

Colorado Trail: Best Legal High in the Land

By Erik Schlimmer

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I'll never forget the comment a Coloradoan made about elevations in the East: "I'd have to drill a well to get to that elevation." An elitist thing to say? Yes. But, was he correct? You bet. With more than fifty peaks surpassing the 14,000-foot-mark, nothing in the East compares to Colorado. And, nothing in Colorado is as sweet as a 515-mile mountain bike trail that traverses eight Rocky Mountain ranges. Taking a southwest course from Denver to Durango, the Colorado Trail (CT) is literally a mile-high ride.

But bring your granny's O2 tank, because CT oxygen is about as abundant as sleeves on a vest. The lowest elevation is 5,520 feet, near the northern terminus, an elevation greater than the highest point in thirty-one different states. The highpoint of the trail depends on which sections you ride. Many riders top the 12,600-foot-level near Silverton. The highpoint of the entire trail, 13,240 feet on Coney Summit, is generally avoided due to rough terrain. Average elevation exceeds 10,000 feet, making the CT the highest long-distance trail in the United States.

It is because of these high elevations that it's recommended you ride the CT north-to-south. Starting in the north enables you to gradually climb to timberline via a seventy-mile-long ascent. If you start in the south you have only a twenty-mile-long ascent to timberline via the biggest climb of the entire route: 5,000 vertical feet from Junction Creek trailhead to Kennebec Pass (11,760 feet). If you are already acclimated to high elevations and in good shape, at worst the Kennebec Pass climb will be a lousy introduction to the CT. If you're not acclimated and not in good shape, this major ascent could spell disaster, bringing on acute mountain sickness, which may escalate to high-altitude pulmonary edema or high-altitude cerebral edema; both life-threatening conditions. You get the point: you'll get higher on this trip than you did on spring break.

Besides the thin air, you have to contend with afternoon thunderstorms that can make for truly electrifying experiences. And, there are waterless sections of trail twenty miles in length. Six federally-designated wilderness areas need to be detoured and snowfields linger well into summer. Beyond these obstacles the CT is designed to please

hardcore riders and wilderness-seekers alike. Once you get to know the CT, there's actually little you cannot like about it.

Considered open for business in September 1987 thanks to countless hours of route selection and construction by the Colorado Trail Foundation and U.S. Forest Service, the CT's possession of premier riding is legendary. You can ride nearly the entire true CT thanks to a gentle tread of soil and rock, utilizing countless switchbacks to ease exertion. From initial construction to guidebook production, the Colorado Trail Foundation has been one of the few major hiking clubs (or maybe the only one) to realize mountain bikers want their fair share of public land, too, and should be provided for. My helmet is off to the Colorado Trail Foundation for welcoming us. Alternate routes around the half dozen wilderness areas are mapped in their guidebook, *The Colorado Trail*. This excellent resource even lists which sections of trail may prove too rough for two wheels.

Mountain bike use is regarded as "heavy" on many sections, especially the northernmost forty miles outside Denver. Ideal riding months are June to October. Starting before summer is a poor decision due to the aforementioned snowfields that litter upper elevations of the CT especially on the north sides of peaks and passes. To bring this point home, it should be mentioned that skiers have logged top-to-bottom ski descents of 14,000-footers as late as May and June. From November to May, you'd be better off with skis than a bike.

Concerning logistics, the longest stretch without a convenient food resupply is the Salida to Creede section, a lonely corridor approximately one hundred miles long. Concerning water sources, two twenty-mile segments of the Colorado Trail can be completely dry and five segments are classified as having water that is "difficult to obtain." From end-to-end you'll cross five major river systems as well as small perennial drainages and alpine lakes. As summer progresses, expect water sources to dwindle.

Once you get acclimated, find water, and get ready to climb an estimated 50,000 vertical feet, it's time to enjoy the ride. Readers of *Backpacker Magazine* voted the Colorado Trail fifth in bestscenery, fifth in best wildlife, and sixth best long-distance trail overall, though our foot-bound brethren had more than a dozen long trails to choose from. With nearly each day of riding you'll encounter alpine terrain, high elevation ponds, heaven-like campsites, and dreamy descents. All this good stuff is traversed via U.S.

Forest Service gravel roads, jeep trails, paved roads, bike paths, and what riders live for: singletrack.

So if you want to take a long-distance ride on the wild side but don't want to invest more than two weeks of your life, the CT will keep you grinning from ear-to-ear. Across black bear and mountain lion country, under the tallest peaks in the state and along miles of singletrack, few long routes match the Colorado Trail's bang for buck.

CT sampler

Raleigh Peak From the trailhead on County Road 97 near South Platte, cross the South Platte River on the longest footbridge on the CT. Some old dirt roads are encountered. Stay on the CT. Cross FR 538, which parallels the trail. Continue to County Road 126 and turn north on this road, now off the CT. When you meet South Platte River near Buffalo Creek, turn northeast on County Road 96 and follow it all the way to South Platte. Turn south on County Route 97 and arrive back at the start point. Elevations: 5,800 to 7,800 feet. 30 miles round trip. *The Colorado Trail* pages 52-57.

Continental Divide From U.S. 50, ride south on the CT. Ascend through evergreen forests via switchbacks to level in a grassy area 2,000 vertical feet above your start point. Many water sources are crossed. Continue along the Continental Divide to end this CT section at Marshall Pass Road (Road 200). Turn east on Road 200 and enjoy a descent to Mears Junction on Route 285. Turn north on 285 to Poncha Springs. Ride west on U.S. 50 to your start point. Elevations: 7,500 to 11,900 feet. 35 miles round trip. *The Colorado Trail* pages 152-157.

Rolling Mountain Start on the west side of U.S. 550 south of Silverton (9,300 feet, a good town to acclimate in). Catch the CT on the west side of Little Molas Lake. Ride west, then north, then west, climbing a meandering trail past waterfalls. Continue on the CT, pay attention to trail makers (or sometimes posts and cairns), and arrive at FR 578, Bolam Pass Road. Reverse direction from here. Elevations: 10,900 to 12,500 feet. 40 miles out-and-back. *The Colorado Trail* pages 224-231.

More information

A biker- and hiker-friendly map set of the route can be found in the Colorado Trail Foundation's *The Colorado Trail*.

Contact

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Vital specs

Length: 515 miles

Dirt: 440 miles (85%)

Pavement: 75 miles (15%)

Climbing: 50,000 vertical feet

Duration: Expect to ride 40 miles per day and expect a traverse to take 13 days

Fastest traverse: Unknown for cyclists (12 days for hiking the 470-mile hiker route)

First traverse: Unknown

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