



# Taking Your RV INTO THE MOUNTAINS

By Emily Fagan #99408, photos by Mark and Emily Fagan

**The western U.S. and Canada are loaded with stunning, craggy, towering mountains. We love hunting these places down in our fifth-wheel to soak in the sweeping views. For us, enjoying the scenery is a large part of what the RVing lifestyle is all about. But the only way to get to these spots is to climb up into the mountains, and then, of course, you have to creep back down again. When your trailer weighs in at 15,000 lbs. and your total rig length is 52 feet, like ours, that can make for some scary driving.**





The climb up the steep switchbacks to the Flaming Gorge Overlook in Utah was rewarded with absolutely stunning views of Sheep Creek.

Photo by Mark Fagan #99408.

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Twice we have been caught by surprise, climbing a steep, twisty, narrow road without an easy way to turn around. Once was on Second Left-Hand Road outside of Parowan, Utah (FR 048), on the way to Yankee Meadow at the top of the mountain. The other was on the Huntington Canyon leg of the the Energy Loop Scenic Byway on Utah Route 31, heading east out of the town of Fairview, Utah. In both cases, we started up the climb unaware of what was coming and ended up having to stop and reassess

sional truckers undoubtedly have all kinds of tricks up their sleeves that we don't know about. But these are the simple things we've done to get us up and over some pretty steep passes safely and happily:

### **Learn about the climb and/or descent beforehand.**

At the tops of mountain passes, most roads have lots of warning signs posted about the upcoming descent. These include the percent grade (5 percent isn't too bad, while 10 percent is very

noticed a clump of tight switchbacks on the map. This was a dead giveaway that there was a steep pass, but even in an enlarged view in Google Maps ([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)), it was impossible to tell exactly how tight these turns were or how steep the grade was.

The book, *Mountain Directory West for Truckers, RV and Motorhome Drivers* by Richard Miller, is a terrific resource for getting this information. Each mountain pass is described in detail, including grades, turns, how many miles you will drive at each grade and whether the road has steep drop-offs or wide shoulders and other helpful info.

We looked up the pass we were concerned about on the road to Fruita and found out the climb was a steady 7 percent to 8 percent grade for three miles, and the six-mile descent was 6 percent to 8 percent with some sections of 10 percent to 12 percent with a few 15-mph switchbacks. This is pretty steep and twisty stuff, and it was enough to make us a bit nervous!

However, a written description only says so much. We have found it can be a good idea to flesh out that info by talking to people, too. Calling the state's department of transportation can be helpful. We also like to get firsthand feedback from other drivers of big rigs that have gone over the pass. When we travel in mountainous areas, we frequently ask locals about upcoming roads that concern us.

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our options when the truck got a little hot. In Parowan, we kept climbing to the top, while in Huntington Canyon we did a 20-point U-turn to reverse direction and go back down. In both cases, the truck was fine, but our lack of foreknowledge made for some unnecessarily stressful moments.

Here are a few things we've learned about how to drive an RV in the mountains with smiles on our faces. We are far from experts, and profes-

steep), as well as the speed limits on the switchback turns (25 mph is a fairly tight turn; 15 mph is a very tight turn). But they don't seem to have much signage warning about upcoming climbs. So paying attention to the map ahead of time can make a huge difference and keep you from getting caught offguard.

On a trip we took last fall between Dinosaur and Fruita, Colorado, heading south on CO Route 139, we

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Mountain Directory West by Richard Miller is available as a printed book or in an online ebook edition.

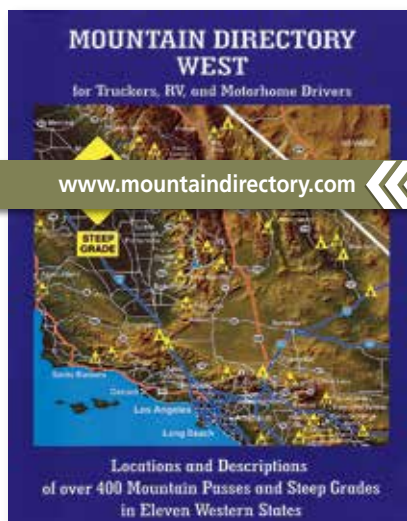


Photo courtesy of R&R Publishing Inc.

Stopping at a visitor center, a chamber of commerce, a hardware or grocery store, a library or any other public building and asking whomever is in there can yield lots of good info. Of course, as with anything, opinions can vary dramatically, depending on driving experience, number of times driving a particular pass, etc.

Farmers and ranchers drive huge rigs full of cattle and horses over mountain passes all the time, and lots of locals have a big fifth-wheel, too. On our trip towards Fruita, Colorado, we

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stopped in Rangely, the last town before the big mountain pass, and started asking around. The general consensus was: “Oh, that pass is no problem; truckers go over it all the time!”

Armed with a little confidence from some local sources, we decided to go over the mountain rather than taking a very long detour around it, and we were fine.

## 2 On the way up, keep the engine cool, even if it means getting hot yourself.

At the bottom of a big pass, even if it’s a hot day, we turn off the air conditioning. If the pass is a long one, my husband, Mark, turns on the heat full blast. He does this in an effort to pull the hot air out of the engine and keep it running as cool as possible. Sometimes one of us is stuck in the sun with the heater blasting away, but if the truck is happy, we’re happy, and we just roll down the windows. Traversing a mountain pass during the cool morning hours can also make a huge difference.

Lots of folks have temperature gauges for the transmission and the exhaust gases. This is probably a great idea, although we haven’t installed ei-

ther of these things on our truck. Also, most folks who buy a diesel truck to pull a trailer get one equipped with a tow package that usually includes a transmission cooler.

Making sure your vehicle’s engine can easily handle the weight of your rig is important. It is tempting to hitch a truck to a trailer that will force it to the outer limits of its towing capacity. While this may work on flat roads in Kansas, it will make for white-knuckle rides in the mountains out West.

When we started full-time RVing,

we had a 2004 Toyota Tundra pulling a 7,000-lb. 27-foot travel trailer. The trailer was at the outer limits of the truck’s capacity. One trip over Tioga Pass at the east end of Yosemite National Park, in California, was enough to make us start looking for a bigger truck. Mark floored the gas pedal the whole way up, and we crept over the pass at 28 mph. Not fun.

## 3 If your engine does start to overheat, pull over and let it idle until it is cool.

If you do need to pull over to let the engine cool down, keep it idling and don’t shut it off. It’s tempting to turn the engine off, as it seems like anything that needs a rest would rest better if it were shut down. However, if your vehicle is allowed to idle, then it can continue to circulate anti-freeze through the radiator. The electric fan should kick on, too, which will circulate air through the radiator as well. You can also turn the heater on with the fan on high to help draw more heat off the engine even faster.

## 4 On the way down, drop down a gear (or even switch to 4x4 Low) and use the exhaust brake.

At the top of the mountain, you get a great view and can sigh a huge sigh of relief, but eventually you’ve got to get down again.

When we got up to Yankee Meadow driving on the crazy, narrow, single-lane left-hand Road outside Parowan, Utah, we were terrified we’d never get off the mountain. Yet the area was loaded with huge toy haulers and motorhomes that were our size or bigger.

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We visited some fellow campers in a big toy hauler and asked them how they planned to get off this mountain. Maybe there was another route? No, they would put their trucks in 4x4 Low in first gear and creep down with the exhaust brake on at five mph. We had never heard of this technique. When we left, Mark gave it a try, and it was a miracle! Even with 15,000 lbs. of house pushing us down a very steep road, the truck snuck down the mountain at five mph in an obedient fashion.

Driving in 4x4 Low in first gear is not recommended for extended driving or for anything faster than five mph. This technique is a godsend on very steep roads where you are driving at walking speed. Anything faster than that puts too much strain on the drive train.

On our autumn trip over Douglas Pass on our way to Fruita, Colorado, the heavens opened up as soon as we got to the top of the mountain,

and it started pouring. To make it even uglier, there had been a recent mudslide, and the whole area was littered with muddy gravel and construction vehicles. Once past this mess, there were several steep 15-mph switchbacks on wet roads headed down the mountain.

Mark put the truck in second gear with tow-haul mode enabled (in regular two-wheel drive), and he feathered the exhaust brake the whole way down by depressing and letting off the gas pedal. This kept the

truck around 15 mph as we rounded the tight turns. It was a controlled descent and not scary in the least. Our confidence was boosted as we watched a semi-tractor trailer negotiating the same 10 percent to 12 percent grades and tight turns coming towards us in the opposite direction.

Good luck with your mountain driving, and don't be afraid to take the scenic route, even if it involves a few steep climbs and descents. Some of North America's most beautiful views are waiting for you. 🏠



Follow our adventures at [roadslesstraveled.us](http://roadslesstraveled.us).

Emily and Mark Fagan #99408 have traveled full-time since 2007. Starting out in a 27-foot travel trailer, they moved up to a 36-foot fifth-wheel, and for two-and-a-half years boondocked their way across most of the Western and Southern states. Seeking warmer winter destinations, they took their voyaging lifestyle to the sea and now alternate between sailing and RVing. You can follow their adventures at [www.roadslesstraveled.us](http://www.roadslesstraveled.us).



Majestic Mt. Rainier in Washington.  
Photo by Emily Fagan #99408.