

THRILLS FOR FLATLANDERS

By Fred Hobbs

Colorado boasts scores of spectacularly beautiful scenic attractions, most of them in mountain settings. And to reach these high-country wonders requires trips over a variety of high-altitude highways and roads in a variety of conditions...paved, dirt, gravel, rutted, rocky, winding and/or narrow.

Native Coloradans, actually born here or entitled to the designation by long-time residence, find these motoring excursions exhilarating and thoroughly enjoyable. But what real mountain men and women call: "them flatland furriners" often find the experience terrifying. We're talking here about those good folks from places such as Illinois, Nebraska, North Dakota, Boston, Birmingham and Brooklyn.

So, it's up to us who live here to ease their anxiety. The best way is to emphasize the reward---the magnificent views. Location choices are numerous.

Take your in-laws or visiting cousins up to Leadville and over Independence Pass to Aspen. They'll travel over gently rising Tennessee Pass, maybe stop to see the remnants of Camp Hale, where the famed 10th Mountain Division trained army ski troops in World War II. That could be a good warm up for what's to come, with a stop in Leadville to explore some of the lore of the silver mining days and the likes of legends Molly and Leadville Johnny Brown, and Baby Doe and Horace Tabor. Then, moving on, they'll probably grip the car's door handles tightly and maybe look away after a glimpse of the thrilling chasm below going up and then down Independence Pass. A sheer rock wall is on the other side, and that's an unsettling sight to contemplate on the narrow road.

But, Aspen awaits. Almost everyone has heard of Aspen through its attraction to and of celebrities. But the most beautiful view is about 12 miles from Aspen, the Maroon Bells, two fourteeners near each other, named for the distinctive color of their rock formations. That view, coupled with the white of the snow on the peaks, the wildflowers in the meadow and a Colorado blue sky will make the flatlanders' fears evaporate in the cool mountain air.

Another "must" experience for those from the lower altitudes is one even locals were sometimes loath to tackle. Appropriately it is known as the "Oh My God" road. Not far from Denver, the road runs from just off I-70 at Idaho Springs to Central City. It's really two separate trails, one easier to navigate in a car than the other. Be sure to take the more difficult, but more scenic route. It rises from about 7,500 to 9,300 feet in elevation. Often rutty and rocky, but always spectacular. And since your flatlander passengers were willing to gamble on arriving in Central City safely, they can take a couple of spins on a slot machine if so inclined. Apparently, the Oh My God road is not as widely used now. Central City interests built a modern highway away along the same general route to help attract more customers to the casinos there instead of neighboring Black Hawk.

And, if you want to treat your visitors to some of the same incredible Colorado mountain beauty and fascination with less anxiety involved, the always impressive Trail Ridge Road connecting Estes Park and Grand Lake through Rocky Mountain National Park is the ticket.

If the flatland furriners need extra assurance that a Colorado mountain trip will be safe, remind them: Mountains don't move, unlike cars going 80 miles an hour down a freeway with mere unpredictable homo sapiens behind the wheel!