



BACKROADS OF THE GREAT *American* WEST

YOUR GUIDE TO

GREAT DAY TRIPS

AND WEEKEND

GETAWAYS

Compiled by the editors of Motorbooks

BACKROADS
OF THE GREAT
American
WEST



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GETAWAYS

GARY CRABBE

DIANA FAIRBANKS

JIM HINCKLEY

THERESA HUSARIK

KAREN MISURACA

GEORGE OSTERTAG

RHONDA OSTERTAG

MIKE SEDAM

CLAUDE WIATROWSKI

DAVID M. WYMAN





Contents



CHAPTER 1

6 *Colorado*

8 **STONE, COAL,
AND SILVER**
Marble to Aspen

14 **SAN JUAN
SKYWAY**
Durango to
Mancos

22 **CRIPPLE
CREEK GOLD**
Cascade to
Westcliffe

CHAPTER 2

28 *New Mexico and Arizona*

30 **DOUBLE-6 IN
THE LAND OF
ENCHANTMENT**
Glenrio to Gallup

38 **AN ANCIENT LAND**
Tucumcari to
Albuquerque

42 **AMERICA'S
MAIN STREET**
Route 66 from
Ash Fork to
Topock

50 **THE ARIZONA
COAST**
Kingman to
Grand Canyon
West

CHAPTER 3

54 *Southern California*

56 **SAN JOAQUIN
VALLEY'S
FREEDOM ROADS**
Delano to
Allensworth

60 **SOUTHERN
MOUNTAINS AND
DESERTS**
The Laguna
Mountains

64 **MOJAVE DESERT
AND HISTORIC
ROUTE 66**
Victorville to
Amboy

70 **DANA'S PILGRIM
AND THE
SWALLOWS
OF SAN JUAN
CAPISTRANO**
Dana Point
to Caspers
Wilderness Park

74 **THE SEVEN
SISTERS**
Morro Bay and the
Edna Valley



CHAPTER 4

80 *Northern California*

82 **WHERE IT'S ALWAYS YESTERDAY**
Locke and the Delta

86 **THE SACRAMENTO VALLEY**
The Midway

92 **THE GREAT BASIN DESERT**
Bodie

96 **MARSHLANDS, RAINFORESTS, AND A ROCKY SEACOAST**
Arcata to Prairie Creek State Park

102 **THE SLEEPING MAIDEN**
Muir Woods, Stinson Beach, and a Mount Tamalpais Loop

108 **PASO ROBLES**
Cowboy Country

CHAPTER 5

112 *Utah*

114 **THE OLD WEST COMES TO LIFE**
Old Pony Express Road

118 **BUTCH CASSIDY WAS HERE**
Beaver Canyon to I-70

122 **ALL-AMERICAN ROAD**
State Route 12

126 **ALONG THE MIGHTY COLORADO**
Potash Road to Dead Horse Point

130 **COWBOYS AND INDIANS, BOTH PAST AND PRESENT**
Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway

CHAPTER 6

134 *Oregon*

136 **ALL THINGS COASTAL**
Lincoln City to Reedsport

140 **VOLCANO CENTRAL**
McKenzie Pass to Santiam Pass Scenic Byway

144 **FIRE AND FEATHERS**
Volcano Scenic Byway to Crater Lake and Klamath Basin

148 **PARADISE FOUND**
Hells Canyon Scenic Byway Main Loop

CHAPTER 7

152 *Washington*

154 **WILD BEACHES**
La Push to Hoquiam

158 **CARBONADO**
Buckley to Mowich Lake

162 **STEPTOE**
Palouse to Steptoe Butte

166 **CONTRIBUTORS**

168 **INDEX**



Chapter 1

COLORADO

8 **STONE, COAL,
AND SILVER**
Marble to Aspen

14 **SAN JUAN
SKYWAY**
Durango to
Mancos

22 **CRIPPLE
CREEK GOLD**
Cascade to
Westcliffe

THE MILLION DOLLAR
HIGHWAY NEAR OURAY,
COLORADO. DAWN WILSON
PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK



STONE, COAL, *and* SILVER

MARBLE TO ASPEN

CRYSTAL MILL NEAR MARBLE IS ONE OF THE
MOST PHOTOGRAPHED SITES IN COLORADO.

PETER KUNASZ/SHUTTERSTOCK





COLORADO HIGHWAY 133 AND COUNTY ROAD 3 PROVIDE ACCESS TO THE CRYSTAL RIVER VALLEY, A REMARKABLE PLACE. THE INDUSTRIES OF COAL MINING AND MARBLE QUARRYING AND FINISHING DOMINATED THE AREA IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES. TRAINS OF SIX DIFFERENT RAILROADS CHUGGED OR WHIRRED (ONE WAS ELECTRIC) IN THE 40-MILE-LONG (64.4. KM) VALLEY. THIS PLACE IS EVER SO REMARKABLE BECAUSE THERE IS MUCH TO EXPLORE ALONG THE CRYSTAL RIVER NEAR A HEAVILY DEVELOPED AREA OF COLORADO THAT HAS LOST MUCH OF ITS HISTORIC AMBIANCE. YOUR JOURNEY STARTS IN THE TOWN OF MARBLE.

By 1907, blocks of marble were being quarried southwest of the town of Marble, and teamsters gingerly dropped them down the mountainside in wagons. Workmen were constructing the marble-finishing mill, some of it built from marble! An electric railway, the Yule Tram, began hauling marble from the Yule Quarry in 1910, down a surrealistically steep electric railroad. Eventually, two railroads would haul the huge marble blocks from quarries to the finishing mill. The brilliant white stone was shipped to the rest of the country on trains of the Crystal River & San Juan Railway. Marble for the Lincoln Memorial was wrested from the earth at the Yule Quarry and cut and polished in the mill at Marble. In 1931, the marble block for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was quarried here. So heavy was this single block that it was carefully lowered from the quarry to the mill at 1 mile (1.6 km) per day. Closed in 1917, the mill was rehabilitated and reopened in 1922. The mill and quarry railroad

JOHN OSGOOD, WHO DEVELOPED THE REDSTONE COAL COMPLEX AND FATHERED THE PUEBLO STEEL MILL, BUILT HIS NOT-SO-MODEST MANOR OVERLOOKING THE CRYSTAL RIVER FOR A MERE \$500,000. *STEPHANIE COFFMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK*

were dismantled in 1941. Trucks now carry marble down the old steep railroad grade from the quarry.

The ruins of the Colorado-Yule Marble Company mill are fascinating and extend for about half a mile (0.8 km) along the river bank. An operator once stood by the now-rusting conveyor that pokes its head out of a marble-walled building. You can imagine the long-gone overhead crane struggling with huge blocks of white stone as it rolled along on rails supported by the large, marble pillars that still dot the mill site. Farther north, explore the marble graveyard where partially processed but defective pieces of marble were discarded. This area is protected, so please do not remove souvenirs. You can

see marble debris alongside the Crystal River where it was dumped to stabilize the river bank. Near the mill parking area in Marble is the turntable pit that spun locomotives of the Crystal River & San Juan end for end to begin their return journey to Carbondale. That pit was once lined with marble blocks! A Marble Historical Society museum will help you orient yourself to this formerly bustling industrial complex and the town that supported it. Drive north on County Road 3 for 6 miles (9.7 km) and turn right on Colorado Highway 133.

About 5 miles (8 km) downstream, the white of marble turns to the black of coal at Redstone. A railroad brought coal down from the Coal Basin mines to be processed into coke by the huge Redstone industrial complex. Coke is mostly carbon, the energy-carrying component of coal. The coke was shipped to the Colorado Fuel & Iron steel mill at Pueblo. Redstone was a company town, with the mining

company providing the store, library, town band, and other amenities. Liquor was always a problem in mining towns. Outlawing alcohol never worked, because miners simply traveled to the nearest source of the forbidden beverage. John Osgood, the man who developed the Redstone coal complex and fathered the Pueblo steel mill, had a unique solution. The miners' clubs at both Redstone and Coal Basin offered liquor but would not allow one man to buy another a drink. Without the cry of "this round is on me," the endless parade of men reciprocating the favor was avoided.

A severe depression, known as the Silver Panic, shut down the Crystal River Railroad to Redstone in 1893, the very year it was constructed. Trains sat idle until 1899. Coal production ended so suddenly in 1909 that residents had to leave many of their belongings to catch the last train out of Redstone for Carbondale. Osgood attempted to

reopen the town's industrial complex many times but without success.

None of Redstone's sizeable industrial plant remains, with the exception of some beehive coke ovens near the highway. Drive into town to see the Redstone Inn, now a hotel but originally built in 1901 as housing for single workmen. Osgood built a home here in 1903, a not-so-modest castle named Cleveholm Manor, for a mere \$500,000. His castle still stands, though its fortunes have been constantly changing. Check to see if tours or lodging might be available. If not, you can glimpse the castle south of town across the river through the trees. Continue north on Colorado 133.

Carbondale sits at the north end of the Crystal River where its waters empty into the Roaring Fork River. Carbondale's roots are agricultural, though its history was strongly influenced by Aspen's silver mines, Redstone's coal mines, and Marble's

**A FLY FISHERMAN TRIES HIS LUCK ON
THE FRYINGPAN RIVER NEAR BASALT.
DIXIE GRILLEY/SHUTTERSTOCK**





quarries. The first settlers arrived in the 1880s and Carbondale was incorporated in 1888. Three railroads—the Crystal River, the Colorado Midland, and the Denver & Rio Grande—once served the town, but none remain. Agriculture has declined in importance, as Carbondale is flanked by two huge tourist destinations: Aspen and Glenwood Springs. Learn about Carbondale’s agricultural and coal-mining past at the Thompson House Museum. At the north end of Carbondale turn right from Colorado 133 onto Colorado Highway 82 bound for Aspen.

Basalt was a junction on the spaghetti-like complexity of Colorado’s railroad network. Denver & Rio Grande trains from Glenwood Springs whistled through Basalt on their way to Aspen. The Colorado Midland’s death-defying crossing of the continental divide at

Hagerman Tunnel brought its trains to Basalt, where some trains continued west to Grand Junction and others branched south to Aspen.

Colorado 82 bypasses downtown Basalt. To drive through downtown, make a left turn onto the first exit for Two Rivers Road. If you’d rather not drive unpaved mountain roads, continue eastbound on Two Rivers Road until it joins with Colorado 82 again toward Aspen and skip to the section titled Ashcroft. Otherwise continue your journey to Ruedi Reservoir and Ivanhoe Lake.

From Two Rivers Road, make a left turn (northeast) onto Midland Ave. which becomes Frying Pan Road. Drive east on Frying Pan Road (County Road 4, Forest Road 105) which mostly follows the Colorado Midland Railway grade. You’ll pass Ruedi Reservoir,

IN 1953, THE ASHCROFT TOWN SITE WAS DEEDED TO THE FOREST SERVICE. IN 1974, THE ASPEN HISTORICAL SOCIETY BEGAN A PROJECT TO RESTORE AND PRESERVE ITS REMAINING BUILDINGS.

KRISTI BLOKHIN/SHUTTERSTOCK



**A VIEW EAST ALONG COOPER AVE. IN DOWNTOWN
ASPEN. THE SKI AREA IS VISIBLE IN THE
BACKGROUND. OSCITY/SHUTTERSTOCK**

drive by the charcoal ovens at Sellar and traverse the rocky shelf upon which trains perched at Hell Gate where you can look down and see pieces of a wrecked locomotive tender. About 1.7 miles (2.7 km) past Hell Gate, the road diverges. You must take the Ivanhoe Lake Road (Forest 527) to the right and finally enjoy the alpine beauty of Lake Ivanhoe. East of the lake, you can easily spot the lower railroad tunnel, the Busk-Ivanhoe Railroad Tunnel. It is now named the Carlton Tunnel and transports water from Colorado's western slope to its eastern slope. The higher Hagerman Railroad Tunnel is a little more difficult to find so ask locally

or have good maps on hand. Return to Basalt on the same route. Turn left (east) on Two Rivers Road to return to Colorado 82 but this time east of Basalt. Turn left onto Colorado 82 for Aspen.

Just before reaching Aspen, you'll encounter a roundabout. Use it to take the Castle Creek Road south and watch for the ghost town of Ashcroft.

In 1880, men scurried about to locate five hundred optimistic lots at the town site of Ashcroft. By 1881, children skipped along Ashcroft's streets to a public school. Adults waited anxiously for daily mail. Important messages were swiftly conveyed on the electric telegraph wire. By 1885,

its population peaked at 2,500, though many left during the harsh winters. Along Ashcroft's lively streets, miners stumbled out of seventeen saloons, traveling salesmen struggled with sample cases at eight hotels, and families went bowling. But the sound of the train whistle echoing up the valley from Aspen, just downstream along Castle Creek, was the beginning of the end for Ashcroft, and today it is a ghost town.

In 1953, the town was deeded to the Forest Service and, in 1974, the Aspen Historical Society began a project to restore and preserve its remaining buildings. There are few Colorado ghost



towns with Ashcroft's large stand of old buildings. More importantly, Ashcroft is Colorado's most easily accessed ghost town of its size. It is just 10 miles (16.1 km) south of Aspen along a paved road and is handicap accessible. If you want to experience an authentic Colorado ghost town without an adventurous road trip, Ashcroft is your destination. Retrace your steps back to the roundabout to continue into Aspen.

In 1879, prospectors discovered silver in the Roaring Fork Valley, nestled between the Sawatch Range and Elk Mountains, and Aspen was incorporated just a year later. Mines bustled with activity and a smelter gushed noxious

fumes into the sky, creating wealth in the process. All that was missing for prosperity was reliable and efficient transportation. Two railroads, the Colorado Midland and the Denver & Rio Grande, arrived in 1887 and Aspen boomed. It was Colorado's third largest city by 1892 with over 12,000 residents. Trolleys, churches, saloons, prostitution, gambling—Aspen had everything a wealthy mining town needed! The repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893, however, devastated Aspen as it did all Colorado's silvered cities.

Aspen's miners hiked up the slopes above town to reach work and slid down on "boards" to return home. The

region's first ski resort, at Ashcroft, appeared in the 1930s but it was not until after World War II that Aspen's famous ski industry blossomed. After the war, summer cultural activities began to grow in Aspen with the support of Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke. Music festivals, scientific institutes, and instructional programs continue to fill the summer months.

Aspen's downtown is home to many restored historic structures including the Wheeler Opera House and the Hotel Jerome. The Wheeler/Stallard Museum chronicles Aspen's history and is one of several facilities operated by the Aspen Historical Society.

San Juan SKYWAY

DURANGO TO MANCOS

THE DURANGO & SILVERTON NARROW GAUGE

RAILROAD'S RESTORED STEAM LOCOMOTIVE RUNS

AS A VISITOR ATTRACTION OUT OF DURANGO.

FLORIDA STOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK





AFTER TRESPASSING ON UTE LANDS TO EXPLORE THE SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS, WHITE PROSPECTORS AGITATED FOR THE UTES TO BE REMOVED. THE 1873 BRUNOT TREATY SOLD FOUR MILLION ACRES OF UTE LAND IN THE SAN JUANS, AND MUCH MORE WOULD EVENTUALLY BE TAKEN IN THE SEARCH FOR RICHES. DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO BOOMED AFTER THAT TREATY WAS SIGNED. THIS IS THE LONGEST AND MOST COMPLEX COLORADO JOURNEY DESCRIBED HERE, SO IT WOULD BE PRUDENT TO START VERY EARLY IN THE MORNING ESPECIALLY IF YOU WISH TO EXPLORE ALL THE SIDE TRIPS. ALTERNATELY, YOU MIGHT DECIDE TO SPLIT THIS JOURNEY INTO TWO DAYS INSTEAD OF ONE. START TODAY'S JOURNEY IN THE BUSTLING TOWN OF DURANGO.

The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad founded the city of Durango in 1880 as a home for its roundhouse and other facilities. Ignoring the existing hamlet of Hermosa, the railroad made more money creating Durango and reaped the profits from increased land values due to the railroad's very presence. Though the Denver & Rio Grande no longer serves Durango, the narrow-gauge trains to Silverton are now operated by the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. The train boards from the original depot, and half the roundhouse is now a superb museum. Downtown offers both original historic buildings, including the 1887 Strater Hotel, as well as new buildings constructed in the style of the old. Though not in downtown, you can tour the Animas Museum.

Durango's Fort Lewis College began as an Indian school, established in 1891 after the Army's fort was deactivated. It was 16 miles (25.7 km) southwest of Durango on the Ute Mountain Reservation and moved to its present

THE GHOST TOWN OF ANIMAS FORKS, AT AN ALTITUDE OF 11,200 FEET, FEATURES A NUMBER OF STANDING BUILDINGS, THE OLDEST OF WHICH WAS BUILT IN 1873. A WALKING-TOUR BROCHURE IS HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. KRIS WIKTOR/SHUTTERSTOCK

location on a mesa overlooking Durango in 1956. Drive north on US 550 to Silverton

Silverton was connected to Durango by railroad in 1882. Its population peaked at around five thousand souls. Those nineteenth-century mountain pioneers dined at restaurants that served fine wines with lobster in the remote San Juan Mountains. The wealth that gave birth to elegance in this small mountain valley was tapped by four railroads that moved ore to and from three smelters and thirty mills. Silverton has also seen rough times. The Silver Panic arrived in 1893; the 1918 flu epidemic decimated the already-dwindling population; metal prices

fell; a mountain lake collapsed into a mine; and the last major mine closed in 1991. After World War II, however, both Hollywood and tourists discovered Silverton. Movies were filmed here and, as quite a surprise to the railroad, the Denver & Rio Grande's narrow-gauge, steam-powered trains from Durango began to carry passengers again—lots of passengers.

That railroad, now the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, operates the Freight Yard Museum in the old Silverton depot. Here, you'll see a model of the Silverton Railway's Corkscrew Turntable and learn about its heart-stopping operations. You can see,

or even stay at, the Grand Imperial Hotel built in 1883, and visit the San Juan County Historical Society Museum. If you are not adventurous or have run out of time, continue north on US 550 and skip to the section titled Million Dollar Highway

If you crave adventure and are willing to drive on unpaved roads, follow the Animas River northeast out of Silverton on County Road 2. This optional portion of your journey might require three or four hours or more. The grade of the abandoned Silverton Northern Railroad also follows the river. Stop at the overlook and interpretive exhibit at the site of the Silver Lake Mill. The

Waldheim mansion once stood on the riverbank below you, as did the huge Silver Lake Mill. In the distance, you'll see the Mayflower Mill, which will be your next stop.

The Mayflower was the last mill to close in the district—it ceased operations along with the Sunnyside Mine in 1991. Unlike most historic mills, the Mayflower was left intact. It was built in the 1930s when its machinery was moved into place via the now-gone Silverton Northern Railroad. With the railroad gone and old machinery not in demand, it was best to donate the intact industrial plant to the San Juan County Historical Society. The

MILLION DOLLAR HIGHWAY WAS SUPPOSEDLY NAMED FOR ITS PER-MILE COST BETWEEN OURAY AND THE SUMMIT OF RED MOUNTAIN PASS. ANOTHER STORY IS THAT THE FILL MATERIAL USED TO BUILD IT WAS ACTUALLY ORE CONTAINING MILLIONS OF DOLLARS OF GOLD. SNEHIT PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

