

DENVER TO SFR VIA ASPEN (EXTRA SCENIC ROUTE!)

From Denver, over Independence Pass, through Aspen

If you have the time you should definitely take this route one of the most dramatic and beautiful drives in America.

*** IMPORTANT!! If you're taking this route up until early June or after the beginning of October call the Colorado Dept. of Transportation (1-877-315-7623) to make sure Independence Pass is open.

DENVER TO ASPEN:

- Leave Denver on I-70 heading west toward Grand Junction.
- Take exit 195 onto Rt. 91, south to where it joins Rt. 24 just north of Leadville, a historic mining town, but a bit too touristy. We suggest spending your time in Aspen.
- Stay on Rt. 24 as it goes through Leadville, hooking right at the south end of town, and then a couple of miles west of town, turning sharply left heading south.
- At about 10 miles, turn right onto Rt. 82 and head west 25 miles or so, up, up, up and over Independence Pass. (You'll see why, on a "beauty" scale of 1 – 10, this route is a "12")
- As you cross the summit, at 12,093 ft., you'll think your pretty high, but on the way there, off to your left is Mt. Elbert, at 14,433 ft., the highest peak in Colorado.
- On the other side of the pass, at the base of all this beauty is Aspen, definitely worth a stop for a leisurely lunch.

Here are some of our favorite lunch places:

- AJAX TAVERN (connected to rear of THE LITTLE NELL on East Durant Avenue) 970-920-6329
 - Indoor or outdoor seating. Their Truffle French Fries are legendary.
- JIMMY'S BODEGA 307 South Mill St. 970-920-9775
 - Indoor or outdoor seating. Creative Mexican dishes and great seafood.
 - Reservations are not really necessary for lunch, but might be helpful if it is a particularly busy time in Aspen.
- C-P BURGER 433 E. Durant, adjacent to the outdoor skating rink. 970-925-3056
 - Good with kids. Healthy, gourmet burgers.
- MEAT & CHEESE 317 E. Hopkins St. 970-710-7120
 - Very creative farm-to-table casual food. Great ambience.

ASPEN/SNOWMASS TO CARBONDALE TURN-OFF

- Take Route 82 WEST, following signs to Carbondale. Rt. 82 will intersect Rt. 133 at Carbondale. Turn left onto Rt. 133
- Go south on Rt. 133, skirting Carbondale, and heading towards Redstone and Paonia, with Mt. Sopris looming ahead. This drive, for the next 40 miles or so, through the Crystal River Valley and over McClure Pass, is one of the most beautiful in Colorado. Set your odometer at zero.

About 17 miles south of where you turned onto Rt. 133 is the entrance to the charming town of Redstone, built in the late 1800's by John Cleveland Osgood, a rich mining entrepreneur, to house the workers for his coke ovens, remnants of which you can see along the road to your right as you drive south. The town, which was owned by Mr. Osgood's widow until the 1930's, has been restored back to life as a quaint tourist village, with art and antique shops and the lovely historic Redstone Inn, worth a visit for coffee or lunch. Turn left over the bridge, and into the south end of Redstone. Drive down the only street in town and out the other end, turning left back onto Rt. 133, again heading south towards McClure Pass. About 6/10 mile past the coke ovens look up to your left for the old Redstone Castle, the elegant and imposing residence Mr. Osgood built in 1902 for himself and his wife to live and entertain their many notable guests (the "B list" guest overflow stayed at the Redstone Inn). After her husband died in 1926 and times became difficult, Mrs. Osgood tried to hang on by taking in paying guests at the castle until she died in 1940. Since then, the castle has had several "lives" as a charming aging inn, with no proprietor having enough money to tackle the extensive maintenance required. Rumor has it that the last owners didn't pay any sales or other taxes, and one day several years ago, the State and Federal authorities swooped down in helicopters and padlocked the place. (Imagine the scene of that government raid out here in this rural mountain setting!) It has since been sold at Govt. auction to someone unknown. And it is for sale again.

About 8 miles further south on Rt. 133 is the Marble turn-off, which takes you on a stunning 6 mile drive into the old mining village of Marble, pop. 131. The town got its name when the locals started mining marble from the adjoining mountains in the late 1800s. At the turn of the last century Marble became famous for the high quality of its white marble, which was used in the construction of the Lincoln Memorial and other iconic buildings in NYC and San Francisco. Now the village is kind of sleepy, although there is still some mining going on. There are several dozen old buildings in the village, seven of which are listed on the National Historic Register.

HOWEVER, if it's anywhere near lunchtime, the best reason to visit Marble is to eat at SLOW GROOVIN BARBQUE. This little place in this tiny town is hands down one of the best BBQ pit restaurants in Colorado. It's right in the middle of "downtown" at 101 W. 1st St. 970-963-4090. Open for lunch Sundays during the summer. Inside & outside seating.

Once you leave Marble and turn left back on to Rt. 133 heading south, it's about 36 miles to your next turn into Paonia.

The drive up and over McClure Pass in any kind of daylight is simply spectacular. Always be careful of falling rocks and deer jumping out onto the road, especially after sundown. After driving many miles through endless pristine mountains, as you pass the long Paonia Reservoir, it is startling to see the first of two coal mine structures rising out of the hills, seeming almost from another world. But these apparently empty places are busy, quietly loading coal onto 2-mile long coal trains, one after another, 24 hours a day.

The second big mining structure dominates the little mining town of Somerset. However, the mine is now closed, and is being dismantled, a big problem for the local economy. Drive through SLOWLY! The second pillar of Somerset's economy has been traffic ticket revenue.

Watch for sign "Jct. 184 to Paonia". About 50 yards past the sign, turn left on Route 187 and head .6 miles straight into Paonia, a classic western farm town (pop. 1200) mostly from another era. Old sidewalks are along all the residential streets lined with small houses and lots of churches. Paonia has become the most interesting and colorful of the three village that anchor the North Fork Valley. The NFV is the organic breadbasket of Colorado, where our state's best small, independent farms, ranches, orchards and vineyards are located.

Rt. 187 becomes Grand Avenue, Paonia's "Main Street". Drive through town to the top of Grand Avenue and turn right in front of the beige and blue metal building. Set your mileage back to zero. After 100 yards or so, the road angles to the left and becomes Mathews Lane. Now you are out of town, driving along a road flanked with cherry and peach orchards.

Go approximately 1.2 miles across some railroad tracks and .5 miles further turn left at the sign to Crawford. Follow this road as it winds back up to the farm and ranch land that spreads out above Paonia. Continue on this road as it meanders through the lush farmland into an arid sagebrush ecosystem and back into farm and ranch land. At the 8.2 mile mark, as the road begins to curve right (about 200 yards ahead you see a bright blue house) turn left on Cottonwood Creek Rd. and head towards the mountains. This road winds through some sagebrush dobbies as it winds up into the mountains. At 4.2 miles the road becomes dirt for the rest of the way.

Keep going straight with Needle Rock looming ahead, to where the road turns sharply right. Continue up around and down the hairpin turn at the base of Needle Rock and turn left onto Needle Rock Road. You're now about 2.5 miles away from the ranch. Follow this dirt road as it meanders into the Smith Fork River valley, with the river down below to the right. After about 1.7 miles, you will cross into the Gunnison National Forest, just past a large unfinished log structure on the right. Just .3 miles further you'll cross the cattle guard entrance to SFR. Another .6 miles and you're at the ranch compound. Welcome to Smith Fork Ranch! Guest parking is on your left.