



With routes and climbs that rival some of the most famous European cycling destinations, Aspen is fast-gaining a must-visit reputation.

# Dream Destination: **CYCLING ASPEN**

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN ANYBODY CONSIDERING A WINTER CYCLING TRIP WOULD LOOK NO FURTHER THAN EUROPE, AND NOT WITHOUT GOOD REASON. ROADS STEEPED IN CYCLING HISTORY, AN ALMOST ENDLESS ARRAY OF COLS TO CONQUER, GREAT COFFEE AND PLENTY OF SUNSHINE.

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**T**HE UNITED STATES IS A PRIME EXAMPLE. I DOUBT IT would appear at the top, or even top five, of many people's lists of 'must visit' cycling destinations, and yet it is home to mountain ranges and cols that dwarf anything that can be found in Europe making the Galibier, Passo dello Stelvio and Alpe d'Huez look like nothing more than rolling hills. Before we continue, I would like to clarify that I am not anti-European, far from it, only that having had my eyes opened to a bright new world outside of my usual focus I want to share what I have discovered. Which brings us to America, or more specifically, the state of Colorado and a little town called Aspen.

**“Without a doubt the jewel in Aspen's impressive crown is INDEPENDENCE PASS, A CLIMB THAT HAS GAINED IN POPULARITY IN RECENT YEARS thanks to the now defunct USA Pro Cycling Challenge.”**

Tucked away at the foot of the Elk Mountains, which form a part of the far greater Rocky range, it's better known amongst skiing and snowboarding circles. However, once winter releases its icy grip on the surrounding mountains, it turns into a cyclist's mecca that serves as a gateway to a wide variety of rides, ranging from the big mountain passes that so many of us crave, through to long, scenic 'base mile' rides in the valley. With its small-town charm and laid-back atmosphere it makes for the perfect base for a week of riding – so whatever it is you're looking for, Aspen has it, and that's not forgetting its added bonus.

A week or two away during winter is as much about working on fitness as it is about exploring new places and enjoying uninterrupted time on the road away from the usual stresses and rigours of life at home. This is where Aspen has an ace up its sleeve that not even the most popular of Europe's cycling hotbeds can trump. Altitude. For whilst the likes of the Stelvio, Col de la Bonette and Col de l'Iseran all boast summits over 2,700m, Aspen sits at 2,400m, and that's before you have even started climbing. By default Aspen doubles up as an altitude training camp, even if you're just planning a week of steady riding to enjoy the beauty of the area.



## ACCLIMATISING FOR ALTITUDE

It takes a little time for the body to start acclimatising and producing more red blood cells, which is why it's best to start easy and work towards higher rides. Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley are blessed with both excellent roads as well as an extensive network of paved bike trails to avoid traffic during busier periods that connect a string of quaint towns along the valley. The highlight of this network is undoubtedly the Rio Grande Trail which runs alongside the picturesque Rio Grande river for 68 kilometres from Aspen all the way through to Glenwood Springs. While it is a 'there and back' route, with the views up and down the valley markedly different, it certainly doesn't feel that way and makes for a great acclimatisation ride before looking to head up into the mountains.

ABOVE: Clear, smooth roads and climbs of up to 3000m, the Aspen Colorado region offers some attractive ride options.



Putting the fitness benefits aside for the time being, the best part of cycling to the top of any climb, at least I believe so, is the view at the summit – and there are few better than the one awaiting you at the end of Maroon Creek Road. For it is here, at the top of the glacial valley, that you'll emerge from the trees to be greeted by the awe-inspiring sight of two giant snow-stripped mountains that epitomise the beauty of the Rocky Mountains. Maroon Peak and North Maroon Peak, with Maroon Lake glistening below, surrounded by swathes of wildflowers, are the most photographed peaks in North America and the perfect reward for conquering a climb that tops out just shy of 3,000m after 17km of climbing.

Running parallel to Maroon Creek Road meandering its way up another glacial valley

is the often forgotten Castle Creek Road climb to Ashcroft. In most other parts of the world it would get top billing, but given its close proximity to two other gems it can often be overlooked. But that is one of its advantages as the perfectly surfaced road is often free from traffic, either the two- or four-wheeled varieties, allowing for a highly enjoyable ride up to, and past, the ghost town of Ashcroft. 20 kilometres long and with fairly constant gradients that never get too steep, it has an alpine feel to it, especially during the second half as you make your way towards the summit at 2,965m. Once the road leaves Aspen it slowly winds its way through pine forests and rustling aspen groves, surrounded by soaring peaks that eventually open out to reveal yet more spectacular views.

## ASPEN INFORMATION



### WHEN TO GO:

The best months to visit are May through to the end of September, with June and July being peak summer months.

### STAY:

Located in the heart of Aspen, the Limelight Hotel is the perfect base for all activities and within walking distance of an array of great restaurants. For those wishing to stay in, Snowmass Woodrun V offers a variety of spacious condos.

### EAT & DRINK:

Aspen is blessed with great restaurants, including Ajax Tavern, Meat & Cheese, Aspen Kitchen, Pyramid Bistro and Cache Cache. For super healthy breakfasts and lunches head over to Spring Café, whilst Jus is the go-to place for smoothies and juices.

### BIKE HIRE:

Four Mountain Sports, which has branches in Aspen and Snowmass, is your one-stop shop for bike rentals. Want to ride with a local? Then Erik Skarvan of Sun Dog Athletics, offers road bike guiding and excellent homemade cookies.

### OTHER USEFUL CONTACTS:

For further information on visiting Aspen and Snowmass visit [www.aspenchamber.org](http://www.aspenchamber.org) and [www.gosnowmass.com](http://www.gosnowmass.com)



## INDEPENDENCE PASS

Without a doubt the jewel in Aspen's impressive crown is Independence Pass, a climb that has gained in popularity in recent years thanks to the now defunct USA Pro Cycling Challenge stage race that was held in Colorado up until 2015. At 32 kilometres long, and with an altitude gain of over 1,200m, it's every bit as impressive as one might imagine from a high-alpine pass deep in the Rockies. At first glance you may be forgiven for thinking that it was a fairly straightforward climb, especially given that the maximum gradient never exceeds eight percent. However, the real challenge of the climb comes not in its distance, or indeed its gradients, but rather the altitude factor.

Starting on the east side of Aspen it steadily climbs from 2,400m to 3,697m at the summit, by which stage you're breathing as if trying to blow out candles on a cake, hardly surprising given that at this altitude the body will take in at least 25 percent less oxygen per breath than at sea level. This silent assassin lies in wait, lulling you into a false sense of security before striking with vengeance when you're least expecting it. Given the gradual gradients, the initial impact of being at altitude is noticeable but by no means

ABOVE: Cycling through June and July will offer the best chance of clear skies and good weather.

ABOVE LEFT: Steep climbs and long descents are among the highlights of the region.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The author at the top – Independence Pass – more than 12,000 feet above sea level.





**“... and then, RIGHT AT THAT MOMENT, YOU PASS THE GHOST TOWN OF INDEPENDENCE...”**



a debilitating factor, and so it continues for a fair few miles as the road snakes its way through dense forest, the air spiced with the scent of pine and sweet flowers.

## THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

And then, right at the moment you pass the ghost town of Independence, an abandoned mining camp that dates back to the late 1800s, it hits you. It's here, with two miles still to go before you reach the summit, that a vicious combination of an ever steepening road and the resultant altitude leaves you feeling as if someone is sucking the air from your lungs with a Hoover. It doesn't sound like much, an eight percent gradient, but when you factor in that you're riding at over 3,300m it feels closer to 18 percent. It does little to help matters that with the trees having given way to an ever widening valley, watched over by sentinel peaks, you can see exactly what lies ahead.

The road snakes upwards past a sign for the aptly named Lost Man trail, stretching towards the horizon before one last turn takes you onto the home straight. It's here, with the summit tantalisingly close, that you start to think about emptying the tank with one last big push. My own attempt to do just that lasted for about 20 seconds before I started to regret it, my legs not so much searing with that familiar burn we've all come to love or hate, but simply seizing up as my lungs fought in vain to suck in enough oxygen for such an effort. The mountain had the last laugh, as what seemed to be a short sprint to take you up and over the peak of the climb is a deceptively long drag that makes you suffer for the right to say you've conquered one of America's highest passes.

## 30 KILOMETRES AT 6.5 PERCENT

It's at the summit, fully recovered from the exertions of the climb, that you can truly begin to appreciate the magnitude of the landscape, with both the Collegiate Peaks and Elk Mountains dominating the horizon with their jagged peaks. From here the road drops down to Twin Lakes, a small town that is home to, as the name suggests, two large glacial lakes. Continuing down to the town offers superb views of the the surrounding mountains reflected in the water, as well as making for a great double ascent. The 30 kilometre climb back up from the lakes is not as steep – the maximum gradient is only 6.5% – but is just as impressive as you near the summit.

There is no greater feeling on a bike than conquering a big climb, especially not twice in quick succession, not just for the sense of achievement but also the exhilaration that comes from being connected with the world around you, of truly living in the moment. The higher we climb the simpler life becomes. Maybe that's why the mountains are always calling, because at heart we all want to free ourselves from the constraints of everyday life, to feel alive in a world where so many simply exist. **BA**