

Top of the Rockies

With altitudes seldom dipping below 9,000 feet, this byway earns its name. Visit historic mining railroad towns en route to historic Leadville, the highest incorporated community in the U.S. Old mining camps attest to the state's rich mining heritage. The route crosses the Continental Divide twice and traces the Arkansas River.



Length: 75 miles / 120.0 km

Time 2.5 hours to drive or a
to couple of days to visit the
Allow: byway

Local Information

Leadville/Lake County Chamber of Commerce

719-486-3900

800-933-3901

Send E-mail

Town of Minturn

970-827-5645

Visitor Services



Accessibility

The Independence Pass corridor provides several universal access trails and sites: * The Braille Trail, located at Mile Marker 54 on Highway 82, was developed in 1961 and was the first to provide blind visitors with access to outdoor interpretive trails. * The Discovery Trail, located adjacent to the Braille Trail, was developed in 2000 to provide access for people with disabilities to the outdoor interpretive trails. * Many museums and attractions in Aspen provide universal access.



Bicycle/Pedestrian Facilities

The terrain along this byway varies from rolling ranch land to precipitous mountain passes. Bicyclists and pedestrians share the road with cars. The creation of pedestrian and bike pathways separate from the road is not likely to happen because of topography and right-of-way limitations. However, there are wide shoulders along some stretches of the road, especially around Leadville and the Twin Lakes area. There are no bike trails or other non-vehicular transportation infrastructure that extend over the length of the corridor although there are bike/foot trails that parallel the highway in close proximity to the City of Aspen. Due to several narrow sections of the road,

bike and pedestrian traffic do not generally use Highway 82 as a travel corridor, although the corridor has been used for large state bike tours.

Camping



There are a variety of campgrounds along the byway, including many around the Leadville area, Twin Lakes, and Turquoise Lake.

Food



There are a variety of places to eat, with the greatest concentration of places in Leadville. Steak dinners, Mexican food, cafés, pizza places, and fast food are all available along the byway.

Gasoline



Gasoline and other automotive services are available along the byway.

Information



There are many interpretive signs located at various points of interest along the byway. In addition to this, the Leadville Chamber of Commerce, located at 809 Harrison Avenue, provides a wide variety of information. Aspen's main visitor center is at the Aspen Chamber Resort Association. Hours are Monday - Friday, 8:30 am to 5 pm, closed weekends. Please visit the Wheeler Opera House during these times. It is a complete tourist and visitor center offering advice about the Aspen area, including skiing, tourism information, directions and maps, travel timetables, and all general tourism information. Hours are Monday through Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm.

Lodging



The greatest number of lodging facilities are located in Leadville. Inns, lodges, historic hotels, cottages, campgrounds, and motels/hotels are available along the byway.

Phone



Public phones are available along this byway.

Restrooms



There are toilet facilities along this byway.

Retail



There are places to shop along the byway.

Special Considerations

This state-maintained paved road climbs from 8,000 feet to over 11,300 feet above sea level where snowfall can exceed 360 inches per year. Under these conditions you might expect significant accessibility limitations, but actually the roads are hardly ever closed. The only part that ever closes is the Vail Pass segment of I-70. When this happens, you

can bypass it by taking State Highways 24 and 91, which does take a little more time to travel.

In May 2007, the byway acquired a new stretch of road that extends west from Twin Lakes to Aspen. Just over 40 miles, this particular part of the route is only state designated for now.

Due to the amount of snowfall along the byway, use normal winter precautions when traveling this route. Most facilities remain open year-round, with the exception of some of the pullouts and displays located at higher elevations. They disappear under plow-caused snow banks.

State Highway 82 over Independence Pass is a two-lane paved road maintained by the Colorado Dept. of Transportation (CDOT). Road widths average 22 to 24 feet with few passing zones between Twin Lakes and Aspen but at least 135 turnouts where slower traffic can pull off the road surface. Vehicles are limited to 35 feet or less which keeps semi-trailer traffic off the road but allows for all but the largest recreational vehicles. Prolific signage informs drivers of mountainous driving conditions and safety issues. Safety information is also available on CDOT and partner websites.

Please note:

- Wildfires are an ever-present danger during the summer. Please obey posted signs regarding campfires, and do not throw cigarettes out of car windows.
- Abandoned mines are extremely dangerous. Do not explore them.
- Respect property owners' rights. Do not trespass or litter.
- This byway traverses high mountain passes, so be prepared for all types of weather.
- High altitudes bring increased sun exposure and reduced oxygen, so please wear sunscreen and sunglasses, and don't overexert yourself.
- Temperatures are also cooler in the high altitudes, so be prepared for cold mornings, even in the high summer months.

Restrictions

Highway 82, the Independence Pass Road between Twin Lakes and Aspen, is closed during the winter months at a point some 5 miles beyond the southwestern terminus of the byway.

The route between Twin Lakes and the eastern boundary of the City of Aspen is limited to vehicles of 35 feet in length or less.

Seasons

Best Time to Drive

From late May to October, against a backdrop of vast snowcapped peaks, visitors conquer the "Top of the Rockies" as they cross the Continental Divide.

High Season

Byway visitors attracted by the spectacular fall colors may experience higher traffic in September at the height of the annual fall color change.

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Summer

Summer is a pleasant time to drive the byway; it's filled with cool temperatures, thick stands of pine trees, shining mountain lakes, and numerous activities in Leadville.

Winter

Due to the 12,095-foot elevation at the summit of Independence Pass and heavy winter snowfall, this segment is open from Memorial Day weekend to when snow falls in late October or early November. Signs along the pass indicate if the road is open.

Map and Directions



Legend:

 Point of Interest	 Campground	 Featured Byway	 Water	 State Border
 Park	 Picnic/Rest Area	 America's Byways	 Wildlife Refuge	 Urban Area
 Mountain	 Interstate	 Other Byway	 Wilderness Area	 Tribal Nation
 City	 U.S. Highway	 Other Road	 Other Federal Lands	 Military Base
 Capital	 State Highway	 Trail	 Other State Lands	

Driving Directions

This byway branches out in three directions from Leadville.

Leadville to Eagle's Nest Wilderness Area

- From Leadville take CO-91 north past Copper Mountain Ski Resort to the border of Eagle's Nest Wilderness Area, where this leg of the byway ends.

Leadville to I-70

- From Leadville take on US-24 north to Minturn.
- Continue north on US-24 to I-70 where this leg of the byway ends.

Leadville to Aspen


- From Leadville, travel south on US-24 and turn west on CO-82 (Independence Pass Road).
- This road takes you just past Aspen to Maroon Creek Bridge, where this segment of the byway ends.

Getting to the Byway



Nearby cities

Denver, CO (101 miles / 162.54 km, 1 hour 40 minutes)

Start:  4600 Washington St.
N 39.780° W 104.979° [?]

Directions:

- Travel west on I-70 to the Copper Mountain exit at the intersection of I-70 and CO-91 (Milepost 195).
- Exit at Copper Mountain and travel south on CO-91, the Top of the Rockies Scenic and Historic Byway.

Junction with byway: * Exit 195 from I-70 onto CO-91 near Copper Mountain, CO
N 39.504° W 106.141° [?]



Road Trip: Independence Pass--A Journey through History's Most Scenic Working Landscape

Departure: Holden/Marolt Mining and Ranching Museum, Colorado

Destination: Independence Pass Summit to Twin Lakes, Colorado

Time to allow: 1 day

Surrounded by stunning scenery only visible at altitudes that rarely drop below 9,000 feet and climb up to 12,095 feet, Independence Pass epitomizes the scenic beauty underlying the rich natural resources of the west. Travel along Highway 82 between Twin Lakes and Aspen and begin to understand how this rugged area, so breathtaking and serene, was the livelihood for many miners seeking their fortune. The route can be traveled between Memorial Day and early November, but is best seen during fall foliage season as vibrant reds and ambers set the mountainsides on fire with color. Please be prepared for high altitude climate and bring extra clothes, coats, sunscreen and water. The weather can change in a matter of moments.

Day 1

- **Start: Holden/Marolt Mining and Ranching Museum**

In 1891, the Holden Lixiviation Mill sprawled over 22 acres at the edge of Aspen, boasting state-of-the-art technology and industrial design. Just 14 months after the new plant opened, Congress demonetized silver and the mill went bankrupt. Mike Marolt purchased the property for a dollar in the 1940 as a family ranch. This unique site tells the stories of both Aspen's mining and ranching heritage.

- **Navigation: Tagert Lake Area**

From 10 minutes / 6 mi (9.6 km)
previous
stop:

Directions: Leave the museum on Music School Lane and turn right onto Highway 82. Follow directional signs for Highway 82 through the City of Aspen traveling approximately 6 miles to the Tagert Lake area.

The Tagert Lake Area, private property around mile marker 47, is dominated by a pair of man-made lakes, one of which has been in place since the property was homesteaded in the 19th century. At this point the roadside views become dominated by mature aspen groves, and the Lincoln Creek drainage is clearly discernible.

- **Navigation: The Narrows-Lincoln Creek Area**

From 10 minutes / 1 mi (1.6 km)
previous
stop:

Directions: Continue driving east on Highway 82 to the Narrows - Lincoln Creek Area is located between mile markers 48 and 49.

The Narrows-Lincoln Creek Area is the first point where the road narrows dramatically. Here, the road clings to the cliff on one side, and on the other yields a precipitous drop-off to the river canyon below. There are wide views of Mount Shimer, the Difficult Creek Drainage, and the mixed deciduous/coniferous forest along the river.

- **Navigation: The Lincoln Creek -Lost Man Area**

From 5 minutes / 1 mi (1.6 km)
previous
stop:

Directions: Continue driving east from the Narrows-Lincoln Creek Area on Highway 82 to view the Lincoln-Lost Man area between mile markers 50 and 55.

The Lincoln Creek-Lost Man area is characterized by a narrow river canyon and closed-in vegetation. The river is revealed in glimpses through the trees, while occasionally travelers can see longer views as the road traverses a second set of narrows just below the Lincoln Creek Road turnoff. Visitors may even glimpse the Grottoes area where the river tumbles down through spectacular eroded rock formations.

- **Stop 1: Braille and Discovery Trails**

From previous stop: 10 minutes / 3 mi (4.8 km)

Directions: Continue driving east on Highway 82 from the Lincoln Creek-Lost Man Area to the Braille/Discovery Trail parking area located at mile marker 54.

Suggested time at this stop: 1 hour

The Braille Trail, built in 1961, was the first trail developed specifically for visitors who are blind. The trail winds through dense forest and crosses a mountain stream while providing information about the local ecosystem and geological formations in the area. Visitors are encouraged to experience the ecosystem through touch, sound, smell, and even taste.

The Discovery Trail, developed in 2000, provides a similar experience for visitors who are disabled.

- **Stop 2: Independence Town Site and Ghost Town**

From previous stop: 15 minutes / 3 mi (4.8 km)

Directions: Continue heading east on Highway 82 from the Braille/Discovery trail parking area approximately three miles to the Independence Town Site parking area located on the right side of the road.

Suggested time at this stop: 2 hours

The history of Independence Pass is steeped in incredible beauty and natural resources that led miners in search of fortune to settle near the top of the west side of Independence Pass. Legend has it that prospectors hit a rich vein of gold on July 4, 1879 and named the claim, and the tent city around it, Independence. The Independence Town Site and Ghost Town is a walk back to the 1880's and helps visitors grasp the reality of living and mining in a harsh environment with an altitude of 10,830 feet. The Aspen Historical Society and the USFS provide a self-guided tour of the Independence Town Site, a thriving mining town and stagecoach stop along the Independence Toll Road.

- **Stop 3: Upper Lost Man Trailhead Interpretive Site**

From previous stop: 15 minutes / 2.5 mi (4.0 km)

Directions: From the Independence Town Site parking area, continue heading east towards the summit of Independence Pass for approximately 2.5 miles to the Upper Lost Man Trailhead Interpretive Site, located at mile marker 59.5. The Interpretive site is located on the right side of the road directly across from the Upper Lost Man Trailhead.

Suggested time at this stop: 10 minutes

As visitors approach the Upper Lost Man Trailhead Interpretive Site, the highway distantly becomes visible as it hangs onto the edge of the steep mountainside near the summit. A stop at the interpretive site directly across from the parking lot to the trailhead will help travelers understand the historic construction of the Independence Pass road, and also the stabilization work and revegetation, which began in 1996.

- **End: Independence Pass Summit to Twin Lakes**

From previous stop: 8 minutes / 1.5 mi (2.4 km)

Directions: Pull out of the Upper Lost Man Trailhead Interpretive Site and continue east on Highway 82 toward the summit of Independence Pass. The Independence Pass parking area and scenic overlook are located on the right side of road.

At the Independence Pass Summit, elevation 12,095 feet, visitors will be awestruck as they realize they are completely surrounded by the largest collection of 13,000 and 14,000 foot mountain peaks in the nation, truly at the "Top of the Rockies." The slow, steep descent towards Twin Lakes showcases stunning views of the Arkansas River valley and the Collegiate Range. As the road descends into the valley, it meanders through dense vegetation with glimpses of Lake Creek raging through its channel off to the right side of the road. As visitors drive to Twin Lakes, they will have truly experienced the history of the west and its natural resources brought to life by the spectacular and rugged landscape of Independence Pass.

Totals for Day 1

Total Distance Traveled: 18 miles / 28.8 km

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Total Travel Time: 1 hour 13 minutes

Total Stopping Time: 3 hours 10 minutes