

USA

America's most epic unsung road trip

Crossing the Great Divide on a family RV journey to the Rocky Mountains

Alex Hannaford

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Into the wild: an early moose encounter
MATT DIRKSEN/GETTY



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In just 30 minutes, we've climbed to about 10,500ft — nearly two miles above sea level. So has a lone cyclist who evidently

climbing. Unseasonably late snowstorms (it's June) kept Trail Ridge Road, which crosses the top of the Rocky Mountain National Park, closed until a few weeks ago. Now huge masses of compacted snow sandwich us in as we make our way west. There are no trees this high up; it's tundra, where only grass, moss and lichen can grow.

"We're crossing the Great Divide," I say as we begin our descent back to a world of trees and birds and deer.

"What's that?" asks our seven-year-old daughter, Scout, from the back seat. I tell her it's an invisible line from Alaska to the southern tip of South America; every river that flows west of the Rockies empties into the Pacific, and every river east into the Gulf of Mexico. Scout seems impressed. "Cool," she says, then returns to her iPad.



Alex with his daughter, Scout
ALEX HANNAFORD

We're on an epic family road trip — me, Scout, my wife, Courtney, and our 11-year-old dog, Scruff — that will take us from our home in Austin, central Texas, to Vail, Colorado, in the Rockies. It's an ambitious journey of more than 1,400 miles one-

RV is a catch-all term here in America. To you and me, we're pulling a caravan. There's a shower and a flushing loo, a hob and a microwave. My wife and I sleep up front in a comfy queen bed and there's a bunk bed at the back. Scout sleeps on the top, Scruff on the bottom — the beneficiary of our decision to have just one child.

There are parts of Texas, a state I've called home on and off for 16 years, having moved from London, that are truly beautiful. The Panhandle — the flat bit in the northwest — is not one of them. But we're forced to drive through it on the first leg of our journey to the mountains. The Rockies don't suddenly appear like some 14,000ft vision, as they might in a Hollywood film about intrepid fur traders. They slowly materialise: rocky outcrops, giving way to foothills that rise steadily as we drive north. The Rockies are vast, extending more than 3,000 miles from New Mexico up through Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho and Montana into Canada. We cross into New Mexico, then drive up through the Santa Fe National Forest, the Carson National Forest and the Jicarilla Apache Nation Reservation into the San Juan National Forest — all part of the same range.

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Road trip: the family's 22ft RV
ALEX HANNAFORD

Our first night in the mountains is at Blue Spruce RV Park, a privately run campsite in the national forest, at the foot of the San Juan range. Camping here, we're dwarfed by pines and mountain peaks. The three of us take Scruff for a walk behind the campsite — along a path that snakes up some rocky bluffs. It's steep, but not very high, and suddenly we find ourselves on a ledge, peering through pines at the expanse of Vallecito Lake, the largest body of water at this height or above in Colorado.

To truly grasp the grand topography of the Rockies, you need to drive the Million Dollar Highway from the old mining town of Silverton, an hour north of Durango, to the town of Ouray (pronounced Yure-ay). It's a 25-mile section of Route 550, built in the late 1880s, that twists and turns between the mountains, over passes, through valleys — where you feel insignificantly tiny in the shadow of the summits around you — and round some terrifying hairpin bends.



Mine of information: Silverton has a rich history
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The road's nickname is said to come from the gold-bearing gravel used to build it, I explain to Scout. She's too busy with her nose pressed against the window, wide-eyed at the sheer drop-offs, even to feign interest.

The sun dipping in the sky, turning the mountains a rich, reddish brown, is our cue to seek out camp. We find a site outside Ouray just before sunset and park next to a fast-flowing creek, squeezing in a dusk walk in the hills beyond. Barbecued chicken and corn are on the menu, then we fall asleep to the soothing sounds of running water and nature.

Denver, Colorado's state capital, is the perfect gateway to the Rockies if you're flying in. We treat ourselves to a night in a hotel and a blowout meal to keep spirits high, stock up on provisions and get going. Big cities are not what this trip is about.

Our target is Estes Park, a town by the entrance to the Rocky Mountain National Park along the Big Thompson River. Estes is a quaint place, largely unchanged since the 1950s. Restaurants sell wild elk and buffalo burgers, and T-shirts in the tourist shops bear slogans such as "National Park Junkie" and "May the Forest Be with You". We park the RV at the Estes Park Campground, at the end of a meandering road a few miles out



The family's pet dog, Scruff
ALEX HANNAFORD

Scruff is spending the day in fancy mountain kennels, as he has a penchant for chasing ungulates, and it's just as well — we've only driven 15 minutes past the entrance gates when we spot a moose in a clearing at the side of the road. But by the time we pull over and get our cameras out, it has disappeared.

However, Scout is delighted to sight three huge elks feasting on grass near the roadside as we carry on up the road to Deer Mountain. As we ascend the Deer Mountain Trail, the air becomes noticeably cooler and we can hear the wind whooshing through the pines.

"Why are there patches of trees missing on that mountain?" Scout asks, pointing to a peak in the distance.

There's no logging allowed in national parks, so we assume it's due to pine beetle infestation — or avalanche. Further up, we sit on a fallen tree limb while Scout marks off flowers (golden banner) and wildlife (a chipmunk scampering beneath a ponderosa pine) in the junior ranger activity book she was given at the park entrance.

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Gem Lake, near Estes Park
GETTY

The percussive rhythm of a woodpecker striking a nearby Engelmann spruce is the only sound. Devoid of the distractions of home, it seems easier to listen on walks — not just to the sounds of nature, but to each other. That evening, back at the campsite, Scout watches two young women on a trip from the East Coast twirl illuminated hula hoops around their waists in the dark, before they invite her to join in. The three of them sit chatting for two hours; when we return to the campsite from our hike the next day, there's a note for Scout under a rock on our picnic table. "I hope you have the greatest adventure today and every day after this," one of the women has written. "Don't stop hula hooping."

As we drive out of Estes and west towards the ski-resort town of Vail the next morning, it strikes me that Scout had engaged those women on her own, made them laugh, told them stories of her adventures in the mountains and listened to theirs. I feel like I'm watching my daughter grow up on this trip.

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On your hike: Columbine flowers
GETTY

The more scenic of the routes to Vail from Estes is back through the national park — via Trail Ridge Road. Once we exit the western gate of the park, the scenery starts to come down from its acid trip. But after a couple of hours, we begin to climb once more. Outside Silverthorne, there are fields of bison and snowy peaks in the distance again. Highway 6, which leads to Vail, slices through canyons; road signs begin to warn of falling rocks.

We spend the final two weeks of our trip at Gore Creek Campground, on the edge of Vail — a secluded spot run by the US Forest Service, right next to a raging river of snowmelt that forges its way down the mountain into the valley below. Each morning, we hike along one of the mountain trails in White River National Forest, where Scruff picks up the scent of elk and deer.



This is bear country, but we fail to spot one — to Scout's disappointment and our palpable relief. By the afternoon, we're back at the RV again, watching a summer thunderstorm roll in.

Ironically, it's the first place we've camped where I have a strong phone signal — which means Scout could potentially watch Netflix from her bunk in the camper. Right now, though, she's climbing trees and looking for bugs. So I think I'll keep this to myself for a little while longer.

Alex Hannaford and family were guests of Hotel Born, in Denver, which has doubles from £146 (hotelborndenver.com). Pitches start at £18 a night at Gore Creek Campground (recreation.gov) and £33 a night at Blue Spruce RV Park (bluesprucervpark.com). Estes Park Campground has RV sites with water and electricity from £37 a night (colorado.gov).

America As You Like It has a 10-night RV holiday from £1,280pp, including return flights from Heathrow to Denver, one night at the Clarion Hotel Denver Central and nine nights' RV hire, with unlimited mileage and insurance, and all taxes (americaasyoulikeit.com). For more information, see visitusa.org.uk

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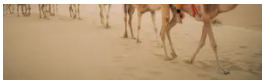
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