

DAY TRIPS IN THE ROCKIES

Colorado Mountain Passes



Photo courtesy of www.computerservicenow.com

Colorado's mountains are certainly its most awesome feature. Wild, rugged, and unforgiving to the unprepared traveler, many areas of the Colorado Rockies are, nevertheless, accessible to the novice outdoorsman or flat-land motorist. A few trails to hike or drive follow.

Quick Geology Lesson

- The Rocky Mountains extend from northern New Mexico into Canada, a part of the great mountain chain, which with the Andes in South America, makes up the backbone of the Western Hemisphere.
- Of the mountains, those in Colorado are the highest.
- Colorado has 53 mountains over 14,000 feet called the Fourteeners, and more than a thousand over 10,000 feet.

Aspen / Independence Pass

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Photo courtesy of www.destination360.com

Independence Pass

The road to Independence Pass lies between Colorado's first and fifth highest mountains – Mount Elbert and La Plata Peak. At 14,433 feet, Mount Elbert is the third highest in the U.S. after Alaska's Mount McKinley and California's Mount Whitney. Travelers can reach Aspen from Glenwood Springs via Colorado 82. Cirques and rounded U-shaped valleys are evidence of the creeping glaciers which dramatically shape the landscape. The Roaring Fork Braille Trail at the summit gives self-guided tours for the blind.

Aspen

Aspen began as a silver mining town and quickly boomed. Today, shuttle buses take visitors to Maroon Bells near Aspen. There are many hiking trails for both beginners and season veterans. These twin peaks are the most photographed of Colorado's Fourteeners.

Pikes Peak

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Photo courtesy of www.shepherdoftherockies.org

So inspired was Katharine Lee Bates by the view from the top of Pikes Peak in 1893, that she wrote the words for the patriotic tribute *America the Beautiful* (Hollander, 1993). Pikes Peak looms 14,110 feet, 1 ½ miles above Colorado Springs and is higher from its base than any other Colorado mountain. According to

Hiking trails abound but you can take a train to the top as well as drive on the road that leads to the top. There is a meteorological observatory that you can walk around. The Cog Railway runs daily in the summer (Monahan, 2002). To reach the Pikes Peak Auto Road, take U.S. 24 west from Colorado Springs up Ute Pass – one of five Ute Passes in Colorado. Turn west at Cascade for the drive to the summit. Every July 4th, drivers race up the 18-mile road in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb. A sight to be seen for sure!

La Veta Pass

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Photo courtesy of www.nature.nps.gov

La Veta Pass, at 9,383 feet, followed the roadbed of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad until a new section of highway bypassed part of this historic route. Veta is Spanish for “vein,” in reference to coal in the area. The twin Spanish Peaks are to the south. To reach the pass, turn west from Walsenburg on U.S. 160.

Great Sand Dunes National Monument

Seemingly out of place in Colorado are the Great Sand Dunes. To visit them, continue on 160 through Fort Garland to Colorado 150 north. Over the course of 15,000 years, winds blowing toward the northeast across the San Luis Valley deposited sand at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The sand was carried downstream by the Rio Grande River. When the river changed its course, the sand was picked up and carried by the wind. The dunes cover 55 square miles. Rising nearly 700 feet, they are the tallest in North America (Winger, 2003). Great Sand Dunes National Monument has a visitor’s center and campground. Towering overhead are three Fourteeners – Mount Lindsey, Little Bear Peak and Blanca Peak.

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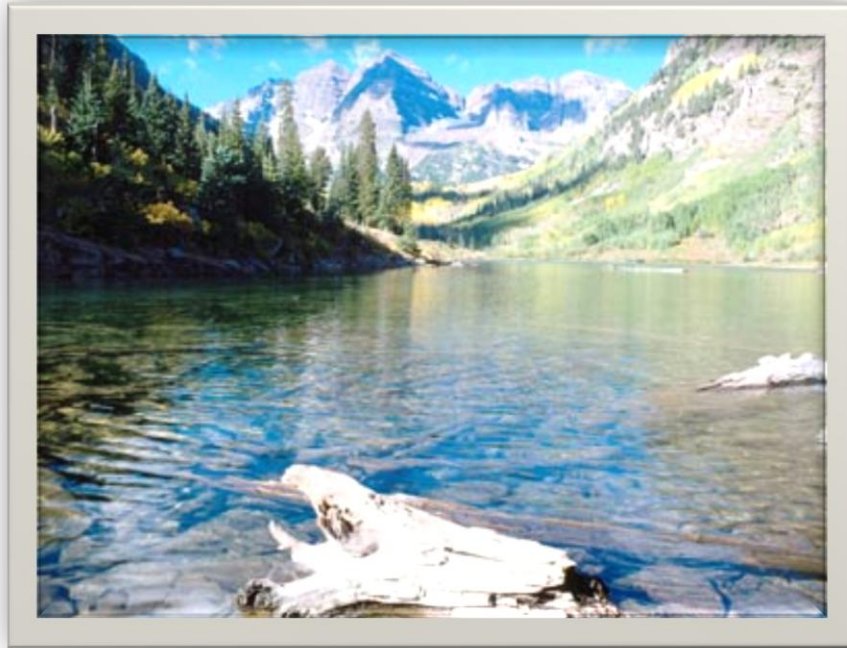


Photo courtesy of www.vacation-rv-rentals.com

These are just a few of the mountain passes in Colorado available to you to explore.

Some people make it their goal to visit every Fourteener in Colorado.

Here is a list of the ones available along the Front Range of Colorado (Fort Collins to Pueblo) which are the peaks most accessible by car.

Name	Height
Grays Peak	14,270'
Torreys Peak	14,267'
Mt. Evans	14,264'
Longs Peak	14,255'
Pikes Peak	14,110'
Mt. Bierstadt	14,060'

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