Headline: Colorado place to go high-plains drifting

Deckhead: Ride the rails to see best of the Centennial State

Colorado is a colorful state. White snowcapped mountains stand tall above vibrant trees and red rocks.

Red enhances Colorado’s stately splendor. Even its name comes from the Spanish term for the ruddy stones of the native sandstone. Colorado certainly is special and it has the places to prove it.

Garden of the Gods is home to many of the state’s uniquely beautiful sandstone-rock formations. Located outside of Colorado Springs, the solemn red giants, with names like Tower of Babel and Kissing Camels, are set against the backdrop of Pike’s Peak.

The Pike’s Peak Cog Railway is the world’s highest of its kind. It’s transported travelers to the rocky pinnacle since 1891. The scenery inspired Katherine Lee Bates to write the lyrics to “America the Beautiful” in 1893. The surroundings include otherworldly rock formations, dense stands of aspen and the rugged peaks of the Continental Divide.

The Royal Gorge Bridge is the world’s highest suspension bridge. It hovers 955 feet above the Arkansas River. America’s steepest Incline Railway slides 1,500 feet to the canyon floor beneath the bridge. Riders descend inside tiny, two-person cages at a 45-degree angle for the six-minute trip down to the river.

The southern Rocky Mountains is home to the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. Tucked away in a corner, it’s mostly unchanged from the day the initial whistle sounded in 1880. The railway is an authentic artifact of the Old West and remains a phenomenal example of the steam era of mountain railroading.

Clinging to the sheer rock faces, the eight-hour journey climbs more than 10,000 feet up Cumbres Pass. The train snakes along a narrow ledge and from here, the view is to the bottom of the gorge. Later, the grassy hills flatten into a broad plain as the steam locomotive chugs into Antonito, Colorado.

Durango’s mountainous topography might only be matched by its colorful past. The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad has been in operation more than a century. Once used to haul gold and silver, the open gondola cars offer vertigo-inducing views along a dizzying series of switchbacks. The narrow gauge 36-inch tracks (standard gauge is 56.5 inches) installed easier around the sharp curves

Traveling through the breathtaking canyons of San Juan National Forest, the steam train takes 3.5 hours to complete the 45-mile route to Silverton, a National Historic Landmark with a fine, Victorian-era downtown.

The Colorado National Monument is located near Grand Junction and preserves one of the grand landscapes of the American West. Towering multihued monoliths erupt from rock layers that are nearly 2 billion years old. The canyons are etched deep into sandstone, while pinion pines and junipers crown the high desert plateau.

Rim Rock Drive climbs 2,300 feet, as it circles sheer-sided canyons and enormous rock towers. Workers used picks, shovels and sheer muscle to remove massive amounts of rocks and debris to create the route.

Cutline: FULL STEAM AHEAD – The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad has been running strong through Colorado since 1880. Image: Bob. Adobe Stock.