

Switchbacks at 11,000 Feet, a Soak in Alpine Springs — A 3-Day Million Dollar Highway Road Trip

I-Journey Travel Guide

The Million Dollar Highway is the most dramatic stretch of Colorado's San Juan Skyway — a two-lane ribbon of asphalt that climbs over three mountain passes above 10,000 feet with no guardrails on some of the sharpest curves. This 3-day self-drive loop out of Durango threads through three former mining towns turned mountain outposts — Silverton, Ouray and Telluride — using real hotels, a real hot-springs pool and real small-town restaurants along the way.

DURATION	BEST TIME TO GO	FROM
3 Days	Late June–September high passes are reliably snow-free and roads are dry; late September adds golden aspens, but an early-season snow squall is possible above 10,000 feet even in summer	\$680 USD / person for 2 people sharing hotels, a rental car and the meals & hot-springs pass listed; excludes flights to Durango (DRO)

DAY 1 Durango to Silverton on the Million Dollar Highway

Pick up a rental car in Durango, walk the historic downtown, then drive the first and gentlest stretch of the San Juan Skyway north to the old mining town of Silverton.

Rental Car: Durango-La Plata County Airport (DRO)

~15 minutes into downtown · rental from \$55 USD / day

Pick up a rental car at Durango's small regional airport, a short drive south of downtown — a 4WD or AWD vehicle is recommended for the mountain passes ahead.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Durango Airport | +1 970-259-0433 | www.enterprise.com

Durango Historic Downtown & Train Depot

~1.5 hours · free to walk

Main Avenue's brick storefronts and the 1881 Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad depot, where the coal-fired steam train that still runs to Silverton each summer loads its passengers.

Drive: Durango to Silverton via US-550

~1.5 hours · ~50 miles, climbing over Coal Bank & Molas Passes

The opening leg of the San Juan Skyway, switchbacking up through spruce forest and over two 10,000-plus-foot passes before dropping into Silverton's wide mountain valley.

Check-In: The Wyman Hotel

From \$175 USD / night, for 2 people

A restored 1902 sandstone hotel on Silverton's main street, built during the town's silver-mining boom and still run as an adults-only historic inn.

DAY 2 Silverton Mining History & Red Mountain Pass to Ouray

A morning learning Silverton's mining history, then the highway's most famous and most exposed stretch — Red Mountain Pass — down into the hot-springs town of Ouray.

San Juan County Historical Society Mining Heritage Center

~1.5 hours · entry ~\$10 USD / adult

Silverton's former county jail turned mining museum, with three floors of hard-rock mining equipment, ore samples and photographs from the San Juan Mountains' silver boom.

Drive: Silverton to Ouray via Red Mountain Pass

~1 hour · ~23 miles, cresting at 11,018 feet

The Million Dollar Highway's namesake stretch, cut into the cliffside above old mine tailings with hairpin turns and long drops — one of the most photographed drives in the Rockies.

Ouray Hot Springs Pool

~1.5 hours · day pass ~\$20 USD / adult

A geothermal pool complex fed by natural hot springs at the base of Ouray's box canyon, with soaking pools, lap lanes and a mountain-ringed view worth the entry fee alone.

Check-In: The Beaumont Hotel

From \$290 USD / night, for 2 people

A restored 1887 Queen Anne hotel in the middle of Ouray's small historic district, once the grandest address between Denver and Salt Lake City.

DAY 3

Ouray to Telluride & Back to Durango

A scenic detour off the Million Dollar Highway to Telluride for a free gondola ride and lunch, then the long drive back to Durango to close the loop.

Drive: Ouray to Telluride via Ridgway

~1 hour · ~50 miles via CO-62 & CO-145

A gentler valley drive west out of Ouray past Ridgway State Park, then south into Telluride's dead-end box canyon beneath 13,000-foot peaks.

Telluride – Mountain Village Free Gondola

~1 hour round trip · free, year-round

A free 13-minute gondola ride climbing out of Telluride's historic downtown to Mountain Village, with the San Juan Mountains opening up on all sides — no ski pass required.

Lunch: Brown Dog Pizza, Telluride

~1 hour · lunch ~\$18–\$25 USD / person

A local favorite on Telluride's main strip serving deep-dish and Sicilian-style pizza a block from the gondola station.

Drive & Rental Car Return: Telluride to Durango-La Plata County Airport (DRO)

~2.5 hours · ~125 miles via CO-145 & US-160

The return leg via Lizard Head Pass, Dolores and Mancos, completing the San Juan Skyway loop before dropping the rental car and departing from Durango.