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REACHING FOR THE SKYWALK

Las Vegasans play integral role in realizing Grand Canyon attraction

By [HENRY BREAN](#)
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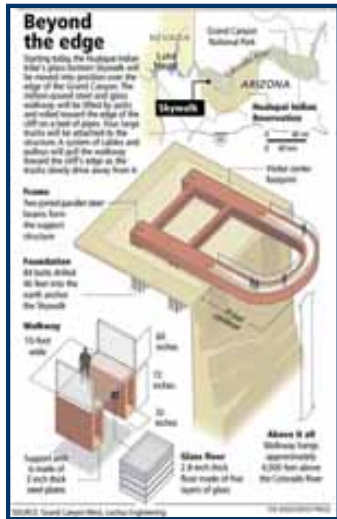
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Bill Karren, principal for Lochsa Engineering of Las Vegas, flips through the structural plans for the Skywalk.
Photo by [John Gurzinski](#).



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The developers of a transparent walkway that will allow visitors to step out from the edge of a cliff and look 4,000-feet straight down into the Grand Canyon expect their project to draw tourists from around the globe.

At the moment, though, the crew working on the structure has a distinctly local flavor.

Virtually everyone associated with the Skywalk lives and works in the Las Vegas Valley -- from the man who first dreamed up the idea to the engineers, architects and contractors who are making it a reality.

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The U-shaped, steel and glass structure on the Hualapai Indian Reservation in Arizona, 120 miles east of Las Vegas, is nearly complete.

Starting today, its million-pound bulk will be carefully moved into position at the cliff's edge, where it will jut 60 feet out over the Grand Canyon. The move is expected to take about two days and culminate with the walkway being welded to massive anchors made from 84 rods of high-strength steel imbedded nearly 46 feet into the bedrock.

The attraction is slated to open to the public on March 28.

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Local businessman David Jin dreamed up the idea in 1996, while on a tour of the Grand Canyon with his family.

The attraction was designed by local architect Mark Ross Johnson and engineered by Lochsa Engineering, one of the largest structural firms in Las Vegas.

The geologist who studied the rock at the project site and the engineering consultant who studied the wind activity also are based in Las Vegas.

The general contractor on the job is Executive Construction Management, a company founded about three years ago by Manuel Mojicar and two other partners with more than 50 years of combined experience in the local building market.

Asked whether he's ever worked on a project such as this, Mojicar said, "No one's ever built something like this before."

Lochsa principal Bill Karren said he has no doubt the Skywalk will become an iconic destination for tourists the world over. The only question in his mind: "How long it's going to be before there's a James Bond movie filmed there?"

The \$30 million investor-funded Skywalk is expected to serve as the centerpiece for Grand Canyon West, a budding tourist destination on the Hualapai Reservation.

At the end of a 14-mile dirt road, Grand Canyon West already offers Old West-themed villages and rides by helicopter, pontoon, off-road vehicle and horseback in and around the canyon.

Entrance packages for various attractions start at about \$28. Once the Skywalk opens, it is expected to cost an additional \$25 to stroll out onto the 4 inches of glass that will serve as the walkway's floor.

Eventually, the Skywalk will be accessed through a visitor center with gift shops and a pair of restaurants, one underground and the other on a rooftop overlooking the Skywalk.

Until then, a pair of covered walkways will be installed so visitors can get to the Skywalk while construction work at the site continues. The visitor center probably won't open until sometime next year, Karren said.

A private event will be held March 20, during which Apollo astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon, is scheduled to lead the ceremonial "first walk" out onto the Skywalk.

By then, of course, an untold number of laborers and engineers, Karren among them, already will have walked on the structure.

"I'll be among the first," Karren said.

So will Jasna Vikic, Lochsa's project engineer for the Skywalk.

Vikic and her husband moved to the United States from Bosnia 13 years ago. She said only in America could she end up working on an attraction such as this.

"From the beginning, I knew it was going to be a famous project. It is a great opportunity."

Vikic said her first visit to the job site was also her first trip to the Grand Canyon.

Because the walkway extends beyond the edge of the cliff, engineers had to contend with some "interesting wind behaviors."

In the end, the Skywalk was designed to withstand wind gusts of up to 100 mph from any direction, though Karren said he expects the attraction to shut down on extremely windy days "purely for pedestrian comfort."

"It's so (the wind) doesn't suck off their toupees because the bridge can take it," Karren explained.

The walkway is engineered to support at least 100 pounds per square foot, or about 800 people weighing 200 pounds each.

Mostly out of curiosity, Karren fired a high-powered rifle into an extra piece of the composite glass that will serve as the deck of the walkway. The glass stopped the bullet.

Operators plan to allow no more than 120 people onto the Skywalk at any one time. Visitors will be given a pair of special booties to prevent their shoes from slipping on the glass or scratching it.

Those who are a bit more squeamish about heights will be able to walk along the structure's steel support beams instead of the clear glass portions of the walkway.

"The experience can be as freaky as you want it to be," Karren said.

The project has already generated a great deal of buzz.

Last year, Popular Science magazine named the Skywalk as one of the world's 100 best innovations.

Karren said he gets a constant stream of e-mail inquiries and requests for interviews from all over the world. "I've been on Discovery TV Canada, and a TV station in Germany wants me to go on with them," he said.

Mojicar gets lots of calls and e-mails, too. "It's starting to get more heated now," he said.

One engineer from the Netherlands has been especially persistent. Vikic said she gets an e-mail from the guy about once a day.

"Every morning it's one more question, one more question," she said.

The man took the information he got from Lochsa and used it to draw his own sketches of the walkway for a Dutch newspaper, Karren said. "He never got it exactly right."

The Skywalk is also generating a great deal of excitement on the Hualapai reservation. Karren said that when the first truck rolled in carrying a piece of the walkway, tourists and tribe members ran over to greet it.

"How often do you see people running to see a piece of steel on the back of a truck?" Karren said.

Once the Skywalk is finally open, Karren expects it to attract people from all over the world because of "what it is and where it is."

"I think it catches people's imaginations. It just grabs them," he said. "The whole world is going nuts over this."



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