

# RIDING THE OLD RIO GRANDE

by Irene Middleman Thomas

Because I had lived in Colorado ever since I was a hormonally challenged middle-schooler, I thought I had a pretty good grasp of what my magnificent state had to offer. I'd done a great deal of horseback riding, hiking, and driving through the wilderness. I'd even taken a narrow-gauge railroad or two in the Rockies. Nothing compared, however, to the excitement I felt while cycling from Aspen to Glenwood Springs on the newly inaugurated Rio Grande Trail in the Roaring Fork Valley.

The continuous, multi-use trail, a 44-mile pathway with a 2,120-foot elevation change, meanders along the old Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad track beds as a Rails to Trails-type endeavor. It took 11 years to complete and was created by the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority as part of an ambitious long-term project that would maintain a continuous right-of-way for recreation, conservation, and mass transit through the Roaring Fork Valley. The trail is two-across wide, in excellent condition, and has plenty of benches along the way. Mercifully the local rapid transit service offers several bus stops en route for those who don't have the time, stamina, or will to do the whole trip. The buses are either regular, with exterior locking devices for the bicycles (up to four

per bus) or they are "Bike Express" buses — sort of like bicycle ferry boats. The fare from Glenwood to Aspen is just six dollars, two additional dollars for each bike, and the bus trip takes about an hour. There are several stops in Glenwood, and the bus also stops along the way at different communities and popular places.

Glenwood is one of my favorite places in Colorado — in the world, for that matter. It's a delightful, still "real Colorado" kind of place — a small city with a municipal building, a college, and plenty of infrastructure — and yet, most people who live here feel like they know just about everyone. Tourists and locals alike flock here for the blissful outdoor Hot Springs Pool, the world's largest, open year-round. We'd always loved a visit to the pool for a soak after skiing, with our eyelashes freezing but our bodies cozy and warm in the steaming water. Now I was ready to experience a hot soak after a cycling adventure. What could be more sublime?

After the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Denver, I stayed in Glenwood Springs, having spent the night in the lovingly restored Grande Dame Hotel Colorado. Built in 1893, the hotel is located right across the street from the Hot Springs Pool, and is a gorgeous piece of history. We stayed



on the same floor as the Teddy Roosevelt suite — yes, he was a frequent patron of the soothing waters and of the hotel here. After breakfast, I rented a hybrid road bike from Canyon Bikes, located right in the

including a long skirt and long earrings, she expertly advised us on how to load our bikes on the bus. With ten individual Thule bike racks mounted to the floor, the bus also can hang four more bikes outside.

the months we cyclists want to be here. There is a wide variety of lodging available, and some of the wintertime high-end hotels offer off-season prices that fit almost any wallet.

I cycled through town and embarked on the journey — feeling that thrill of pioneer-like excitement I always do when I see the first trailhead. Although some prefer to do the trail from Glenwood to Aspen, most do as I did, enjoying the roughly two-percent downhill grade almost the whole route. This first section hosted a lot of other cyclists and walkers, all enjoying the lush vegetation along Hunter Creek and the Roaring Fork River.

The entire Aspen to Glenwood journey contains some small hills and upgrades, and many flat sections as well. Most cyclists will be able to do the Rio Grande in about three hours without stops. On the other hand, it would be a shame not to stop — this is a leisurely, wide trail with many don't-miss sightseeing and visiting opportunities. Spend the day — have breakfast, ride, linger, ride some more, linger, shop, eat, gaze, etc.

Bring your camera — you'll pass a wall of cascading waterfalls; grazing miniature horses; llamas, sheep, and goats; glorious estates and ranches; eclectic sights, such as old railcars converted into funky homes; too many deer skeletons (you'll feel proud that you aren't driving a car); and even huge furry caterpillars crossing the trail. Benches are appropriately placed at strategic points along the rushing Roaring Fork River, so take a break and enjoy watching the passing rafters, fly fishermen, ducks and geese. On the trail, you might run into other cyclists, but you'll also encounter joggers, equestrians, in-line skaters, dogs in certain sections and parents pushing strollers. I found a back-country Colorado I had never seen before — away from the highways and away from the tourists, with pastoral scenes framed by the towering Rockies just begging me to bring a set of watercolors next time.

In the first half-hour or so of the journey, the trail is soft-surface gravel, whereas the rest of the trail is made of asphalt. Many signs warning of "hidden driveways," but you rarely see a vehicle. A delightful stop at

this turning point would be Woody Creek, where Hunter S. Thompson lived for many years. Other luminaries, such as Ed Bradley, Don Henley, Don Johnson, and John Oates, and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi have also lived here. Just a few yards from the trail, you can have a brewski or a good lunch at the funky Woody Creek Tavern, where Thompson spent many hours with his drinking and philosophizing buddies. At one time, the Woody Creek Tavern sponsored a legal defense fund for Kenneth Lay, the embattled CEO of Enron. This consisted of a jar on the top of the bar into which patrons dropped donations such as screws, condoms, toothpicks, a small toy figure of a man with broken legs, string, rubber bands, pennies, and IOUs. The ambiance here is definitely unique, shall we say?

The trail then passes through the town of Basalt, a bedroom community that houses many of the workers in Aspen. You'll see the local high school and the golf course, and then cycle over Highway 82 and the Roaring Fork River at Wingo Junction. Basalt is well known for its Gold Medal



trout fishing in the Frying Pan River.

Continuing on, you'll pass through a wide variety of peaceful terrain. The beauty and calm were so impressive that I felt myself smiling rather foolishly in sheer joy. My legs tired, but I couldn't stop — there was more majesty ahead. At nearly the end, the trail passes right through the town of Carbondale — a very pleasant former-

farming community, now famed for some of the state's top restaurants and a large sustainable and organic food movement. Visit the tiny, outwardly unimpressive, but oh-so-sophisticated Catherine Store Wine & Liquor, where you'll find some of the world's finest vintages at decent prices. Carbondale is a perfect stop for lunch or dinner, as well as for shopping in various eclectic boutiques. This area offers some gorgeous views — it's located next to the White River National Forest and lies beneath the 12,000-foot twin peaks of Mount Sopris.

Another five miles and the trail ends, back in Glenwood Springs. I got home in time for that shower and soak in the pool, and oh, yes, was it good! I topped it all off with an excellent dinner at the Hotel Colorado and fell deeply asleep afterward, feeling very, very content indeed. **AC**

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## Nuts & Bolts: Glenwood Springs

### What else to do

There's a lot to do in Glenwood Springs — for cyclists and noncyclists alike. It's a perfect hub from which to explore the Rockies. Just two and a half hours from Denver, 45 minutes from Vail, and an hour from Aspen, it's close to half a dozen ski resorts (including one right outside of town), features a wide variety of hotels, inns, and restaurants (including a very fine brewpub), and a myriad of attractions. Visit the Glenwood Caverns just ten minutes from town, where you'll see fantastic stalactites and stalagmites and hear a marvelous narrative of the caverns' past. Adventure Park boasts the country's first alpine

coaster, the Canyon Flyer. Its individual cars race on tracks 3,400 feet through the trees and down the mountainside! There's also an awe-inspiring bungee jump and various other thrills and chills, all reached by gondola. Glenwood also features a pioneer cemetery, where you can see the alleged graves of such notables in Western history as the infamous Doc Holliday, whose grave is always decorated with whiskey bottles, playing cards, and smokes. Cyclists, take in the 16.2-mile Glenwood Canyon Recreation Path along the rushing Colorado River, surrounded by the towering canyon walls. Besides the spectacular scenery of the

canyon itself, the trail leads to the magnificent Hanging Lake hike. It's relatively short (about an hour plus each way) although rather steep, but my own kids did it when they were quite young. We were well rewarded by the incredibly beautiful turquoise blue lake at the summit — it seems to hang off a cliff.

**If you go, check out:**  
 Hotel Colorado, www.hotelcolorado.com, 800-544-3998.  
 Canyon Bikes, www.canyonbikes.com, 800-439-3043.  
 Royal Fork Transit Authority, www.rfta.com, 970-384-4975.  
 Glenwood Springs, www.glenwoodchamber.com, 970-945-6587.

hotel. A small but very well-stocked, family-owned shop, they equipped me with "Annie Oakley," (their rentals are affectionately named after Wild West heroes and heroines), filled the handlebar bag with a lock and key, and gave me info on their free roadside assistance program.

I was off — just a five-minute cycle to the Bike Express stop in front of Glenwood's municipal building. A small group of other cyclists waited there, including a local couple with their two elementary-school-aged girls. They told me they took the trip often and that they were very pleased with this addition to their community. The bus arrived right on schedule, with its off-beat German driver. Dressed in typically hippy/Bohemian Colorado mountain attire,

Nineteen passengers sit behind in regular bus seats. Our cheery group set off, stopping every now and then en route for additional cyclists as well as cycleless passengers, arriving at our final destination at Stein Park in Aspen about an hour later.

Aspen is a celebrity haven, and no wonder. Beautifully maintained Victorians from the mining days abound here, and the pedestrian brick-paved lanes are lined with lovely little shops and bistros. Next time I do the ride, I'll get here earlier and have a delicious Aspen breakfast before setting off on my journey. This town is definitely worth a couple of hours for a look-see — even if you can't afford to stay here overnight! Actually, Aspen is surprisingly affordable in the nonwinter months,