

# Mountain climbing

Hitting the high road in Southern Colorado by Tyson Hugie

There are famously more ways than ever to get high in Colorado. One that has been both legal and also popular and world famous for a hundred years or so is the drive (or cog railroad) to the top of Pikes Peak, the twentieth-tallest peak in the highest state in the nation, though it is rated as 'the second most topographically prominent.'

High altitude destinations are sought-after refuges for any Arizonan during our warmest summer months. Which is perhaps why, on a return trip from Colorado Springs to Phoenix this summer, the worst traffic I hit on the entire 850-mile stretch on a Sunday afternoon was between Heber and Payson. The secret is out—cooler temperatures up north motivate thousands of folks from the Valley to head for the hills each weekend.

Each year for the last 14 years, I've been part of an annual car club event that brings together owners and enthusiasts of 1990s Acuras. The event has been held in various regions of the country, from Morristown NJ in the east, to Sacramento CA in the west, to Houston TX to the south. For 2018, Colorado had its first chance to play host to the group. With monsoon season ramping up and

the 10-day forecast looking like an apocalyptic inferno in Arizona, it was a perfect time to get out of Dodge... in an Acura.

NALM—the National Acura Legend Meet—was headquartered at the Country Lodge in Woodland Park, about 20 miles northwest of Colorado Springs on US Highway 24. It's a quaint Rockies town, nestled among old mining communities, and a stopping point for those who travel between the Springs and points statewide. This year's capstone event, for those who dared attempt it, was a climb up one of Colorado's famous "Fourteeners"—a term given to any mountain peak whose elevation exceeds 14,000 feet. Pikes Peak, at 14,115, is one of the most notorious, having played host to an annual hill climb racing event for over 100 years.

There was no racing involved in our group's event, however. Rather, I think participants kept speeds intentionally low, at the risk of breaking anything on our old automobiles. Even so, only 10 of the 11 participants made it to the summit, after one attendee experienced a failed transmission near the halfway point. The road has over 150 curves over its 19-mile ascent, which climbs a



staggering vertical mile in elevation. It's a two-hands-on-the-wheel driving experience, and a little unnerving to anyone who's not keen on heights.

Our caravan of cars rose above the pine trees to the barren mountainside above timberline, with periodic signage alongside the highway noting our progress, in both miles and elevation. Each passing mile brought lower temperatures and more jaw-dropping scenery. Windows down, I noticed two things: the smell of wildfire was heavy, not surprising given a wide ban on fires this summer. And it got extremely cold! At the summit, it was a balmy 42 degrees—in July—and windy. I was glad I had packed a sweatshirt.

The primitive but cozy summit house (built in 1963) had the perfect refreshments to counter the chilly exterior environment: coffee, hot cocoa and fresh donuts. The donuts are a Pikes Peak tradition and have gained popularity as some of the world's

best (or at least most famous) to the 600,000 or so visitors who make it to the summit house each year. I sampled them and was impressed.

The Pikes Peak Cog Railway, it should be noted, does typically provide transport services between Manitou Springs and the summit, but is currently out of service until further notice. Construction is underway on a new, modern summit house, so the railway's re-opening will likely coincide with that.

For some, the descent down Pikes Peak Highway is even more gut-wrenching than the ascent, and drivers are reminded multiple times to utilize lower gears. A few miles into the trip, a mandatory brake check brings everyone to a complete stop, and a park ranger directs a temperature gun at brake components to assess readings. Any vehicle with a brake temperature in excess of 300 degrees

is asked to cool off. Somehow, I ended up with the best "score" of our group, at 154 degrees, and was sent on my way. I think there should be an award or certificate for that.

Colorado's culture, scenery and weather are a huge draw for Arizona residents—whether for ski outings in the wintertime or for summer excursions like mine to escape the heat. If you decide to head up Pikes Peak, keep in mind summit level parking is limited. When it fills, travelers are required to ride shuttle buses from parking lots at lower elevations, so plan to arrive before 8:30 am or after 4:00 pm, which are off-peak times. Enjoy the landscape, and go easy on the brakes. Maybe you can even make a stop at Four Corners on your way home from our neighboring state. ■

