

# BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL PARK

by Don & Barbara Laine

**E**ARLY AMERICAN INDIANS AND, LATER, UTES AND ANGLOS AVOIDED the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, believing that no human could survive a trip through its depths. Now, the deepest and most spectacular 14 miles of this 48-mile canyon comprise

one of America's newest national parks.

The Black Canyon, which had been a national monument since 1933, became a national park on October 21, 1999. In a statement issued after the bill signing ceremony, Pres. Bill Clinton called it a "true natural treasure," adding, "Its nearly vertical walls, rising a half-mile high, harbor one of the most spectacular stretches of wild river in America."

The Black Canyon ranges in depth from 1,730 feet to 2,700 feet. Its width at its narrowest point (cleverly called "The Narrows") is only 40 feet at the river. This deep slash in the earth was created through 2 million years of erosion, a process that's still going on—albeit slowed by the damming of the Gunnison River above the park. At 30,300 acres, the Black Canyon is among the smallest of America's national parks.

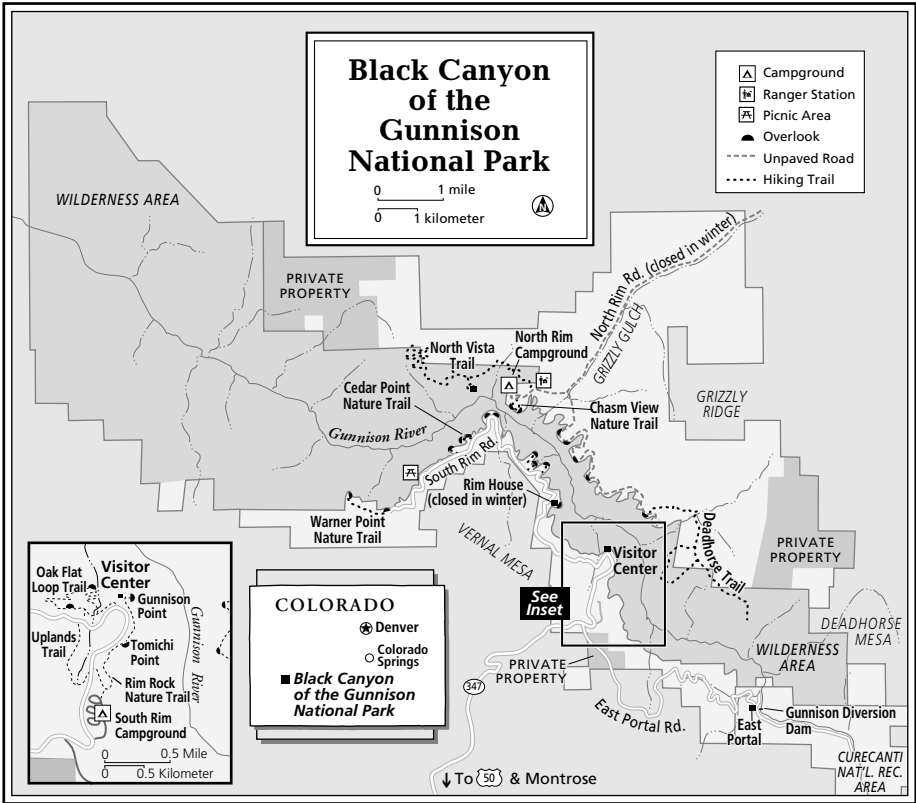
Most visitors view the canyon from the **South Rim Road**, site of the visitor center, or the lesser-used **North Rim Road**. Short paths branching off both

roads lead to splendid viewpoints with signs explaining the canyon's unique geology.

The park has hiking trails along both rims and backcountry hiking routes down into the canyon, and offers excellent trout fishing for ambitious anglers willing to make the trek to the canyon floor. It also provides an abundance of thrills for the experienced rock climbers who challenge its sheer canyon walls. In winter, much of the park is closed to motor vehicles, but it's a delight for cross-country skiers and snowshoers.

The Black Canyon shares its eastern boundary with **Curecanti National Recreation Area**, which offers boating and fishing on three reservoirs, as well as hiking and camping.

**Avoiding the Crowds.** Although overcrowding has not been much of a problem in the past, with about 200,000 people visiting each year, visitation is expected to increase now that the Black



Canyon has gained national park status. Summer is the busiest time, with more than half the park visitors arriving between Memorial Day and Labor Day. December through February is the quietest time. Those seeking solitude should visit before Memorial Day and after Labor Day. Although winter can be beautiful, park access is limited.

## Just the Facts

### GETTING THERE & GATEWAYS

The park is located on Colo. 347, 6 miles north of U.S. 50. To reach the south rim, travel east 8 miles from Montrose on U.S. 50 to the well-marked turnoff. To reach the north rim from Montrose, drive north 21 miles on U.S. 50 to Delta, east 31 miles on Colo. 92 to Crawford, then south on an 11-mile access road.

**The Nearest Airports.** The Montrose Regional Airport, 2100 Airport Rd. (☎ 970/249-3203), off U.S. 50, 2 miles northwest of Montrose, is served by America West and United Express, with rental cars from Budget, Dollar, Enterprise, and Thrifty.

A bigger airport is **Walker Field** in Grand Junction (☎ 970/244-9100; www.walkerfield.com), about 75 miles northwest of the park. Located about a mile north of I-70 Exit 31 (Horizon Dr.), on the north side of Grand Junction, Walker Field has commercial flights connecting Grand Junction with most major cities. Airlines operating at Walker Field include **America West Express**, with daily service to Phoenix; **Delta/Skywest**, with daily service to Salt Lake City; and **United Express**, with daily service to Denver. Rental cars are available from **Alamo, Avis, Budget, Enterprise, Hertz, National, and Thrifty**.

No other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness, and somber countenance of the Black Canyon.

—Geologist Wallace Hansen, who mapped the canyon in the 1950s

Toll-free reservations numbers for airlines and car rental companies are listed in the appendix.

### INFORMATION

For information on both the national park and the adjacent Curecanti National Recreation Area, contact **Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park/Curecanti National Recreation Area**, 102 Elk Creek, Gunnison, CO 81230 (☎ 970/641-2337); or the **South Rim Visitor Center** (☎ 970/249-1914, ext. 23; [www.nps.gov/blca](http://www.nps.gov/blca)). A bookstore at the South Rim Visitor Center, operated by the Western National Parks Association, offers a variety of publications, including the very useful *South Rim Driving Tour Guide*, which was published by the association.

For information on other area attractions, lodging, and dining, contact the **Montrose Visitors and Convention Bureau**, 1519 E. Main St. (P.O. Box 335), Montrose, CO 81402 (☎ 800/873-0244 or 970/240-1414; [www.visitmontrose.net](http://www.visitmontrose.net)); or stop at the **Montrose Visitor Center** (☎ 970/249-1726) in the **Ute Indian Museum**, 17253 Chipeta Dr., on the south side of town off U.S. 550. Information on federal lands in the area, including those under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, is available at the **Public Lands Center**, 2505 S. Townsend Ave., Montrose, CO 81401 (☎ 970/240-5300), which is open year-round Monday through Friday.

### VISITOR CENTERS

The park's **South Rim Visitor Center** is open year-round, except on winter federal holidays; the **North Rim Ranger Station** is open intermittently in summer but closed at other times.

### FEES & PERMITS

Admission for up to 7 days costs \$7 per vehicle or \$4 per person on foot or bike. Camping costs \$10 per night for basic sites; \$15 for sites with electric hookups. Required backcountry permits are free.

### SPECIAL REGULATIONS & WARNINGS

Visitors are warned to not throw anything from the rim into the canyon, since even a single small stone thrown or kicked from the rim could be fatal to people below. Visitors are also advised to supervise children very carefully—many sections of the rim have no guardrails or fences.

Unlike at most national parks, leashed pets are permitted on some of the shorter rim trails (check with rangers), but are specifically prohibited on others and are not permitted in the inner canyon or wilderness areas.

### SEASONS & CLIMATE

Temperatures and weather conditions often vary greatly between the canyon rim and the canyon floor, and it gets progressively hotter as you descend into the canyon. Average summer temperatures range from highs of 60° to 90°F (16°C–32°C), with summer lows dropping to 30° to 50°F (–1°C–10°C). In winter, highs range from 20° to 40°F (–7°C–4°C), with lows from 0°F to 20°F (–18°C–7°C). Brief afternoon thunderstorms are fairly common in the summer. The South Rim Road usually remains open to the visitor center through the winter, but the North Rim Road is often closed by snow between December and March.

## If You Have Only 1 Day

It's fairly easy to see a great deal here in a short amount of time, especially if you stick to the South Rim. First, stop at the visitor center to see the exhibits and get an understanding of how this phenomenal canyon was created. Then, from the visitor center, drive 6 miles (one-way) to the end of South Rim Drive, stopping at the overlooks. Finally, take off on one of the rim hiking trails, such as the easy **Cedar Point Nature Trail** or the somewhat more challenging **Warner Point Nature Trail** (see "Day Hikes," below). If you'll be camping in the park or staying nearby, you might plan to attend the evening ranger program.

## Exploring the Park by Car

The park's 7-mile (one-way) **South Rim Drive** provides an excellent and fairly easy way to see much of the park. There are about a dozen overlooks along the drive, and in most cases you'll be walking from 140 feet to about 700 feet to reach the viewpoints from your vehicle.

Among the not-to-be-missed overlooks are **Gunnison Point**, behind the visitor center, which offers stunning views of the seemingly endless walls of dark rock, capped by a pinkish rock layer; and the **Pulpit Rock Overlook**, which provides a splendid view of the rock walls and about 1½ miles of the Gunnison River, some 1,770 feet down. Farther along the drive is **Chasm View**, where you can see the incredible power of water, which here cut through more than 1,800 feet of solid rock. Near the end of the drive, be sure to stop at **Sunset View**, where there's a picnic area and a short (140 ft.) walk to a viewpoint, which offers distant views beyond the canyon as well as of the scenic canyon (but not the river). And, if your timing is right, you might be treated to a classic western sunset, in all its red-and-orange glory.

## Organized Tours & Ranger Programs

A variety of **ranger-conducted programs**, which might include nature walks, geology talks, and evening campfire programs, are presented from Memorial Day through mid-September on the South Rim (check at the visitor center for the current schedule). During the winter, guided snowshoe walks and moonlight cross-country ski tours are usually offered on the South Rim when snow conditions are right (stop at the visitor center or call ahead for information and reservations).

## Day Hikes

Trails on the monument's rims range from short, easy walks to moderate-to-strenuous hikes of several miles; hiking below the rim is mostly difficult and not recommended for those with a fear of heights. Permits are not needed for hiking rim trails, but free backcountry permits are required for all treks below the rim.

### SOUTH RIM TRAILS

#### *Cedar Point Nature Trail*

0.7 mile RT. Easy. Access: Cedar Point Trailhead, along South Rim Rd.

With signs along the way describing the plants you'll see, this sunny trail not only offers a painless botany lesson, but at the end provides breathtaking views of the Gunnison River, 2,000 feet down, as well as the **Painted Wall**, at 2,250 feet considered the tallest cliff in Colorado.

#### *Oak Flat Loop Trail*

2 miles RT. Moderate to strenuous. Access: Near the visitor center.

Dropping slightly below the rim, this trail offers excellent views into the canyon, while also taking you through a grove of aspen, past Gambel oak, and

finally through a forest of aspen, Gambel oak, and Douglas fir. Be aware that the trail is narrow in spots and a bit close to steep drop-offs.

### *Rim Rock Nature Trail*

1 mile RT. Moderate. Access: Near the entrance to the South Rim Campground's Loop C.

Following the rim along a relatively flat path, this trail leads to an overlook, providing good views of the Gunnison River and the canyon's sheer rock walls. A pamphlet available at the trailhead describes plant life and other points of interest.

### *Warner Point Nature Trail*

1.5 miles RT. Moderate. Access: High Point Overlook at the end of South Rim Rd.

This trail offers a multitude of things to see, such as mountain mahogany, pinyon pine, Utah juniper, and other area flora; distant mountains and valleys; and the Black Canyon and its creator, the Gunnison River 2,722 feet below. A trail guide is available at the trailhead.

## NORTH RIM TRAILS

### *Chasm View Nature Trail*

0.3 mile RT. Moderate. Access: End of the North Rim Campground loop.

Starting in a pinyon-juniper forest, this trail heads to the rim for good views of the canyon and the river; you'll also have a good chance of seeing swallows, swifts, and raptors.

### *Deadhorse Trail*

5 miles RT. Easy to moderate. Access: Kneeling Camel Overlook.

Actually an old service road, this trail offers a good chance of seeing various birds, plus views of **Deadhorse Gulch** and the **East Portal area** at the southeast end of the park.

### *North Vista Trail*

7 miles RT. Moderate to strenuous. Access: North Rim Ranger Station.

Offering some of the best scenic views in the Black Canyon, this trail also provides hikers with a good chance of seeing red-tailed hawks, white-throated swifts, Clark's nutcrackers, and ravens. You might also be lucky enough to spot a peregrine falcon. The trail goes through a pinyon-juniper forest along the canyon's rim about 1.5 miles to **Exclamation Point**, which offers an excellent view into the canyon. Up to this point the trail is rated moderate, but it continues another 2 miles (rated strenuous) to **Green Mountain**, where you'll find broad, panoramic vistas.

## Exploring the Backcountry

Experienced hikers in excellent physical condition may want to hike down into the canyon. Although the canyon has no maintained or marked trails, rangers can help you plot out several recommended routes. Free permits are required. A limited number of campsites are available for backpackers.

The most popular inner canyon hike is the strenuous **Gunnison Route**, which branches off the South Rim's Oak Flat Loop Trail (see above) and meanders down the side of the canyon to the river. Eighty feet of chain help keep you from falling on a stretch about a third of the way down. This hike has a vertical drop of 1,800 feet and takes 4 to 5 hours.

## Other Summer Sports & Activities

**Biking.** Although bikes are not permitted on any park trails, this is still a popular destination for bikers, who travel the **South Rim Road** to the various overlooks and trailheads. There are also plenty of mountain biking opportunities outside the park. You can obtain maps, information, bike repairs, and accessories in

Montrose at **Cascade Bicycles**, 25 N. Cascade Ave. (☎ 970/249-7375).

**Climbing.** The sheer vertical walls and scenic beauty of the Black Canyon make it an ideal and popular destination for rock climbers, but—and we cannot emphasize this too strongly—this is no place for beginners. These cliffs require a great deal of experience and the best equipment. Free permits are required, and prospective climbers should discuss their plans first with park rangers.

**Fishing.** Dedicated anglers can make their way to the Gunnison River at the bottom of the canyon in a quest for **brown** and **rainbow trout**. East Portal Road (open only in summer) provides access to the upstream section of the river from adjacent Curecanti National Recreation Area. The stretch of the Gunnison River located within the park has been designated as Gold Medal Waters; only artificial lures are permitted, and other special rules apply (check with park rangers). A Colorado fishing license is required.

**Watersports.** Mostly, don't do it! Through the park, the Gunnison River is **extremely dangerous**, for both swimmers and rafters (it's considered unraftable). Sections of river west of the park are more suitable; information is available from the Public Lands Center office in Montrose (see "Information," above). The only exception is for experienced kayakers, who find the river an exhilarating challenge. Free permits are required.

**Wildlife Viewing.** The park is home to a variety of wildlife, and you're likely to see chipmunks, ground squirrels, badgers, marmots, and mule deer. Although not frequently seen, there are also black bear, cougars, and bobcats, and you'll probably hear the lonesome high-pitched call of coyotes at night. The peregrine falcon can sometimes be spotted along the cliffs, and you may also

**I**n September 1949, Ed Nelson accomplished what practically everyone considered impossible: He was the first man to boat through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Amazingly, he accomplished this feat in a 5-pound collapsible boat, using Ping-Pong paddles for oars!

see red-tailed hawks, turkey vultures, golden eagles, and white-throated swifts.

## Winter Sports

When the South Rim Road is closed by winter snows, the Park Service plows only to the South Rim Visitor Center, leaving the rest of the park the domain of cross-country skiers and snowshoers. The South Rim Road makes a great trail, running about 6 miles from the visitor center into the park; and, 0.2 mile beyond the visitor center, the Vernal Mesa Ski Trail loops off the road, providing another 1.5 miles for cross-country skiers and snowshoers.

## Camping

There are campgrounds on both rims, usually open from May through October, with a limited water supply hauled in by truck. The campgrounds have pit toilets, but no showers. The **South Rim Campground**, which rarely fills, has 89 sites (23 of which have electric hookups), but the **North Rim Campground**, with only 13 basic sites, does occasionally fill up. Sites are available on a first-come, first-served basis, and cost is \$10 per night for basic sites and \$15 for sites with electric hookups. Reservations available through the **National Recreation Reservation Service** (☎ 877/444-6777; [www.reserveusa.com](http://www.reserveusa.com)).

Campgrounds with hot showers and RV hookups are available in Montrose. Our choice is the **Hangin' Tree R.V. Park**, 17250 U.S. 550 S., Montrose, CO

81401 (☎ 970/249-9966; hangintree@rmi.net), which is open year-round. It has grassy tent sites and large pull-through RV sites, a self-service laundry, a convenience store, and a 24-hour gas station. Its 25 sites run \$16 to \$24 a night and major credit cards are accepted.

## Where to Stay

### NEAR THE PARK

There is no lodging inside the park; the nearest facilities are in Montrose. In addition to the properties discussed below, Montrose has a **Comfort Inn**, 2100 E. Main St., Montrose, CO 81401 (☎ 970/240-8000), charging \$60 to \$99 double; **Days Inn**, 1655 E. Main St., Montrose, CO 81401 (☎ 970/249-3411), with rates of \$37 to \$67 double; **Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites**, 1391 S. Townsend Ave., Montrose, CO 81401 (☎ 970/240-1800), which accepts pets and charges \$99 to \$149 double; and **Super 8**, 1705 E. Main St., Montrose, CO 81401 (☎ 970/249-9294), with double rates from \$49 to \$78. National toll-free reservations numbers are listed in the appendix.

#### *Best Western Red Arrow Motor Inn*

1702 E. Main St. (PO. Box 236), Montrose, CO 81402. ☎ 800/468-9323 (direct) or 970/249-9641. www.bestwestern.com/redarrow. 60 units. A/C TV TEL. \$62–\$115 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.

Those seeking the reliability and familiar surroundings of a major chain motel will like the Red Arrow. Occupying a large two-story building near the east end of town, it offers spacious rooms, most with queen beds, plus refrigerators, coffeemakers, bathrobes, and hair dryers. Anyone traveling with a laptop will appreciate the two-line phones with dataports and voice mail. A handful of “spa rooms” have large whirlpool tubs. Amenities include a solarium with a hot

tub and fitness center, seasonal heated outdoor pool, playground, guest laundry, conference space for 360, and courtesy airport transportation.

#### *Lathrop House Bed & Breakfast*

718 E. Main St., Montrose, CO 81401. ☎ 970/240-6075. www.lathrothouse.com. 5 units (3 with bathroom). A/C TV. \$79 double shared bathroom, \$89–\$99 double private bathroom. Rates include full breakfast and evening wine and cheese. DC, DISC, MC, V. Suitable for children 14 and older.

The handsome Victorian architecture and historic flavor may lead you to the Lathrop House for your first visit, but the service—okay, it’s really pampering—and the delightful breakfasts will bring you back. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this home was built in 1902 by the Lathrops, a prominent Montrose family that owned the local hardware store and also the first automobile in Montrose. Like many of Colorado’s historic homes, it had fallen into disrepair and its days looked numbered when it was rescued by innkeeper Cindy K. Crosman in the 1980s. Following a major restoration, it opened for business in the fall of 1998.

Today’s guests will find an attractive three-story home typical of those built by the West’s well-to-do citizenry of 100 years ago. There are four rooms on the second floor and one on the third, each one different. For instance, the J. V. Lathrop Room has Victorian decorations such as an ornate mirror and antique sewing machine converted to a sink, plus masculine touches including a set of elk antlers over the king-size bed, and a deer head on the opposite wall. It contains a half bath (toilet and sink only) and shares a shower. A favorite of honeymooners, the colorful Emma Lathrop Room has hand-stenciled designs on the ceiling and walls, a queen-size canopy bed, a pleasant sitting area, a fireplace, a private deck, a washer and dryer, and a bathroom with

shower only (no tub). Breakfasts are especially memorable—candlelit and somewhat elegant, with fresh fruit, home-baked breads and muffins, and hot entrees such as banana-stuffed French toast, breakfast burritos, or steak and eggs. Smoking is not permitted.

### *Western Motel*

1200 E. Main St. (at Stough Ave.), Montrose, CO 81401. © **800/445-7301** or 970/249-3481. www.westernmotel.com. 28 units. A/C TV TEL. \$52–\$64 double, \$85–\$115 family units; lower rates in winter. Rates include continental breakfast May–Sept. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Pets accepted (\$5 fee).

A one-story white stucco building with a two-story annex, this attractive independent motel, renovated in late 1999, offers clean, comfortable rooms that are a tad larger than average, with some homey touches, and most have queen-size beds. A few two- and three-room family units are available, and most rooms have door-front parking. VCRs are available to rent, and there's free coffee in the lobby. Facilities include a seasonal heated outdoor swimming pool, plus a hot tub and sauna.

## Where to Dine

### NEAR THE PARK

In addition to the Montrose restaurants discussed below, Montrose has a **Starvin' Arvin's**, a regional-chain family restaurant, located at 1320 S. Townsend Ave. (© **970/249-7787**), that's open daily from 6am to 10pm.

### *Glenn Eyrie Restaurant*

2351 S. Townsend Ave. © **970/249-9263**. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$12–\$30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sat 5–9pm. CONTINENTAL/AMERICAN.

This small, cozy restaurant is lodged in a colonial farmhouse on the south end of town. In summer, guests can dine inside or outdoors in the garden; in winter,

folks seek tables near the cozy central fireplace. Just about everything is made in-house, including rolls, jams, and sauces; and many items are grown on the grounds—fruits, herbs, and greens. Owner-chef Steve Schwatke changes the menu frequently to reflect the seasons and availability of fresh ingredients, but choices might include whole rack of lamb, which is grilled, then slow-baked, and served with a sauce of tomato, rosemary, and garlic; or steak Diane, a butterflied beef tenderloin steak that is flamed tableside in a mustard, applejack brandy, and cream sauce, and served with mushrooms and artichoke hearts. The restaurant also offers fresh seafood selections and vegetarian dishes.

### *The Whole Enchilada*

44 S. Grand Ave., near W. Main St. © **970/249-1881**. Main courses \$3.75–\$8.50 at lunch, \$5.75–\$14 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11am–9pm; Fri–Sat 11am–10pm. MEXICAN.

Come to this local favorite for well-prepared Mexican fare, such as burritos, tostadas, fajitas, and tacos. Those seeking a bit more adventure might opt for enchiladas Acapulco (corn tortillas stuffed with chicken, black olives, almonds, and cheese); or from the “Not for Gringos” section of the menu, the El Paso chimichanga (a fried flour tortilla filled with beef and jalapeños and smothered in green-chile sauce). A variety of burgers are also available. The restaurant is locally famous for its margaritas, and a delightful outdoor patio is open in summer.

## Picnic & Camping Supplies

A good bet for those seeking groceries, deli sandwiches, baked goods, or a buy-by-the-pound salad bar is one of the two **City Market** grocery stores in Montrose. There's one at 128 S. Townsend Ave. and another at 16400 S. Townsend Ave. For information, call © **970/249-3405**.