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Colorful COLORADO

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Photos by EMILY AND MARK FAGAN



Alpine lake mirrors the fall colors in its depths.



The town of Ouray is intimate and charming.

Autumn in Colorado's Rocky Mountains is a spectacle not to be missed.

The vast mountainsides transform into vibrant shades of yellow and orange, and nature's vivid display stretches as far as the eye can see across every valley. RV travel in these towering mountains can be difficult, but the challenge is a small price to pay for the extraordinary beauty when you get there.

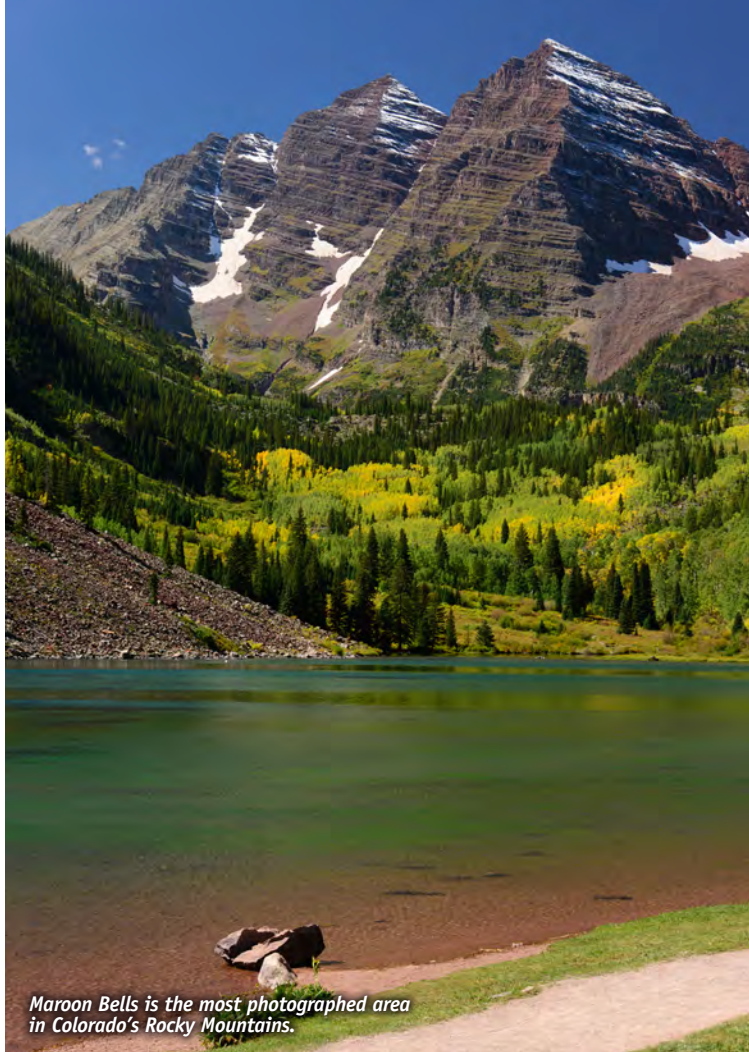
When we arrived at the ski resort town of Snowmass outside of Aspen with our 36-foot fifth-wheel, the first hints of fall were just beginning to show. Nearby Maroon Bells, in the Elk Mountains, are the "most photographed mountains" in Colorado, and they stand in regal majesty on the far side of Maroon Lake. As we ran down the dirt path to the water's edge, our eyes grew wide at the truly breathtaking scene. Two steep mountains rose on either side of the lake, framing the more distant summits. On the far shore, a few trees had traded their summertime green for autumn yellow. Standing by the water, the crystal clear lake sparkled in the sun all the way from the toes of our hiking boots to the base of the soaring mountains on the horizon.

Along the banks there was a hum of activity. Kids played at the water's edge while anglers cast their lines and families enjoyed picnics.

We returned to Maroon Bells on another morning before sunrise to find the lake perfectly still. It silently reflected the image of the mountains in its depths without a single ripple. The pre-dawn hours are a magical time in Maroon Bells because the air is so crisp. The mountains are lovely in their early morning slumber. But it's not a time of solitude by any means. Not only were ducks and beavers going about their early morning tasks in the lake, but dozens of photographers crowded the shoreline. Like a great host of paparazzi, they were waiting for the arrival of the ultimate rock star—the sun.

Maroon Bells is full of classic, picture postcard Rocky Mountain scenery, but 125 miles from there we discovered a totally different side of Colorado at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Here, the Gunnison River has carved an impossibly deep gorge through a craggy and forbidding black rock landscape. As high as the Rocky Mountains seem to go into the sky elsewhere in Colorado, the knifelike cliffs of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison seem to pierce the heart of the earth in this otherworldly place.

Driving the wildly curving road alongside the Gunnison River, we climbed higher and higher above the canyon. At each overlook we stared down at ever more sheer drops to the ribbon of water below. All color had left the landscape, save the black and gray shades of the canyon walls, and the



Maroon Bells is the most photographed area in Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

weathered rock spires rose as high as 2,000 feet above the river. Overhead, large turkey vultures in search of carrion soared on the thermal air currents, adding an eeriness to the otherworldly atmosphere.

At one of the overlooks, the forest rangers had put up a bulletin board with a sign at the top asking, “What does ‘Wilderness’ mean to you?” Little slips of blank paper, a pen, and thumbtacks encouraged visitors to jot down some notes and post them. “Wild & Free,” one person had written. “Wilderness speaks to my soul,” another responded. “Quiet humility,” “Hope,” and “Reminds me just how small I am,” penned a few more. Standing at the edge of the earth, as the Black Canyon of the Gunnison does, inspires introspective thoughts and wonder.

The Painted Wall Overlook placed us in front of an immense canvas of rock that looked much like a modern work of art painted with odd stripes and patterns. At the aptly named Chasm View Lookout, we peered over the edge into the depths of the canyon. Driving down East Portal Road brought us to a totally different world at the bottom of the canyon where the peaceful Gunnison River flows between green, tree-lined banks. It is the speed of the Gunnison River’s downhill flow, which drops a whopping 95 feet per mile, that created the Black Canyon, yet as we drove along the banks and stared up at the canyon cliffs

around us, it was hard to imagine this meek river had sculpted the rock walls with such force.

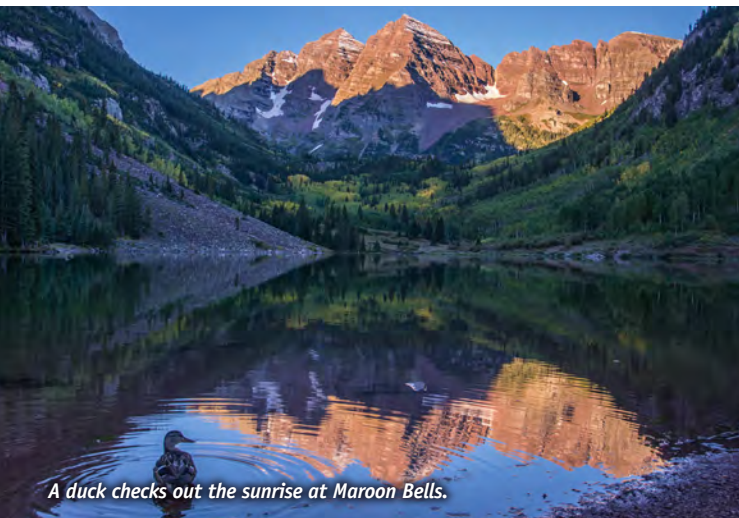
Leaving this mysterious land behind, we traveled another 50 miles south to the charming mountain town of Ouray (pronounced “you-ray”) where we found colors and camaraderie as vivid and convivial as the Black Canyon of the Gunnison had been remote and stark. Surrounded on all sides by steep 13,000-foot mountain peaks, Ouray is a village of just 1,000 people who live 7,700 feet above sea level.

The town was named for Ute Indian Chief Ouray, a great leader in the 1860s who became chief at a difficult time for his people. Interestingly, he was raised by a Mexican family and spoke four languages before he became the revered ruler of his mother’s tribal people. Nowadays, Ouray is a town that radiates historic charm and a welcoming spirit. Both sides of the main street are lined with beautifully maintained nineteenth-century buildings that date back to Ouray’s heyday as a mining town, and every view around town is set against a dramatic mountain backdrop.

Wanting to get out into these mountains rather than just observe them from a distance, we did a short but steep hike to Cascade Falls. This uphill hike was a good workout, even though it was only a quarter of a mile to



Stunning views of cliffs with a ribbon of water below at Black Canyon of the Gunnison.



A duck checks out the sunrise at Maroon Bells.



An early snowstorm blankets the fall colors on the Million Dollar Highway.

the waterfall, and we found ourselves breathing heavily when we finally got to the falls themselves. The waterfall is most impressive in the spring when the snowmelt from the mountains makes it flow fast and free, but there was still a pretty spray of water over the rocks, and we enjoyed the feeling of the cool moist air on our skin.

Back in town, we stopped in at Mouse's Chocolates Cafe on Main Street for a latte and a muffin and looked up at a stunning mountain view. We asked our barista where we would find the best fall colors in the area. "Up the Million Dollar Highway," she told us without hesitation, pointing toward the end of town. "The colors are unbelievable this year." Just a few moments later we were back in our truck beginning the steep series of 180-degree switchbacks that mark the southern end of town, rising high in the air with every tight turn.

The town quickly became a distant world of toy houses far below and then vanished from view all together as the immense Uncompahgre Canyon took its place. This road is not for the faint of heart, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw the bottom of the canyon practically straight below me from just outside the passenger's side door of our truck. But the views were so magnificent at every turn of the road that we ended up doing this drive over and over during our stay. The golden aspens and other alpine trees

were in every stage of their autumn transformation on the hillsides that lined Crystal Lake, ranging from soft lime green to lemon yellow to bright orange. In the mornings, before the breeze picked up, the lake dutifully mirrored the hues of the mountainsides in a kaleidoscope of color.

It is said that the Million Dollar Highway (US Highway 550), which forms a portion of the San Juan Skyway loop drive, may have gotten its nickname because the mountains' gold veins are so rich in the area that a million dollars' worth of gold dust was inadvertently used in its construction. Another theory is that the name came from the exorbitant expense of building the road over these very steep passes. However it got its name, it could easily be said that a drive along the Million Dollar Highway is worth that much or more.

The highway traverses three huge mountain passes on the way from Ouray to Durango, and Red Mountain Pass, at more than 11,000 feet, is the highest. Climbing these switchbacks took us from one dizzying overlook to another, and near the top we could see the remains of the Camp Bird Mine tucked against the base of the burnt orange face of Red Mountain. Zooming down the backside of this pass, our exhaust brake fully engaged the whole way, the autumn colors filled our views as we dropped out of heaven's heights into the tiny village of Silverton.



Fall color envelops an RV on the Million Dollar Highway.



No matter where you stop, the scenery is photo worthy.



Snow comes early in the San Juan mountains.

The few dirt streets of this town, laid out in a classic grid, are home to just 639 people; however, tourists swell the ranks every day. The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railway chugs up the mountain delivering passengers into town after an exhilarating 45-mile ride up from Durango. The train travels only between Durango and Silverton, making a round trip up and down the mountain once to three times a day between May and October. For those who don't want to tackle any mountain driving, taking a trip on this train into Colorado's alpine heights is a relaxing way to see the sweeping views.

Once a year, over Memorial Day weekend, the Iron Horse Classic bicycle race pits cyclists against the train in a man-versus-machine race up the mountain from Durango to Silverton. And every year, a few cyclists beat the train to the top. This crazy race was first run decades ago by the Mayer brothers when older brother Jim, who was a train brakeman, challenged his brother Tom to jump on his bike as the train passed their house going to Silverton.

After we arrived in Silverton, a stop at the Avalanche Brewing Company, where they make their own "elevated ales," was a must. Brightly painted in primary colors, with a picket fence made of snow skis out front, the inviting front porch of this little eaterie was the ideal spot for lunch. Afterwards, we enjoyed a stroll past the old,

wooden mining-era buildings around town. On our return to Ouray, driving through autumn's glory once again, we stopped frequently to take pictures. When snow fell in the mountains a few days later, the whole area was transformed into a peaches-and-cream winter wonderland.

The Million Dollar Highway can be traversed by big RVs, and semi tractor trailers drive over it all day every day. However, there are sharp turns and very steep grades, so be sure your RV's engine and brakes, as well as your own nerves, are up to the task. We found that driving it with our truck first before towing our fifth-wheel really helped.

The arrival of fall's sumptuous colors is a feast for the eyes in many parts of the country, but the dramatic landscapes in this special corner of Colorado are among the best and are well worthy of an RV road trip.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Black Canyon of the Gunnison: nps.gov/blca/index.htm

Ouray Colorado: ouraycolorado.com

Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad: durangotrain.com