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**3 COLORADO
PASSES**

**SOLO IN
NEPAL**

THREE GREAT COLORADO

My kind of pass is the highest point that offers the lowest possible route through a mountain range or ridge. In Colorado, we have more than 20 unimproved routes artistically littered by nature with rocks, dirt and sand. Civil engineers have paved more than double that number for even more exploration. As a bona fide “Pass Bagger” (collector of passes), I’ve ridden or at least attempted most of them. When I turned 40 a few years back I even attempted to ride 40 passes in 40 hours, “just because.” I made 37 before snow and fatigue put an end to my folly.

Every pass has a story and an adventure, such as when the rock-laden *Tomichi Pass* sent my *Triumph Scrambler* and me tumbling home, prior to reaching its summit. But there are no hard feelings... and it’s still on my dance card. One could easily collect a half dozen passes crisscrossing Colorado from Denver to Vail between the I-70 and 285, and many do during the yearly *100K Ride* where riders collect as much as 100,000 vertical feet, one pass at a time, in a single day. For this reason, selecting favorites is an impossible task. Instead, I’ll tell you about areas demonstrating Colorado’s diversity and splendor.

MOSQUITO PASS

They say you never forget your first. Mine was the unimproved *Mosquito Pass*, between Fairplay and Leadville. It wears an “Open for Business” sign only a few months a year, due to abundant snow. There are significantly easier ways to ease into off-road pass riding, but once you conquer *Mosquito* things definitely get easier. The Fairplay side has large rocks, deep ruts and an excess of running water that can challenge even the toughest riders, which I’m not. But I held my own. Familiarity with traversing waterfalls is definitely a plus, another skill I lacked. In many sections, it’s more a hill climb than a trail.

Imogene Pass, the highest pass in the San Juan Mountains, connects Telluride and Ouray and sits within the grandeur of the Alpine Loop.

It appears any problem can be solved with a tire iron, a thimble and some twine!

IMOGENE PASS
ELEVATION 13114 FEET

PASSES TO RIDE

by Joe Trey



The Scrambler in its natural habitat.

Eligible bachelors keeping a safe distance from Bridal Veil falls outside Telluride.



The Leadville side has smaller rocks and more manageable switchbacks. At first it seems easier, but it requires patience to keep your bike steady on the narrow trail with its steep grades, hairpin turns, and scree. The strain the ride puts on modern machines makes it difficult to imagine John Lewis Dyer, the pioneering Methodist Circuit Rider (horseback preacher) crossing the 13,185-foot summit several times a week in the late 1800s. Preaching didn't pay the bills, so he took a part-time job delivering mail for the princely sum of \$18 per month. He continued his work into the winter with the help of Norwegian snowshoes, traveling in weather that would send most of us inside with some adult-style hot chocolate.

TRAIL RIDGE ROAD/FALL RIVER PASS

It's well documented that Katharine Lee Bates was seated at the top of Zebulon Pike's Peak when she penned, "America the Beautiful" and wrote the words "purple mountains' majesty" to describe the Colorado Rockies. However, she could easily have written it from any site within Rocky Mountain National Park. Instead it was Stephen King who used his proximity to write "The Shining" from the nearby Stanley Hotel. The Rocky Mountains clearly inspired them both in vastly different ways.

Rocky Mountain National Park is home to the highest contiguous paved road in the U.S. (12,183 feet). The 48-mile long *Trail Ridge Road* connects Estes Park to Grand Lake. When the elk are not forcing you to yield to their

path, you will constantly be tempted to stop and absorb the grandeur of expansive mountain fields, multiple hiking opportunities and the lava-ravaged beauty surrounding you.

A lesser known route to the summit is found near the Estes Park upper entrance, just past the Alluvial Fan, an area with boulders bigger than cars strewn along the roadside as a result of the 1982 Lawn Lake Flood. Most people are satisfied to make a U-turn here. But continue, and you will see where convicts lived as they built the 11-mile *Old Fall River Road* in 1913. The road is an easy, but often sandy, one-way ascent to the apex it shares with *Trail Ridge Road*. It has no guardrails, just enough rocks to be interesting, and is bendy in all the right places—in other words a great route! To avoid the flatlanders who religiously adhere to the road's 15 mph speed limits, it's best explored on weekdays. In contrast to *Trail Ridge Road's* sweeping vistas, this off-road alternative offers a unique view through tight, tree-covered trails once only negotiated by Native American hunters in search of the area's plentiful game.

At the summit, you will reconnect with families sipping hot chocolate and purchasing T-shirts, wondering how you magically appeared on the opposite side of the parking lot entrance. Please, offer only a smile, and keep the secret of "The Old Road" to yourself!

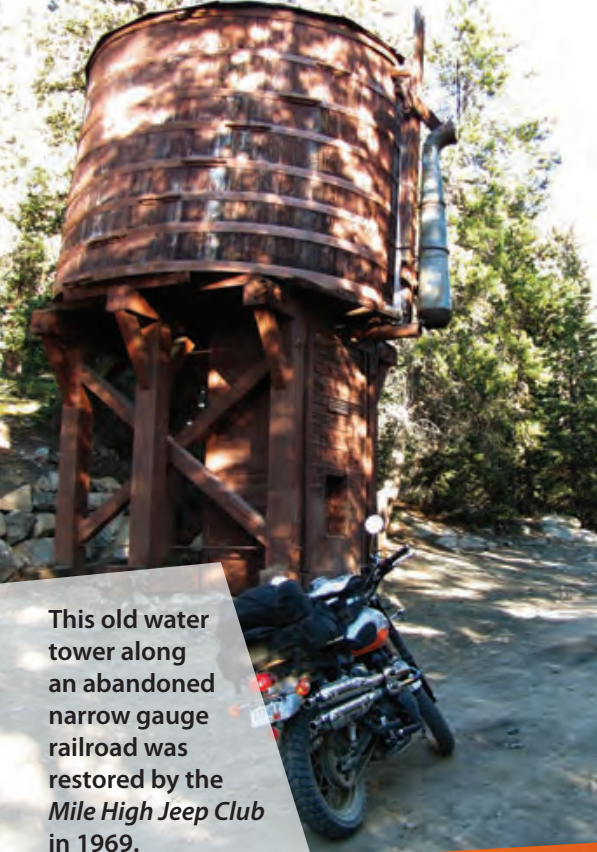
Continue west on pavement toward Grand Lake and cross two additional passes. At Iceberg Lake, a body of water seemingly spawned just for the myriad of painters lining its



Getting every inch of the 11,789 feet Ophir Pass.



Where am I supposed to find two more wheels up here? Oh well, onward and upward!



This old water tower along an abandoned narrow gauge railroad was restored by the Mile High Jeep Club in 1969.



shore, you will cross *Iceberg Pass* (11,827 feet). A few miles later is *Milner Pass* (10,759 feet), intersecting the Continental Divide, which separates drainage to the Atlantic from the Pacific and runs from Alaska to just above South America's Cape Horn.

Exiting the park leads you to the Grand Lake Lodge, offering "Colorado's favorite front porch." Spend the night or simply enjoy a great meal as you overlook Grand Lake, Colorado's largest and deepest natural lake. Stare into a mesmerizing reflection as blue as Paul Newman's eyes and pretend you and Sundance just pulled off the heist of the century as you look back on your day.

ALPINE LOOP AREA

When only the best will do, head to Colorado's *Alpine Loop*, the *Disney World* of off-road pass riding, with a European flare. *Engineer*, *California* and *Cinnamon* passes, each coming in at just under 13,000 feet, connect the base camp towns of Silverton, Lake City and Ouray (aka "Little Switzerland," so named because of its setting at the narrow head of a valley enclosed on three and a half sides by mountains). The ghost towns of Animas Forks and Capitol City beg to be explored as you are further distracted by detours to lakes, basins, gulches and even more passes. Navigating the complexity of rubble along steep, narrow pathways is intensified by the presence of bighorn sheep, mountain lions and bears. Overhead, curious bald eagles view your exploration from heights exceeding the area's highest peaks.

Flanking the *Alpine Loop* is the *Million Dollar Highway*, with access to other awe-inspiring day trips, such as *Yankee Boy Basin*, *Ophir Pass* and *Imogene Pass*. But none are more infamous than "To Hell You Ride." This "road" to Telluride over *Black Bear Pass* has resulted in more deaths than any other pass in Colorado, but for those who dare, it offers some of the most spectacular views of the Red Mountains, Ingram Lake and Bridal Veil Falls, a breathtaking two-pronged waterfall that pours out from below the second oldest operating AC generator in the U.S. Many choose to view it by simply riding down Telluride's main street and looking up, but the view from above is life changing and you deserve it!

Whether you stick to pavement or venture off road, bagging a pass is an invitation to experience roads that were once *not* less traveled; to see the routes that opened up areas and created opportunities; to expand our own worlds... one pass at a time. **ADV**



Joe Trey aka "**Adventure Hermit**," moved to Colorado in 1996 and found his childhood love of motorcycles rekindled. He has traveled all over the U.S., including a two-month journey on the Trans America Trail, from Tennessee to Oregon, off highway. You can usually find him riding the longest route between the shortest points. **AdventureHermit.com**