



COLORADO

Department of Transportation

Region 5

US 550 Red Mountain Pass - The Million Dollar Highway

Silverton to Ouray

QUICK FACTS

When was Red Mountain Pass constructed?

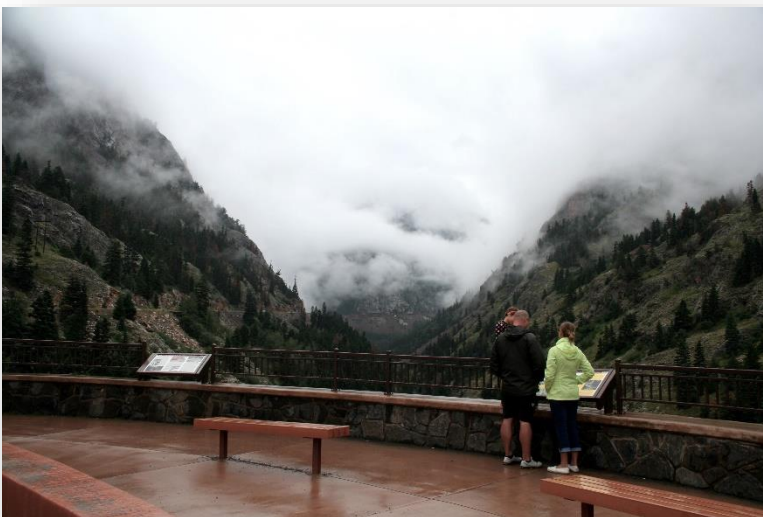
The first road over Red Mountain pass, used by horse and mule drawn wagons, was built in 1883. The road was a private venture by railroad man and entrepreneur, Otto Mears. To help pay for this "highway" that finally connected Silverton and Ouray, Mears charged wagon drivers a passage fee to use the road, making this one of the first toll roads in the state. The first motor vehicle to drive the road was a Ford Model T in 1911. The car carried a doctor on a house call from Ouray to the mining community of Ironton, located on the north side of the pass.

The car then continued to the reach top of Red Mountain Pass. The return drive from Red Mountain Pass summit back to Ouray took two hours. Today a traveler can drive that stretch of road easily within a half hour, even stopping along the way to enjoy the vistas!



When was Red Mountain Pass first paved?

The state of Colorado took over the road, at the request of the area counties, in about 1920. The first *documented* asphalt paving was in the 1950s, and the road was paved in stretches over the next several years.



Why was Red Mountain Pass constructed?

Money is often the driving force of projects and ventures. Red Mountain Pass is no exception. The road was necessary to get ore to market. Extensive mining of valuable metals in the area of Ouray, Red Mountain, Silverton, and Telluride provided the incentive for the construction of the original toll road. Railroads were able to reach the towns of Silverton and Ouray, communities on either side of the pass, but only from the south (Silverton) and from the north (Ouray). The mines up in the rugged mountains between those towns required transportation of ore on the wagon road to the railheads in the towns. Of course, as time went on and with motor vehicle travel became

predominate, this major north-south route through southwestern Colorado became a major contributor to commerce in the area, especially with the tourism industry.

What are the dimensions? How long is it? How many lanes?

The segment of US Highway 550 from Ouray to Silverton (the section known as the "Million Dollar Highway") is approximately 20 miles long. The highway is a two-lane road; one lane northbound and one lane southbound. The average width of the road is 31 feet. However some areas are wider, and some narrower -- as wide as 48 feet across and as narrow as 23 feet across.



Why is it called the "Million Dollar Highway"?

The popular nickname is a curiosity that is disputed by many. Some say that in the early 1900s, when the wagon road was improved, the gravel used for the improvements contained precious ore -- a million dollars' worth. Can you imagine?! Others say the road cost an astonishing \$1 million per mile to build. Still others claim that it is the spectacular scenery along the highway that offers "million-dollar views." The bottom line - no one is quite sure, but it's engaging to speculate.

Is Red Mountain Pass considered a dangerous highway?

Despite the highway being listed as a notoriously dangerous stretch of road, the Million Dollar Highway is safe! Speed limits, by necessity, are low and slow. Most drivers offer the highway the respect it deserves, typically driving carefully and cautiously. This is one of the most spectacular drives in the world, and motorists treat it as such. Construction of the East Riverside snowshed, where a major avalanche path intersects the highway, greatly reduced adverse impacts of snowslides on the highway. The highway is open year-round and is used daily by commuters, local residents, trucking companies and visitors to the state.

Why are there no guard rails on the pass?

Oh! But the road DOES have some guardrails! They are located in areas where there is "room" for them, and the road can maintain an adequate lane width. However, there are stretches of the road that are too narrow that indeed do not have guardrails. This is so CDOT snowplow drivers can push the snow directly off the roadway. (The San Juan Mountains typically receive up to 300 inches of snow annually.) The guardrails would be a hindrance to plowing operations in some areas.

Is this considered a tourist attraction?

Absolutely! When visitors (and locals alike) talk about their experiences in Southwest Colorado, they inevitably share stories about the famous Million Dollar Highway! Some people say they will never get over the breathtaking and awe-inspiring vistas or the twisty-turny hair-pin curves. People come from around the world to experience the stunning fall colors of the Quaking Aspen. The views from atop Red Mountain Pass rival landscapes around the world. Others thrive on the history, seeking new bits of information about the small mountain and mining towns, abandoned rails or defunct mines that dot the corridor. Others enjoy recreational fun on trails, bike routes, OHV roads and backcountry skiing or snowshoeing. Finally, visitors certainly marvel over the genius engineering feat of a paved highway that hugs the rugged mountains.

Red Mountain Pass and the Million Dollar Highway are part of the San Juan Skyway (a national scenic byway). More information is available on CDOT's website:

Colorado Scenic Byways: www.codot.gov/travel/scenic-byways

San Juan Skyway: www.codot.gov/travel/colorado-byways/southwest/san-juan-skyway