

Rocky Mountaineer rail journey connects Colorado Rockies to Utah's Red Rocks in style



- Rocky Mountaineer's new Rockies to the Red Rocks route runs spring through fall between Denver and Moab, Utah. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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Soon after I departed Denver aboard the luxury train Rocky Mountaineer, Amtrak's California Zephyr slid alongside on a parallel track. Passengers on both trains smiled and waved, surprised to see each other in such close proximity.

How would their rail journey compare to mine, I wondered? My fellow passengers must have had the same thought.

"We have better windows," someone on the Mountaineer cried. "We have better food," came the chorus. Soon Amtrak's silver coaches sped ahead on their way west while Rocky Mountaineer moved along at a steady pace, averaging just 35 mph in the two days it would travel 354 miles to Moab, Utah.



Passengers lean out the open vestibule on the luxury train Rocky Mountaineer to snap photos of passing scenery. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Speed isn't the point. Stellar service and spectacular views seen at more than a blur set Rocky Mountaineer apart from other journeys by rail. It earned multiple awards for its routes in Western Canada since its founding more than 30 years ago. Now Rocky Mountaineer repeats its formula for luxury rail travel on its first itinerary in the Southwest U.S. The Rockies to the Red Rocks route launched last August and now runs from spring through fall.

No sleeping cars

From my glass dome coach, I drank in panoramic views of steep canyons and Colorado River valleys while I relaxed in a roomy, reclining seat. When I wanted to stretch my legs, I made my way to an open-air vestibule, poked my head over the side of the train and watched its sleek navy and gold cars round a curve. Passengers who upgrade from Silverleaf to Silverleaf Plus service have yet another viewing option: Access to a lounge car where hosts mix cocktails and serve premium alcoholic beverages as the scenery slides by.



Hosts mix cocktails and serve premium alcoholic beverages in the lounge car of the Rocky Mountaineer. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Rocky Mountaineer does not have sleeping compartments, opting instead to put passengers up for the night in hotels along the route so they don't miss a moment of daylight sightseeing. We disembarked before nightfall in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. While still on the train, a host handed me my room key so I could go directly to the hotel where my luggage, which arrived separately by road, stood waiting. Such service gave me ample time to explore the town known for its hot springs and Wild West history, have dinner and sleep in a real bed to rise rested and ready for an early morning departure.

Onboard Rocky Mountaineer, meals are included in the rail fare and were served restaurant-style on navy napery at my seat. Breakfast options included a frittata or a waffle with local berries. Main course lunch was a choice of coriander-crusting coho salmon or rosemary and Durango honey-roasted pork loin followed by a dessert from the Aspen Baking Company. A charcuterie plate had bites of Colorado-raised bison, elk and venison. Hosts poured alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks throughout the journey at no extra charge.



Wine and a charcuterie plate are among the many courses during meals aboard the Rocky Mountaineer. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Scenery and storytelling

An easy camaraderie formed among passengers and hosts who told stories and prepared us for get-your-camera-ready scenery. In the 13-mile-long Tunnel District, we counted off 28 of 30 tunnels still standing since construction in 1904. At the 6-mile-long Moffat Tunnel, we learned about the Denver banker who spent his fortune on a railroad cutting through the Continental Divide. We spotted white-water rafters on the Colorado River as it surged through Gore Canyon. In Burns Canyon, red sandstone cliffs first appeared and reached their rugged peak in Glenwood Canyon, the largest chasm in the Upper Colorado.

Along the way, hosts encouraged passengers to call out when spotting wildlife, perhaps bighorn sheep, elk or mule deer. "Moose," someone cried and heads swiveled right as the dripping beast scrambled from a trackside stream.

After its overnight in Glenwood Springs, Rocky Mountaineer rolled past Palisade and Grand Junction, Colorado's wine country on the west range of the Rocky Mountains. Orchards dotted the base of the Book Cliffs with 6,765-foot Mount Garfield, named for President James Garfield, at the highest point.



A sign on red rocks along the route of the Rocky Mountaineer lets passengers know they are passing between Colorado and Utah. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Red sandstone rose along the rail line through 25-mile-long Ruby Canyon. "Wait for it," said the host directing our attention to soon-to-be-visible words painted on the canyon wall marking the Colorado/Utah state line.

Red rock country continued to draw oohs and aahs as the train skirted Arches National Park on its approach to Moab, the end of Rocky Mountaineer's westward journey. The discovery of uranium put this small desert town on the map in the 1950s, but today tourism rules thanks to its position as the gateway to Utah's "Mighty 5" national parks: Arches, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, Bryce and Zion.

Pre- and post-experiences

The Rockies to the Red Rocks route can be started in either Denver or Moab and typically includes hotel stays in each city. Fares for the three-night Rockies to the Red Rocks Classic itinerary start at \$1,619. Longer itineraries add stays in Las Vegas or Salt Lake City, self-drive explorations by rental car or guided motor coach tours of national parks.

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If you go

Rocky Mountaineer, (877) 460-3200, rockymountaineer.com/

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Rocky Mountaineer.*

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