



The Cripple Creek & Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad explores Colorado's gold mining history on a 4-mile, 45-minute ride west of Colorado Springs. VISITCOS.COM

ROCKIES BY RAIL

Get out of the car and off the plane.
The best way to soak up the scenery
is from a (comfortable) seat on a train.

Matt Alderton, Special to USA TODAY

Interstate 70 is more than a highway. It's a miracle. Stretching nearly three-quarters of the way across the country, from Baltimore to Cove Fort, Utah, the highway was designated in 1956 but not completed until 1992, when workers finished its final 12 miles in western Colorado's Glenwood Canyon. Although construction of most of the Interstate Highway System was finished by the 1980s, I-70 took years longer to complete because of an unusual and immovable obstacle in its path: the Rocky Mountains, the surmounting of which make I-70 an infrastructural triumph.

See **RAILROADS**, Page 16

Railroads

Continued from Page 15

The same challenges that made I-70's western leg so difficult to build make it a marvel to drive. There are high altitudes, steep grades, dramatic dropoffs, deep tunnels, hairpin turns and rocky cliffs that shed boulders like dead skin. Even in the worst traffic, one can't help but feel inspired by the extreme scenery, whose natural beauty makes you wonder how engineers ever pulled it off to begin with.

As incredible as I-70 is, however, here's something even more unbelievable: A century before there was a highway through the Rocky Mountains, there was a railroad. Numerous railroads, in fact. Constructed without the benefit of heavy machinery or modern technology, they traversed treacherous landscapes and impossible odds in pursuit of Manifest Destiny. More than 100 years later, those that are still operating offer things travelers will be unlikely to find on I-70 and certainly not on the commercial jets that fly over it: a nostalgic taste of American history, breathtaking backcountry views and a relaxed ride that relishes in the journey instead of rushing to the destination.

Why railroading rocks

A plane will get you there faster. A car might get you there cheaper. So why ride the rails at all?

Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari counts the reasons. First, he says, trains are both more affordable and more convenient. Those who choose rails over roads, for example, can forgo the monotony of rest stops and hotels. Those who choose trains over planes, meanwhile, can "expect not to be penalized for carrying on baggage or checking baggage. Expect to keep your shoes on. And expect not to have to arrive at the station two hours before departure."

Trains are more comfortable, too. "On Amtrak, you have a choice of accommodations," he says. "If you're in coach, your seat will recline pretty fully, and you will have a leg rest — which is nothing like you'd experience in the air or on the highway. And if you have a sleeping compartment, you can upgrade to have a bedroom, a shower and food service."

What really sets trains apart, however, are the experiences passengers have aboard them — starting with the people they meet. "It's not like flying, where people put their earbuds in and just wait



The Vista Dome car on the Royal Gorge Route Railroad serves up scenery so spectacular that Teddy Roosevelt once said it "bankrupts the English language."

"In some ways, it's a history lesson played out in real time right outside your window, because a lot of towns in the West wouldn't exist but for the railroad."

Marc Magliari
Amtrak spokesman

The Royal Gorge Route Railroad passes hundreds of feet below the Royal Gorge Bridge, seen at upper right in this photo, near Cañon City, Colo.

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See **RAILROADS**, Page 17



The Cripple Creek & Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad wrapped up its 51st season in early October. The annual season begins in late May. VISITCOS.COM

for it to be over. It's more of a social and communal environment," Magliari says. "People actually talk to each other when they ride the train."

The experience is as educational as it is social. "If you want to see how the country grew, how we expanded across the West, you'll see that," Magliari says. "In some ways, it's a history lesson played out in real time right outside your window, because a lot of towns in the West wouldn't exist but for the railroad."

Finally, there's what you will see — untouched mountain wilderness — and what you won't: the homogenous checkerboard of billboards, chain restaurants and gas stations that lines U.S. interstate highways.

"This is a big country. The only way to see it without someone in the lane next to you or an 18-wheeler blocking your view is on a train," Magliari says. Trains offer scenery that cars can't because railroads go places roads can't, he says. "We show places you can't really get to from a

car, and you certainly can't see 35,000 feet in the air."

The Rockies' top trains

Aaron Isaacs, editor at the nonprofit HeritageRail Alliance, says there are two types of trains for travelers: intercity trains like those operated by Amtrak, whose main function is transportation — getting people from Point A to Point B — and tourist railroads, whose primary purpose is showcasing history and scenery. The Rocky Mountains offer both.

■ **Colorado:** This state is unquestionably the king of Rocky Mountain rail travel. Its crown: Amtrak's **California Zephyr**, an intercity train with daily departures between Chicago and San Francisco. The two-night, 2,438-mile journey stops at Denver's historic Union Station, then steams west through the Colorado Rockies, making stops in Fraser, Granby, Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction on its way to Utah and beyond. The train

has been rolling through purple mountain majesties since its inception in 1949 and in some spots traces the same path as the original transcontinental railroad.

"The California Zephyr between Denver and Salt Lake City is one of the great train rides in the United States," says Isaacs, who also recommends Amtrak's annual Winter Park Express, a seasonal ski train that runs January through March between Denver and Winter Park. "It's a spectacular ride."

If you'd rather spend a couple of hours aboard a train than a couple of days, check out one of Colorado's 10 tourist railroads, suggests Carly Holbrook of the Colorado Tourism Office. "Some of Colorado's train rides traverse wild and rugged terrain that cannot be easily experienced any other way," she says.

Options include the **Georgetown Loop Railroad**, which runs 2 miles between the historic mining towns of Georgetown and Silver Plume and offers an optional silver mine tour midway

through; the **Rio Grande Scenic Railroad**, which once delivered supplies to inaccessible mining settlements and now offers three routes along the edge of San Isabel National Forest; the **Leadville, Colorado & Southern Railroad**, which takes hairpin turns over the Continental Divide; and the **Royal Gorge Route Railroad**, which passes beneath the spectacular Royal Gorge Bridge.

During a May 2018 stay in Durango, Colo., travelers Dan and Tracy Keller-meyer fell in love with the **Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad**, which has been operating in southwest Colorado since 1882. The 3½-hour trip from Durango to Silverton — a historic mining town in the San Juan National Forest — features a costumed narrator, concessions and a coal-fired, steam-powered locomotive.

"Our trip on the train was an experience we'll never forget," says Dan, who

See RAILROADS, Page 18

Are you rail-ready?

Before you obey the conductor's call — "All aboard!" — take heed of these tips from train travel veterans:

■ **Splurge for a sleeper:** If you're taking an overnight trip on an intercity train, pay the extra money for a sleeper cabin, John Widmer says; your body will thank you.

■ **Make a pit stop:** Both the Widmers and the Kellermeyers say they have only one regret about their respective train trips: not exploring more along the way. If you can, make room in your itinerary for detours and excursions.

■ **Keep kids in mind:** According to Aaron Isaacs, many tourist railroads offer special trips featuring licensed characters, which are ideal for children and families. Common, for instance, are *Polar Express* trains featuring Santa Claus at Christmastime, Thomas the Tank Engine trains and "The Great Pumpkin Patch Express" trains featuring Peanuts characters at Halloween.

■ **Pack a camera and a coat:** You'll be taking lots of pictures, so make sure you have enough storage on your smartphone or an extra memory card for your digital camera. And remember to bring layers if your train offers open-air cars; even in summer, the Rockies are naturally cool because of their elevation.

■ **Let your mind rest.** Avoid thinking so much about where you're going; when you take the train, you're already there.



Tracy and Dan Kellermeyer's trip on the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad "was an experience we'll never forget," Dan says. "Riding in a historic train car while being pulled by an authentic steam engine was like going back in time."

Railroads

Continued from Page 17

rode aboard the train's glass-topped, open-sided Silver Vista car. "Being able to see both the tall mountain cliffs above us and the Animas River in the valley below us was breathtaking ... The experi-

ence of riding in a historic train car while being pulled by an authentic steam engine was like going back in time. Hearing the engine chugging along with the train whistle echoing throughout the mountains gave us chills."

■ **Montana:** It may be known as Big Sky Country, but the state has big mountains, too. One of the best ways to see them is on Amtrak's **Empire Builder**, an

inter-city train with daily departures from Chicago to Seattle and Portland, Ore. The two-night, 2,200-mile journey includes seven stops in western Montana, including at the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Whitefish Mountain Resort and Glacier National Park. "In terms of setting, it doesn't get much better than

See RAILROADS, Page 19



Heather Widmer and her husband took Amtrak's Empire Builder as the first leg of their around-the-world journey in 2017. ROAMINGAROUNDTHEWORLD.COM

Railroads

Continued from Page 18

Glacier National Park," Magliari says.

Travelers John and Heather Widmer agree. They rode the Empire Builder in fall 2017 as the first leg in a trip around the world using only surface travel.

"We really enjoyed taking it slow, relaxing and looking out the window at the scenery — the highlight, of course, being the mountains once we hit Glacier National Park, which was just spectacular," John says. "Our eyes were glued to the windows."

Although the Widmers rode straight through to Seattle, there are plenty of opportunities to disembark for detours along the way, according to Glacier Country Tourism spokeswoman Lucy Guthrie Beighle. Along with guided tours of Glacier National Park — the park's

iconic red buses will pick you up near any of three train stations outside the park — she recommends a visit to the historic **Izaak Walton Inn** in Essex, Mont.

"It was built in 1939, and the train station is actually connected to the inn," Beighle says. "You can stay in the lodge itself, or in old cabooses and train cars (that have been converted into lodging). It's charming, and a fantastic place to stay if you're into trains."

■ **Utah:** Utah is home to the Wasatch Range of the Rocky Mountains. To see it up close and personal, check out the **Heber Valley Railroad**, a tourist railroad whose 16 miles of track date back to 1899. Located in Heber City, 30 minutes outside Provo, the railroad provides a number of different excursions, ranging from 1½ to 3 hours round-trip. On all of them, the setting is the star.

"Our track goes round a beautiful lake with Mount Timpanogos as a vista in the background, and the last 5½ miles wind

along the Provo River, which is a beautiful river that's in a steep canyon," says railroad executive director Mark Nelson. "The scenery is unbelievable."

So, for that matter, is the show: Most of Heber Valley's scenic trains get "robbed" by actors playing bandits, and some feature an Old West gunfight. "We have some really talented and fun entertainers," Nelson says. "The nostalgic customer service they provide is something that's really unique."

■ **Alberta:** The Canadian Rockies are as rail-friendly as the American Rockies thanks to the **Rocky Mountaineer**, which offers four routes past snow-capped peaks. Although its inaugural trip took place in 1990, the railroad's routes are much older. The "First Passage to the West," for example, dates back to the 1880s, when the Canadian Pacific Railway built its historic transcontinental railroad connecting Canada from east to west along the same passage. Trains

depart for Alberta from either Seattle or Vancouver and reach alpine destinations like Jasper, Lake Louise and Banff.

"Rocky Mountaineer offers a unique vantage point to the most iconic scenery in the Canadian Rockies, passing by rushing rivers, towering waterfalls, spectacular river canyons that are simply not available by other modes of transportation," boasts spokeswoman Nicole Ford, who says the Rocky Mountaineer is known not only for its mountain views, but also its mountain meals. "Guests will be immersed in their surroundings through their culinary experience as well, being treated to meals using locally sourced products inspired by the bounty of Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest."

For an optimal experience, choose the railway's premium GoldLeaf service, which transports passengers aboard a bi-level coach with panoramic views through domed windows.



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