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Rocky Mountain Railroads

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO UNFORGETTABLE COLORADO GETAWAYS

THE LURE Standing in an open-topped train car, I crane my neck back to look up at soaring rock walls. More than 1,000 feet above, the world's highest suspension bridge frames a crescent moon slowly arcing across a sliver of pink sky bound between the canyon's rims. Once a year, BASE jumpers leap from that bridge, deploy their

parachutes and land in the gorge bottom somewhere nearby.

Most of the year, though, including today, the bottom of this canyon is a secluded wilderness locale. It's just me, some fellow passengers, a family of bighorn sheep and a train. I'm on the Royal Gorge Route Railroad, a stretch of track that dates to 1879 that

EXPERIENCE
THE ROMANCE OF
TRAIN TRAVEL
ON SUBLIME
EXCURSIONS IN
THE HEART OF
COLORADO

once linked Denver with Salida and, eventually, Salt Lake City. Today, the train chugs its way from Cañon City through its namesake gorge—also known as the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas River—and back.

For the moment, the train has stopped at an engineering marvel known as the Hanging Bridge. Here, the sheer walls of the gorge narrow to just 30 feet, leaving room for little but the Arkansas itself. Kansas engineer C. Shallor Smith used metal girders—anchored to the rock walls and spanning the Arkansas as an A-frame—to suspend the railroad tracks over the water.

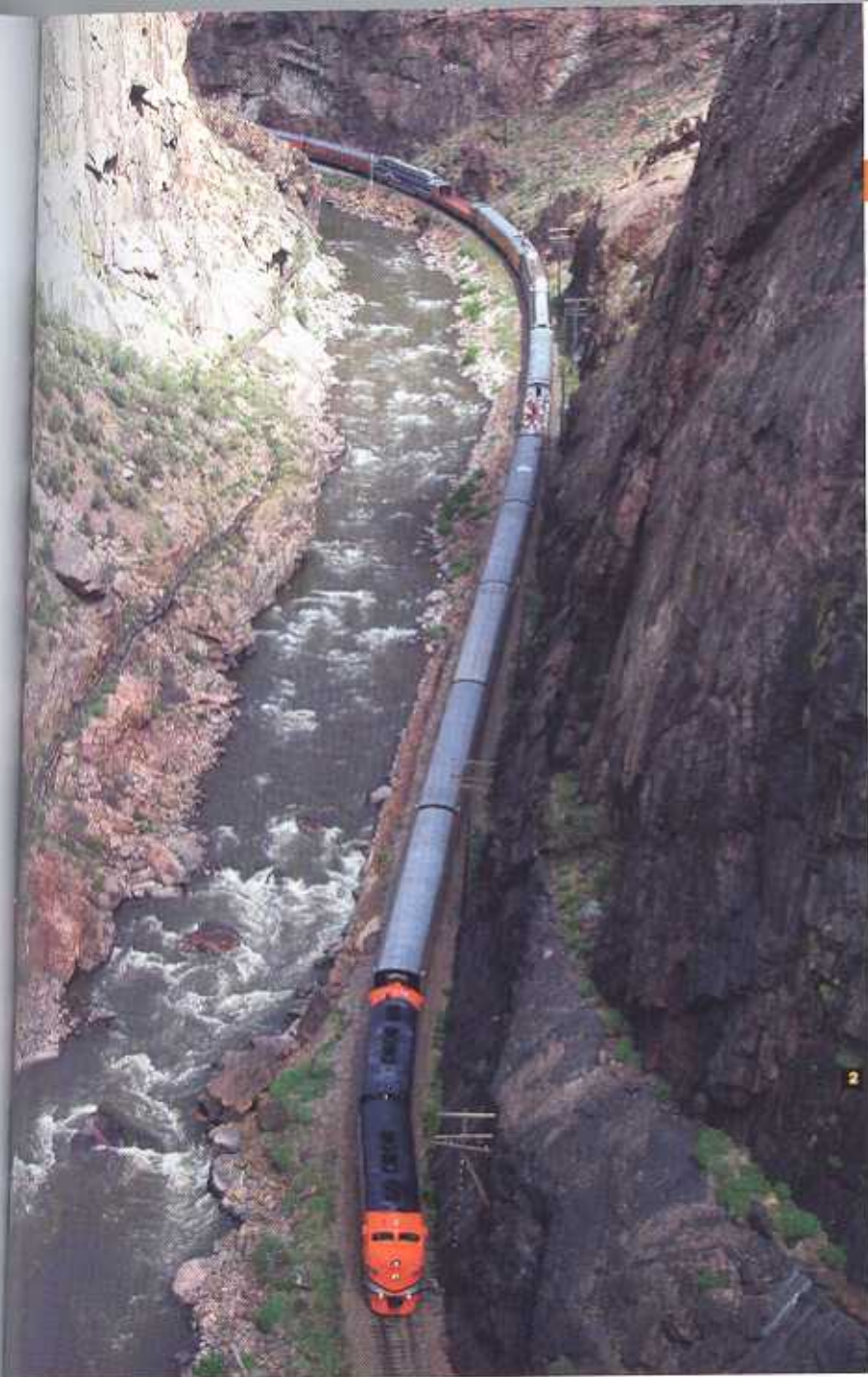
Below, the Arkansas rushes past in a series of class III rapids. As I stare at the whitewater, crashing and tumbling over rocks, a pod of kayakers float past



PHOTO: COURTESY HARRIS, RIO GRANDE SCENIC RR

PHOTO: MARK ORENKA

STORY: PETER BRONSKI



in their solid-colored red, green and blue boats, like a box of Crayola crayons let loose. They disappear behind a bend in the canyon, and it's then that I realize it's time to step inside my dining car for a glass of Merlot and a prime rib of Angus beef.

THE PULLMAN EFFECT Ever since their invention, trains have been a utilitarian and industrial way to transport people,

livestock and goods. But for the well-to-do, trains can also be a comfortable, elegant and sophisticated way to travel—to dine on fine food, to see beautiful countryside.

For this we can thank American George Pullman, who, in the mid-to-late 19th century, had the idea that train travel could be—and perhaps should be—luxurious. He envisioned dining cars, comfortable sleeping berths, indi-

THE DETAILS

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1 THE RIO GRANDE SCENIC RAILROAD CUTS THROUGH SOUTHERN COLORADO. **2** THE TRAIN HUGS THE CANYON WALLS THROUGH THE ROYAL GORGE. **3** OBSERVATION DOME CAR ON THE ROYAL GORGE ROUTE.



vidually named cars and an unsurpassed level of service. His ideas took off abroad, especially in Europe, where the Golden Age of train travel peaked in the early 20th century.

The most legendary trains and routes have become world famous. Who hasn't

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heard of the Orient Express, which linked Paris with Istanbul? Or the Rocky Mountaineer in Canada, the Royal Scotsman in Scotland, the Hiram Bingham in Peru or the Lhasa Express in Tibet?

THE COLORADO EXPERIENCE Thankfully, you don't have to travel abroad to taste the experience. Colorado's own Rocky Mountains are home to railroads that offer up sublime train trips very much in the spirit of Pullman.

The Pike's Peak Cog Railway is the highest cog railway in the world (higher even than Switzerland's famed Jungfrau Railway). Beginning in Manitou Springs at an elevation of 6,571 feet, it climbs nearly 7,500 vertical feet in just nine miles to the 14,110-foot summit of Pike's Peak, which the first passenger train reached in 1891.

Farther south, the Rio Grande Scenic Railroad runs the San Luis Express, which dates to 1878. Beginning in La Veta, the route crests La Veta Pass. After a stop at the midway Fir Station, the train continues to Alamosa before returning. From Alamosa, you have the option to ride the Potato Valley Express, which continues west into

1 ASCEND A COLORADO FOURTEENER ON THE PIKE'S PEAK COG RAILWAY. 2 FINE DINING ON THE RAILS THROUGH THE ROYAL GORGE.



PHOTO: ROYAL GORGE BELT RAILROAD

the San Luis Valley en route to Monte Vista, or transfer to the **Toltec Gorge Limited**, which takes you to the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.

The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad runs from Antonito, Colorado, to Chamas, New Mexico, straddling the border of the states as it weaves its way through the mountains. Dating to 1880, it's the San Juan extension of the Rio Grande rail line and is actually owned jointly by the people of Colorado and New Mexico.

Finally, even farther west, you'll find the **Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad**. It cuts through the wilderness of the San Juan Mountains, following the Animas River canyon. The first trains ran in 1882 and the locomotives in use today date from 1923 to 1925. They run on coal-powered steam, belching thick black smoke as they go. It's literally a scene right out of an Old Western—movies such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Viva Zapata!* (featuring a young Marlon Brando), filmed here using the railroad.

No matter which train you choose, one thing is a guarantee: It will feature rich history, travel through visually stunning locales and an experience that would have made Pullman proud. **CE**

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MOORE IN THE GARDENS

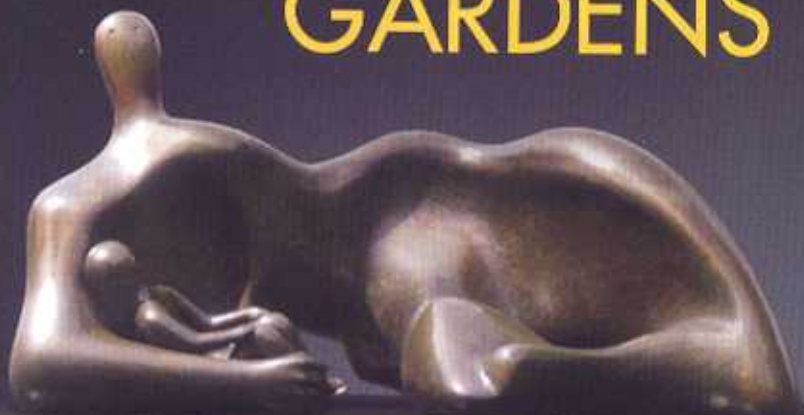


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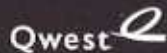
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