

## In Search of Gold in Southwestern Colorado

In mid-September Pat and I spent an exhilarating week in southwestern Colorado searching for gold – not the precious metal, but the golden colors of millions of aspen trees. We were participants in an *Arizona Highways* photo workshop: *Fall in the Colorado Rockies*, learning how to take better photos from accomplished nature photographer Jim Steinberg.

I was particularly attracted to this workshop because my grandfather worked as a mining engineer in the same area in the 1910s and 1920s.

Pat and I drove from Tucson to Montrose, Colorado for the start of the workshop. We split the drive into two days with an overnight in Flagstaff (direct drive is about 660 miles and over 11 hours).

Together with six other participants from around the U.S., plus our photographer and trip leader from *Arizona Highways*, we were based for the week at 7,800 feet altitude in the old mining town of Ouray (pronounced *you-ray*), dating from the 1870s, named after a prominent Ute native American chief. From Ouray we made daily excursions by van or 4WD jeep deep into the back country around Ouray, photographing the spectacular scenery and fall colors, a little late this year due to warm weather and frequent rain.

Our varied and challenging photographic opportunities included expansive meadows, impressive mountain profiles, colorful aspen trees, reflecting lakes, waterfalls and streams, cattle and horse ranches, and mining ghost towns. Weather conditions changed too, with occasional fog and rain, and often spectacular cloud backgrounds. Our itinerary included visits to the nearby quaint towns of Silverton and Telluride, formerly prosperous mining towns and now tourist destinations.

On one memorable day we rose early to shoot sunrise from a fabulous mesa vantage point and returned to the same spot later in the day to shoot sunset, experiencing totally different lighting conditions, getting some of our best images. On another evening we came back to the same site to shoot the rise of the full moon, occurring coincidentally with sunset – a fun experience only slightly marred by non-optimum cloud conditions and a sizable error in our prediction of where the moon would rise against the mountain background.

Many of the mining ghost town excursions were at altitudes above 10,000 feet; we reached them in an open-air 10-person jeep. Some of the rides back to Ouray during late afternoon showers (even hail once) were rather sporty, with us clothed in multiple layers and huddled under heavy wool blankets to ward off the rain and wind.

On one return to our base from a mining ghost town, we stopped to talk to roadside prospector, himself a worthy subject of photography, with a full white beard. The prospector had recently filed the first claim in the area in 35 years, had earned some decent return in the last few months, and offered each of us a sample of his gold-specked pieces of ore. We didn't know quite what to make of him.

The highlight of the week for us was a 5-hour 4WD jeep excursion out of Ouray to Telluride, over Imogene Pass at 13,114 feet altitude. After ascending to the Pass on a rough, rock-strewn, switch-back dirt road, we could see 150 miles in all directions on the sunny, clear day.

The descent to Telluride included passing through the ghost town of the Tomboy Mine that Pat and I had read about before the trip in the memoir of young miner's wife who described their incredibly isolated and challenging life.

Throughout the week our teaching photographer Jim Steinberg was outstanding. Forty years a photographer, Jim has traveled all over Colorado and even written a book about Colorado's scenic byways. Jim's passion for photography was evident in his descriptions of each image opportunity we confronted and in his eagerness to help each of us to achieve the best results possible. The experience level, cameras and supporting equipment, and learning goals of the eight participants varied considerably. I was impressed that Jim easily adjusted his teaching approach for each individual, including me, the sole member of the group using a point-and-shoot camera only.

Jim's emphasis was on framing and composition, achieving pleasing color, and mastering different lighting conditions. By the end of the week we were kidding Jim about operating on "photographers" time, inexhaustibly working with each of us on our photo-taking, resulting in some long days with late dinners. He was especially helpful in two group evaluations of our images.

Our group members – all experienced travelers – were very friendly and congenial. Besides enjoying the photography, we had fun at several dinners together at good eating places in Ouray.

We saw many wild animals over the week, particularly deer and elk. Just after Pat and I left Ouray for the return trip to Tucson, a huge, fully-antlered bull elk bounded across the road right in front of us; we just missed him. Sorry no photo.

Pat and I did get several hundred photos each over the week, providing a real challenge to select the best to keep and edit - great memories of a fun-filled, educational, and very satisfying experience.

Additional Information: Arizona Highways Photo Workshops (<http://www.ahpw.org/>); *Colorado Scenic Byways, Taking the Other Road* (Jim Steinberg & Susan Tweit, 2009); *Tomboy Bride: A Woman's Personal Account of Life in Mining Camps of the West* (Harriet Backus, 1977)



View from Animus Forks ghost town near Silverton. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Bear Creek Falls just north of Ouray. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Head frame of the Yankee Girl Mine, one of the great silver and gold producers in the Red Mountain Mining District. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Bob and Pat atop Imogene Pass at 13,114 feet, the highest mountain pass in the San Juan Mountains. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



View looking west into Utah on Last Dollar Road north of Telluride. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Sunset panorama from Log Hill Mesa, southwest of Ouray, with the Cimarron Mountains to the left and the San Juan Mountains to the right. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)