

# Colorado Trail: Best Legal High in the Land

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Colorado. The name rolls off the tongue, evoking images of monstrous, snow-capped peaks and broad, wildflower-filled valleys. This is the trail that will bring you to such a place.

- I'll never forget the boorish 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 50 peaks surpassing the 14,000-foot-mark in the Centennial State, nothing in the East compares. 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 as abundant as sleeves on a vest. The

lowest elevation is 5,520 feet, near the northern terminus, an elevation greater than the highest



points in thirty-one separate states. The

highpoint of the trail depends on which sections you ride or detour. Many riders top the 12,600-foot-level near Silverton. The singular highpoint of the entire trail, 13,240 feet on Coney Summit, is generally avoided due to rough terrain, though

some choose to ride it. Overall, average elevation exceeds 10,000 feet, making the CT the highest long-distance trail in the United States.

It's 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 reach timberline via the biggest climb of the entire route: a 5,000-vertical-foot grind from Junction Creek trailhead to Kennebec Pass (11,760 feet).

If you are already acclimated to high elevations, this initial climb will only equal a lousy introduction to the CT. If you're not acclimated 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.

So 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 make for truly electrifying experiences and there are waterless sections of trail 20 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 little you cannot like about it, as has always been the case.

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 few hiking clubs to realize mountain bikers wanted their fair share of public land and that we weren't leaving anytime soon. My helmet is off to the CTF for welcoming us.

Alternate routes around the half dozen wilderness areas are mapped in their guidebook, *The Colorado Trail*. This resource even lists which



sections of trail open to riders may prove too rough. 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. On the CT, 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. For water sources, two 20-mile segments of the Colorado Trail can be completely dry and five segments are classified as having water that's "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. Many sources are shared by pack animals or are near grazing lands so be sure

to treat all water with a filter or chemical treatment.

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 best

scenery, fifth in best wildlife and sixth best long-distance trail, though our foot-bound brethren had more than a dozen premier paths 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 buff singletrack, few long routes match the Colorado Trail's bang for buck. Just don't make those boorish Coloradoan comments when you reach the end of this epic ride.

## 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 pine forests, utilizing 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 an enormous 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 (at 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 wildflowers and waterfalls. Continue on the CT, paying attention to trail makers – or sometimes posts and cairns – and arrive at FR 578, Bolam Pass Road. Reverse direction. Elevations: 10,900 to 12,500 feet. 40 miles, out-and-back. *The Colorado Trail*, pages 224-231.

### *More information*

*Maps* 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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