

# Travelling the Rails

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Continued from Part 1 in DUSTOFF



## Part 2: Denver, Glenwood Springs and Durango

After breakfast, the train arrived in Denver about 30 minutes late. I took the 16<sup>th</sup> Street street-car (free) to the Civic Center and noted the 5280' elevation brass plate on the **State Capitol** steps. After a guided tour of the State Capitol and **Denver Mint**, I had lunch nearby at **Dozens Cafe** on W. 13<sup>th</sup> St. This cafe has the best cinnamon scones I have ever tasted. Nearby, the **Denver Art Museum** [www.denverartmuseum.org](http://www.denverartmuseum.org) (designed by Daniel Libeskind, notorious for his Crystal ROM addition) has a wonderful permanent collection of Charles Russell paintings which depict cattle ranching of the early 1900's in Colorado. I had been to the **Colorado History Museum** [www.coloradohistory.org](http://www.coloradohistory.org) before and it's very worthwhile to pay a visit.

I picked up my rental car and drove west up the eastern face of the Rocky Mountains and on to **Glenwood Springs** (Doc Holiday is buried here...somewhere) and the only hostel in town, **Hostel Colorado** [www.hostelcolorado.com](http://www.hostelcolorado.com). The male dorm rooms were \$16, but I splurged and opted for a private room at \$25. This was a good choice to stay because as I was pouring over my map in the living room, one of the guests pointed out to me that the route I was planning could not be used because the highway was still closed with snow drifts. I had a delicious dinner at the Glenwood Canyon Brewing Company [www.glenwoodcanyon.com](http://www.glenwoodcanyon.com) in the **Hotel Denver** (1915) downtown. Next time I will visit the **Glenwood Hot Springs** across the Colorado River from the Amtrak Station. Open all year, the outdoor heated pool is the largest mineral springs pool in the world.

My route to Durango changed, I headed for Aspen, Poncha Springs and westward to the **Monarch Pass** (11,312' elev.), marking the Continental Divide.

I arrived in **Durango** in late afternoon and headed to **Serious Texas Bar-B-Q** [www.seriousbbq.com](http://www.seriousbbq.com) at 3535 North Main Avenue. I gave my order-pulled pork and half a side of ribs-and waited for my name to be called. I sat with a trucker who was from Dallas and he confirmed to me that, "*Buddy, the BBQ here is the real deal.*" The Lone Star beer was a perfect match for the meal.

I secured my return ticket on the **Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad** for the next day. [www.durangotrain.com](http://www.durangotrain.com) Built around 1880, the narrow-gauge steam locomotives pull authentic 1880's coaches on a 90-mile (144km) round trip along the Animas River gorge from Durango north to Silverton where there is a 2-hour layover for lunch and shopping. I bought a Standard Class coach seat on the outward trip and had access to open-sided gondola cars which most people chose anyway. For the return trip, I had a First Class ticket in the Alamosa Parlor Car, the last carriage in the consist. (A consist, in North American railway terminology, is used as a noun to describe the group of rail vehicles which make up a train.)

The cheaper motels are found on the north side of Durango on N. Main Avenue, and I chose the **Alpine Inn**, for under \$60. None of the motels appeared crowded so reservations are probably unnecessary.

Boarding a steam train is the most fun I could have without laughing. Any rail fan likes to ride on trains but would forgo that just to watch a live steam locomotive standing in a station. Part of the appeal is nostalgia and railway history, but it's simpler than that. Look at the face of a child light up when he/she stands beside a steam locomotive for the first time—the massive steel structure, the smell, the smoke, the hiss and sight of steam pressure being released, the engineer in his striped coveralls carrying an oil can to various oiling ports, the whistle and then the driving arms rotating giant wheels forward. I'm just as much of a child too. And to be able to ride in period coaches along the banks of a raging Rocky Mountain river, well, no computer game is in the same league.

In the evening, I drove to the historic **Strater Hotel** [www.strater.com](http://www.strater.com) and took in the honky-tonk music show in the Diamond Belle Saloon, a favourite, I gather, of the western author Louis Lamour.

After a second night, breakfast was at the **Durango Diner** [www.durangodiner.com](http://www.durangodiner.com) on Main Avenue downtown. This is a no-nonsense diner frequented by locals rather than tourists. If you sit at the counter you can watch the grill man prepare your blueberry pancakes and the best bacon I've ever tasted. After breakfast, I headed east toward Chama.

### **Part 3: Chama, New Mexico**

**The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railway** [www.cumbrestoltec.com](http://www.cumbrestoltec.com), is the highest and longest narrow gauge railway in North America. It is east of Durango and probably the better value of the two routes described here. The 64-mile (102km) Denver & Rio Grande Western track takes you through some of the most scenic routes in the Rockies, from pine and aspen groves to desert. This heritage railway offers trips daily and the line crosses the Continental Divide at Cumbres Pass (10,015 ft) from Chama to Antonito, Colorado.

I stayed overnight in Antonito, purchased my ticket from the station agent in the morning and took their bus back to Chama. The reason for backtracking to Chama is the grade is steepest (4%) from Chama to the Cumbres Pass and I wanted to feel and see the full effect of the coal-fired steam power when the demand is greatest. There'll be lots of smoke too, I reckoned.

Our docent was Bob—every inch the cowboy, from his boots to the 10-gallon hat. At first, Bob had what you call quiet stage presence, and so help me, when he first entered our coach, it seemed that every atom in the room instantly rearranged itself around him. He quickly became a dazzling presence who drenched anyone within earshot with showers of intriguing information about the rail line that was guaranteed to be astonishing, even if it wasn't always particularly useful. Later, when one of the passengers rushed in and demanded that the train be stopped to pick up his hat which had blown off the open-air car, "Mister," Bob calmly declared with an almost caloric Texas accent, "*This train ain't going back for your hat.*"

The train stops mid-way to Antonito at a dining hall attached to the Osier station and we feasted on a fine turkey lunch (included in the fare) with all the trimmings.

The following day, en route to Denver, I stopped at the **Royal Gorge Bridge**, (1929) the highest suspension bridge in North America, being over 1000ft above the Arkansas R. Walking across the wooden deck is unsettling if you are afraid of heights. [www.royalgorgebridge.com](http://www.royalgorgebridge.com)

I finished the day off with an evening baseball game at Denver's **Coors Field** and the next day, I flew Air Canada back to Toronto. ■