

Buckskin Gulch Auto Tour

The Personalities behind the Pans

This series of auto tours crosses through National Forest lands and private landowners. Some of the historic mining sites may contain mine shafts and other dangerous mine workings, most of which are on private land. Visitors should exercise caution when leaving their vehicles.

This 5-mile tour begins in downtown Alma, 5.5 miles northwest of Fairplay on Colorado Highway 9. Turn west on County Road 8.

CHRONOLOGY-BUCKSKIN GULCH
1849 - California gold rush
1858-59 - Depressed economy after Panic of 1857 sent gold-seekers west
1859 - Colorado gold rush; finds on Tarryall Creek, South Platte and Buckskin
1859 - Town of Buckskin Joe established
1860-63 - Height of small-claim placers
1861-65 - Civil War
1871 - Silver strikes in Colorado; coal found near Como
1877-79 - Leadville silver boom
1879-89 - \$82,000,000 in silver taken from Leadville
1879 - Railroad reached South Park
1884 - Railroad to Leadville over Boreas Pass
1891 - Cripple Creek gold rush began
1892 - South Platte Forest Reserve created
1893 - Sherman Act demonetized silver; Colorado hit hard by Panic of 1893
1905 - U.S. Forest Service created
1907 - Pike National Forest evolved from South Platte Forest Reserve

1. Memories of Miners

All that remains of Buckskin Joe is the name and this cemetery, down the road to the right, which in its silence and stone speaks volumes about life of the town and the people who populated it. A walk among the gravesites reveals much about struggles of the miners and settlers against weather, terrain and time. The stone grave of young Thomas Fahey

records that on a blustery February day he left his cabin to go to his mine and did not return. His body was found the following June.

Many of the miners were immigrants from Europe. Images of home and echoes of their languages can be seen on some stones. The stones and gravesites with their ornate rails and gates exhibit a craft and workmanship that has outlasted the modest cabins and other structures in the town. The town of Alma still uses the cemetery.

2. The Lively and Lucky Town of Buckskin Joe

The story of the founding of Buckskin Joe, also called Laurette, comes to us through the haze of a mining myth. As the story goes, a man named Harris was hunting and sighted a deer. He shot, but the animal vanished. Confused and convinced he had hit the deer, Harris looked for traces of blood. He located where the bullet had hit the ground, and there found gold. Other sites have similar origin myths. One can imagine gold seekers hoping that easy riches would soon be theirs. Hearing and believing such tales, they summoned mining luck like a magic charm.

The town was named for Joe Higgenbottom, an eccentric fellow who wore buckskin clothes. Despite attempts to officially name the site Laurette (for Laura and Jeanette, the wife and daughter of Old Man Dodge who wielded some influence in the area) it was called Buckskin Joe by most, and so the name remains.

It was a lively place in its brief time. In 1861-1862 several thousand people lived in Buckskin Joe. It became the county seat from 1862 until 1867 when the courthouse was moved to Fairplay. It had a newspaper, post office, two banks, and uncounted saloons, dance halls and gambling houses. A brass band played nightly on the street corner.

When the Phillips Lode petered out, Buckskin Joe closed down as quickly as a candle blowing out. A few stalwarts remained. One was J.P. Stansell, who made a fortune working the leavings of the Phillips Mine long after the miners left. Another was Horace Tabor who would later make his fortune in Leadville.

In the early days of South Park successful men and women were either lucky or hardworking. Horace and Augusta Tabor were both. They met by chance in Maine, married and moved to the Colorado Territory. There they sought their fortune following the miners. Horace tried mining and found it too much work with too little return. Storekeeping and grubstaking proved more regular and more profitable. Augusta, the steadier of the two, quickly learned to cook and began providing board for miners. They traveled from mine site to mine site, setting up cookstoves and laundry tubs, offering a meal and a clean shirt. In August, 1861, they loaded their supplies,

groceries and household merchandise and moved to Buckskin Joe. Their store soon became the area's most successful. During the next seven years Horace invested in local mines and became the postmaster. In reality, it was Augusta who ran the post office although she could not legally hold that position. Horace became increasingly involved in community affairs before moving to Leadville where his enterprising skills again drew attention. Locals there made him their first mayor.

Buckskin Joe had itinerant preachers, the most famous of whom was Father John L Dyer, a Methodist from Ohio whose circuit covered Fairplay, Park City, Buckskin Joe and Breckenridge. To stretch parishioners' contributions in the early days, Dyer would prospect when not in the pulpit. As easy placer findings vanished and the cost of staples soared (\$40.00 for a bag of flour), Dyer added mail-carrying to his church duties. He trekked weekly from Mosquito Gulch and Buckskin Joe over passes to Leadville and Breckenridge. Neither winter nor the absence of improved roads deterred him. Often on skis ten feet long with 30 pounds of mail on his back, Father Dyer would climb through deep snow and wind-swept alpine heights to dispense his earthly and spiritual messages.

3. Separating the Glitter from the Granite

The use of "arrastras" to crush ore originated in Mexico and South America. Those found in South Park, however, do not remain from Spanish expeditions to the area in the 1600's. The prospectors of 1860 had two means at their disposal for milling placer deposits. Arrastras were cheap, easy to construct, and could be operated by one person with a beast of burden. Steam powered stamp mills were the other alternative. An arrastra was built around a rock grinding floor about six feet in diameter. Wooden slats formed barrel-like sides about two feet high. A vertical shaft supported wooden arms that rotated around the shaft and crushed the ore between these grinding faces and the floor stone. After pulverizing the ore, water was channeled through the arrastra to wash the unwanted rock from the heavier bits of gold that remained behind. The steam-powered mills were more efficient, but also far more costly.

4. A Hint of Where to Hunt

The layers of rocks ahead, tilting skyward, originated during a time when most of Colorado lay under a shallow inland sea. As sediments settled to the bottom they compressed in horizontal layers into rock. Forces within the earth lifted these strata

upward during a period of mountain building about 70 million years ago. Tremendous pressures accompanied the uplift, causing cracks and fissures to open within the strata. Molten rock within the earth filled some of these pathways, others were injected with mineral-rich water. As the rock cooled and pressures subsided the enriched waters deposited the minerals held in solution along the fracture lines. Miners looked for areas such as the one above on the left, where the Hungry Five Mine clings precariously to the rocks. A cable-and bucket system carried ore down from this mine to the road below. The large building ahead is the Paris Mill, which received its ore via cables to the mine among the cliffs to the north.

5. Timbers of Time

Three and a half miles up this side road to the right, a national treasure more enduring than the gold that once glittered in Buckskin Creek, hugs the brow of Windy Ridge. Park low-clearance vehicles south of the Dolly Varden Creek ford, and walk the remaining 1/2-mile to the ridge. There you will find 1000-year old bristlecone pines, sculpted by the harsh mountain elements of wind, snow load, and stingy soils. On south-facing slopes throughout the area, under less punishing conditions, these trees grow in a normal upright position. The oldest living bristlecone found in the South Park area dates, by ring measurement, back 2,400 years. In general, these trees were not prized by loggers. Often found in steep, inaccessible places and useful only as mine timbers or firewood, most escaped the lumberman's saw.

6. Hide and Seek

Remaining in these mountains are vestiges of exploitation that fueled the "extract exhaust-exit" attitude. Collapsing structures, rusting equipment and abandoned shafts pock the slopes. Some early-day mining resulted in erosion, water pollution, and overcutting of timber on public land. The Forest Service actively monitors and attempts to remedy these conditions with the help of the more enlightened modern-day miner. Old buildings seem almost to camouflage themselves with the passing of years as they blend into the mountain sides. A careful look up and to the right will reveal old buildings and parts of others hiding among the rocks and behind the trees.

7. Sweet Home Mine

Workers in the Sweet Home Mine still tunnel for wealth, but they neither seek nor expect what miners dreamed of a century ago. Gold and silver shaped the gulch's history, but rhodochrosite brings it fame and income today. Unlike the precious metals, rhodochrosite is a rose red crystalline mineral formed of manganese carbonate. The purity and quality of

the specimens extracted from this mine are known among rock and gem collectors world-wide. The rhodochrosite specimen in the Smithsonian's permanent display of the world's minerals came from this mine. Mineral crystals form when elements combine in a molten state, then gradually cool in distinctive geometric patterns.

8. Erosion and Exposure

The swath of red coloring on the side of Mt. Bross to your right surely must have attracted miners' curiosity if not their picks and shovels. Despite their ingenuity and boundless energy, miners did not uncover or shape this natural amphitheater. Nature sculpted it by injecting a molten broth of elements between layers of solid rock then eroding and exposing the cooled mineral mass that resulted. Gold did not occur in this red rock formation. Instead, it yielded a smooth, silky feeling mineral known as serpentine.

9. Prospecting the Peaks

Warning: the next mile of road to Kite Lake becomes steep, rough and difficult for some passenger cars. Some of the land the road passes through is privately owned and should not be trespassed upon. Today Kite Lake Campground/Trailhead provides access to three 14,000' peaks: Mt. Democrat 14,148', Mt. Lincoln 14,284', and Mt. Bross 14,172'. Private mining claims still blanket these slopes. Where recreationists now scale these mountain sides, prospectors once scrambled, attempting to stake out and secure their fortunes. Protect their legacy and today's landowners by respecting private property. Many open shafts and drifts remain in this area. Exercise caution when exploring old mines!

For more information, contact:

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