

TRAVEL



On the rocks: Part of what is considered the gateway to the Rocky Mountains is the Garden of the Gods, which offers visitors an almost-desert-like landscape.

A Rocky Mountain high



Enchanted view: The natural beauty of central Colorado, which includes Mt. Princeton (elevation 14,197 feet) on the outskirts of Buena Vista, is approximately 100 miles west of Colorado Springs.

Colorado's breathtaking views seem endless year-round

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The mountains really appear to be purple.

When Katharine Lee Bates visited Colorado's Pike's Peak, she was inspired to write the "purple mountain majesties" and other beauties of creation in the song, *America the Beautiful*. Each year, thousands of travelers discover the sensation of having their heads in the clouds while their feet are firmly planted on the ground.

In the I-25 corridor between Denver and Colorado Springs, both scenic and manmade attractions form the gateway to the Rocky Mountains. It's an area where frontier traditions and modern amenities seem to have mixed well.

Known as the "mile high city" — an elevation of 5,280 feet, for those who remember from school — Denver has its own attractions, but is nowhere near the pinnacle for sightseers. Colorado Springs is a bit higher at 5,980

feet. Both pale in comparison with Pike's Peak, however, and other "points" of interest known collectively as "the Fourteeners," so named for their elevation of more than 14,000 square feet.

A trip to the top of Pike's Peak is made possible either by motor vehicle (with many advisories concerning potential damage by excessive braking or use of air conditioning) or by the Pikes Peak Cog Railway (a 3.5-hour round trip that includes a great view of the landscape and mountain wildlife). Regardless of the mode of transportation, travelers are strongly advised to brace for lower temperatures and thinner air at the summit. Drinking lots of water at the top helps make up for the lack of oxygen in the air.

Those not quite as adventurous can still enjoy a view of the heights without going all the way up. Several roads have been given "scenic" designation, and driving tour options are numerous. A loop of sorts is created by US-285 out of Denver connects

with US-24 out of Colorado Springs. Along the latter are roadside turnouts allowing a great view of the "collegiate peaks" such as Mt. Harvard, Mt. Yale, Mt. Princeton, etc. The small town of Buena Vista is a pleasant place to stop, or motorists may choose to turn off onto a county road that leads up to the Continental Divide.

Tip: Many scenic drives carry cautions such as "weather permitting" or "falling rock zones," so plan alternate routes in advance.

US-24 also leads to the town of Cripple Creek, home of an abandoned vertical-shaft gold mine that gives tours and free ore samples which, if melted in a ceramic kiln, will likely yield a couple grams of the good stuff. The town itself, once a thriving center of commerce when prospectors filled the area, now lures tourists with a different kind of temptation to strike it rich; virtually the entire central business district has been converted into casinos.

If you're going...

■ Planning ahead takes on new meaning for Rocky Mountain country. Expect cooler temperatures in higher elevations, and be sure your vehicle is prepared if you plan mountain driving. In addition to potential problems from heavy braking and use of air conditioning, some roads may be closed because of weather or falling rocks. Have alternative routes at the ready.

■ If traveling by car, Denver is accessible via I-76 from I-80. If a more southerly cross-country route is desired, I-70 to US-24 will lead to Colorado Springs. Air travelers can fly into either Denver International Airport or Colorado Springs Airport. Commercial bus lines serve both cities, while rail travel is possible to Denver only.

■ Because the area is also a Mecca for skiers, there are two brief "off seasons."

Lower lodging prices tend to be available in early spring and late fall.

■ More information is available from the Colorado Springs Convention & Visitors Center, 104 S. Cascade, Suite 104, Colorado Springs, CO 80903 (www.coloradosprings-travel.com); the Pikes Peak Country Attractions Association, 354 Manitou Ave., Manitou Springs, CO 80829 (www.pikes-peak.com); and the Denver Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1668 Larimer St., Denver, CO 80202 (www.denver.org/visitors).

Other places of natural beauty include Garden of the Gods, a 1,300-acre park allowing tourists free access to a place where the Great Plains meet the Rockies. Red sandstone formations are the focus of awe for most, but a variety of flora and fauna provide diversity to the landscape. The Rocky Mountain National Park has a visitors center northwest of Denver, serving as a

gateway to some 365,700 acres of natural beauty.

Those looking for more urban attractions can be well served by destinations such as the U.S. Air Force Academy near Colorado Springs. In addition to seeing cadets in close order drill at various times of the day, the campus chapel is a place for both spiritual reflection and architectural admiration.

In Denver, a visit to the U.S. Mint is offered free of charge, with historical displays accompanied by a look at how coins are stamped by modern presses. The Mile High City has a variety of cultural, athletic and entertainment venues reflecting its historical transformation from frontier town to modern center of commerce.

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