Canyon rim to the river.

"It's hard to say how long or how many years it will take," Honga said. "But all these ideas are doable. It's not a pipe dream."

Not everyone appreciates the tribe's dream, the Skywalk in particular.

"I think it's a tragedy to put it right on, and over, the rim of the canyon," said **Kierán Suckling, a policy analyst for the Center for Biological Diversity** in Tucson. "It's one of the seven wonders of the world. It deserves better treatment."

The structure has also split the 2,300-member tribe, putting a wedge between traditionalists and the Skywalk's supporters.

"Natives aren't used to having this sort of thing in nature and on the canyon," said Emily Walema, 61, who grew up on the Hualapai reservation. "I wonder what will happen and wonder what the ancestors think about this."

The Hualapai acknowledge that the Skywalk is not the ultimate solution to all of the tribe's money problems.

"The Skywalk is not our salvation. It's an added feature at Grand Canyon West," said Honga. "It will help keep us in the black."

On StarNet: See more photos from Tuesday's preview of the Grand Canyon Skywalk at azstarnet.com/slideshows

INSIDE TODAY

Members of the Hualapai tribe got their first view from the Skywalk Monday, and a Star reporter was with them to capture their reactions to the new attraction. Page A5

The Hualapai Indians' gamble to lure tourists from nearby Las Vegas likely will pay off, even if the attraction isn't quite as majestic as advertised. Opinion, Page A12

COMING UP

The Star's Levi Long walks the Skywalk and tells you what it's like. Plus, the lowdown on what else to do and where to stay in the Grand Canyon area. Sunday in ¡Vamos!

? Contact reporter Levi Long at 573-4179 or by email at llong@azstarnet.com.