



The Top of the Rockies Byway, one of the highest in the United States, spans 82 miles (132 kilometers) between Copper Mountain and Leadville and almost never drops below the 9,000-foot (2,743-meter) mark. Just a little warning for those prone to altitude sickness.



Finding a sturdy set of wheels for the spectacular 600 miles (966 kilometers) of mountain roads ahead should be your first priority as you arrive in Denver, Colorado. The Mile High City doesn't have its origins in the convenience of a riverside or coastal location; it was born from the hard slog of mining gold and minerals. It's an easy-going destination these days, though, and you can enjoy the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains while wandering among the historic redbrick buildings of Lower Downtown and Larimer Square.

Once you've acclimated to the elevation and have outfitted yourself with some warm clothes, join I-70, which snakes westward into the foothills. An hour from the city, the vertiginous splendor of the Mount Evans Scenic Byway

beckons. This is the highest paved road in North America, open to vehicles from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Get ready for the highest paved road in North America.

The entire road climbs 9,000 feet (2,743 meters) through five climate zones in one hour of driving, curling through the high plains and rewarding determined motorists with summit views from Mount Evans at just over 14,000 feet (4,267 meters). Breathe in air that's likely as clean as you've ever known, and survey the vista before

you, from Never Summer Range in the north to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the south.

Parts of Breckenridge form a modern ski resort, but its historic district boasts structures that have somehow survived the 160 years or so since it was a rough-hewn, log cabin town along the Blue River. Colorfully evocative Victorian buildings stand out against the gray and white of the Rocky Mountains' Tenmile Range. Both the Pollock House and Chinese Laundry House stand almost exactly as they were in 1862, when the first roads and shacks made up a burgeoning but lawless mining town. There's even a strange, small museum here, the Edwin Carter Museum, filled with wildlife from the Central Rockies, caught and preserved via taxidermy in the mid-19th century.

Spring, summer, and fall are by far the best times to explore the Top of the Rockies Scenic Byway and Independence Pass, severe winter weather often shutting down sections of this spectacular drive. The roads twist through the hills surrounding Colorado's two loftiest mountains, Elbert and Massive. Fortunes were made here in the 19th century, and small communities survive to this day. Independence Pass is open from May through early November each year, and driving 12,000 feet (3,658 meters) above sea level with the panoramic alpine tundra on both sides is one of the country's truly breathtaking drives.

Powderheads will feel their senses awakening as the region's best-known ski resorts start to come into view. The historic homes and →

