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# Discover Beartooth Pass

BY KRISTEN POPE

When journalist *Charles Kuralt*, in his acclaimed “On the Road” series for the *CBC Evening News with Walter Kronkite*, called Beartooth Highway “the most beautiful drive in America,” he wasn’t kidding. This 68-mile-long stretch of Highway 212 connects the twin towns of Cooke City and Silver Gate, Montana (located just outside Yellowstone National Park), to Red Lodge, Montana, via Beartooth Pass. Driving it will exhaust your store of superlatives.

The designated All-American Road, which opened in 1937, traverses more than 1 million acres of wilderness. The highest highway in both Montana and Wyoming, the Beartooth surveys some twenty peaks over 12,000 feet in a diverse landscape that encompasses seas of green forest and stark alpine tundra side-by-side.

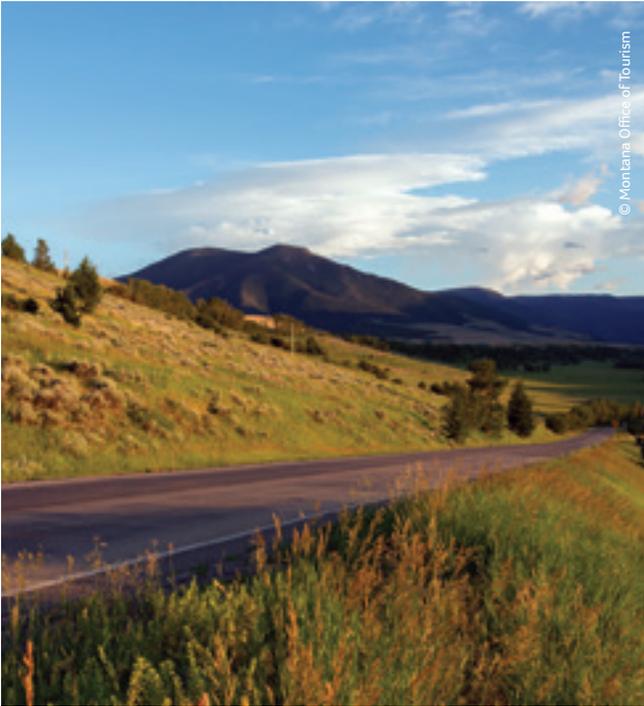
The Beartooth Highway also endures some of the most extreme weather in the world. Although the highway is typically open from Memorial Day to early October, summer snow squalls are not uncommon. Wherever you choose to stop along the way, be sure to bring warm clothing and a wind breaker and be prepared for rapidly changing mountain weather.

Plan for a minimum of two hours for the drive. The journey will take longer if you stop at the many interpretive sites, trailheads and picnic spots along the way—and you should.

Short detours from the highway can lead to outsized views. Drivers should make the three-mile drive to Clay Butte Fire Lookout Tower for one of the best. No longer used to spot wildfires, it offers great views of 12,799-foot Granite Peak—Montana’s highest—and Beartooth Butte as well as



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interpretive displays about the 1988 fires in Yellowstone, which torched nearly 800,000 acres of the park—the largest fire in the park’s history.

Dozens of high alpine lakes dot the highway, many accessible by vehicle. Overlooked by the prominent sedimentary slab of Beartooth Butte on its west shore, Beartooth Lake is a great spot for fishing and canoeing. Nearby trailheads access even more remote alpine pools.

Skiers will even find good alpine schussing well into summer at Beartooth Basin Summer Ski Area. Two Poma lifts bring skiers up a 1,000-vertical-foot headwall to carve laps in the high-country snow at pitches ranging from a gentle 15 degrees to an experts-only 50-degree slope. Without a lodge or other facilities, the experience is like backcountry skiing with a lift.

Of course, the high point of the drive, geographically and visually, is 10,947-foot Beartooth Pass. At nearly two miles above sea level, visitors may be surprised to find a surfeit of color. Keep an eye out for alpine wildflowers starting in mid-July, as well as spectacular rock formations and mountain goats. If the elevation doesn’t take your breath away, the scenery certainly will.

The rugged high-alpine wilderness route requires a measure of self-sufficiency. In addition to preparing for the highway’s famously unpredictable weather, drivers should stock up on snacks and other provisions before setting out; the Top of the World Store near Beartooth Pass provides the only services on the route.

For a map and more information, go to [beartoothhighway.com](http://beartoothhighway.com). To learn more about visiting Montana, go to [visitmt.com](http://visitmt.com).