

# The San Juan Triangle:

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An Introduction to High Altitude Vehicular Adventures in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado! Copyright: 2013

## The Silver or San Juan Triangle in South Western Colorado.



There is a triangle that encompasses the most spectacular mountains (a little personal bias) in this country, if not the world. In the center of this Triangle (or the heart) are the Red Mountains and the Red Mountain Mining district. It was one of the richest silver producing areas in history and why it used to be called the Silver Triangle, but since this is officially the San Juan Mountain Range most folks now days call it the San Juan Triangle. The 3 points of the Triangle are the old mining towns of Silverton, Ouray and Telluride. The 4x4 roads called Engineer Pass, Imogene Pass and the infamous Black Bear Pass loosely make up the sides of the Triangle of. The paved highway called Red Mountain Pass, a stretch of US Highway 550 or the Million Dollar highway, strikes right threw the heart. So climb aboard the Chattanooga chu-chu (what the narrow gauge R.R was called from Silverton to the Red Mountains) as we learn more about this fun, adventuresome and historic area and who knows, it may become just as much your passion as it is mine.

# Silverton, Ouray and Telluride

## The tips of the Triangle.



The 3 points of the triangle are the towns of Silverton, [Ouray](#) and [Telluride](#), listed by age with [Silverton](#) being the oldest with exploration in the area by Captain Charles Baker dating back to 1860. During the height of the mining boom these three towns were referred to as sister cities, very similar in being mostly in support of the mines and miners working in the high country.

[Silverton](#) (we have Silver by the Ton) prides itself on having the longest run of mining with its beginnings in 1860 and the Sunny Side (Standard Metals) mine finally closing in the early 1990's. But eventually mining was no longer an economic influence in the area and the 3 towns had to recreate themselves to survive.

[Telluride](#) (named after a Gold bearing ore not To Hell U Ride) has made the biggest visual change of the three when in the early 1970's it opened the now famous [Telluride Ski area](#). The once sleepy little town that for a time had been overrun by 60's era hippies (mentioned in the song Smuggler's Blues) is now overrun by mansions, gondolas and billionaires (millionaire just doesn't mean much anymore). The sound of private jets taking off has replaced the rumble of Stamp Mills in this valley.

[Ouray](#) (named after the Chief of the Ute Indians in this area) is a little lower key in its changes, yet it has defiantly made the swing towards a tourism economy. Through the influence of Francis

Kuboski of [San Juan Scenic Jeep Tours](#) and [C.W. McCall](#), (remember the song Convoy) who served as Mayor for many years, [Ouray](#) became known as the Jeep Capital of the world. It used to mostly fold up in the winter, but with the introduction of the [Ice Park](#) it is now also famous for ice climbing.

Out of the three [Silverton](#) has somehow been able to hold onto its historic look and feel. Because someone had the foresight to preserve the [Narrow Gauge R.R. tracks between the town a Durango and Silverton](#), which is now a super popular tourist attraction, the highlight of the day is still when the Train rolls into town.

## The 3 sides of the Triangle



As you can imagine, after over 20 years of giving Jeep/4x4 tours in these mountains this subject is my favorite. I always thank the mining that took place in this area for the access that was created to get supply's to the mine by pack mules then later wagons who's trails we are now able to navigate with 4-wheel drive vehicles.

The first leg of this 3 sided loop I am going to present to you is called Imogene Pass. Imogene was the short-termed wife of the superintendent of the Camp Bird mine, which is located in Imogene Basin, and is on the Ouray side of this pass. Interestingly, this was not historically a wagon road/pass. There were actually two roads, one from Ouray to Imogene Basin and one from Telluride to Savage Basin, called the Tomboy Road which is the name of the large mine/community located there. It was the local Jeep clubs that arranged to have the two roads connected at the top of San Sophia Ridge around 1960 and created the second highest pass road in the U.S at a little over 13,000 ft.

Starting from Telluride, you drive to the top of Oak street, lock into 4x4 and start climbing up the side of San Sophia Ridge on an often narrow shelf road. If you were on my tour I would cover lots of stuff, but here I will cover some of the highlights. When driving through a tunnel, that is the Social Tunnel, lore would have it that this was the cut off for alcohol and prostitution coming up the hill. But you could, as a miner, travel to this tunnel and partake of the goods, hence the social tunnel. The first large mine you pass is the

Smuggler Union, a large producer and site of a large union/lawman shoot out in the early 1900's. The next big pile of junk that sits in the base of Savage Basin was the Tomboy Mine and Community of. During its hayday the population here was larger than the town you left from. Harriet Bacus lived here and wrote a wonderful book called Tomboy Bride, which will give you a real feel for living and working at over 11,000 feet.

From Tomboy to the top is quite a pull as you climb on over 13,000 ft. Enjoy the view from the top. The little shack is where the Lineman lived who maintained the electrical line that crossed over the top. I hope they got hazardous duty pay. Before you start down be sure to see the view from what is called the false pass where you can look down on the Red Mountains, the heart of the Triangle, and also where the picture in this chapter was taken. From this overlook, turn around and look up to see Peabody's Fort. It is a long story (actually a book, called "A Corpse on Boomerang Road") but has to do with Governor Peabody of Colorado, the Local Miners Union (remember the shoot-out at the Smuggler-Union) and State Militia cutting off support for the Miners Union that was coming over from Ouray.

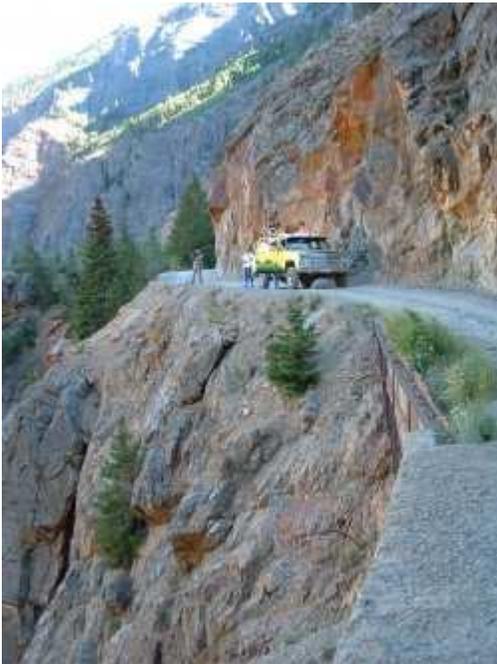
The high point of the trip down is the Camp Bird Mine located in several spots along the way. This is a rare example of an actual individual who ended up making a fortune for himself. Most of the large, successful mines were owned by conglomerates/corporations, because it took a lot of money to go from an open claim to a producing mine. Luckily for Thomas Walsh he stumbled upon an abandoned mine that for some reason had a bunch of high grade Gold Ore mistakenly tossed into its Dump pile. Thomas was able to buy the rights to this claim and he quickly turned the dump pile into enough start up cash to make it all happen. At one point Thomas, sold the mine and moved his family to the D.C area. There, because he adored his daughter Evelyn (who also wrote a book called "Daddy Struck it Rich"), used some pocket change to purchase her the Hope Diamond.

Now it's down and around and around and down till you run out of road at the edge of the town, beautiful Ouray Colorado.  
Learn more from our Guide Book-

[The Tour Guide's Guide to Imogene Pass \(BOOK\).](#)

## Engineer Pass, Ouray > Silverton

### Hemorrhoid Hill



The next side of the Triangle that will connect you from Ouray to Silverton is made up mostly by Engineer Pass. If you were to take the high road and follow the pass road to its terminus you would be in the town of Lake City, another cool mountain town. But it is not part of the triangle, so will have to wait for another book.

Us tour guides have a nickname for this road. We call it Hemorrhoid hill, and soon after you turn off highway 550 south of Ouray at a sign that claims the Alpine Loop, you will understand why. The first climb from the turn off to the Shelf Road (see

picture) is the roughest yet you don't get any real breaks from the rock until you hit Timberline.

The first Mine you will come upon is the Mickey Breene, which saw some work on and off until the 80's, but is most famous for the avalanche area just up the road a bit. Soon you will pass a fork in the road. The right is [Poughkeepsie Gulch](#). This is a real fun road but trust me it will test your rig and your driving skills, especially from this direction. If you stay to your left you still get to stress your rig a bit as you climb 100s of feet up switchback city.

As you reach timberline you will have a great view of the ruins of the San Juan Chief Stamp Mill, which was built to process the Silver Ore from this area. A lot of time and money was poured into this structure but, unfortunately, it was finished in 1893, the year of the great Silver Crash, so it was never operated.

As you cross this treeless area you get a fine example of permafrost found in the lower 48 and soon you will come to another fork in the road. The left will take you to the top of the pass at about 12,900 ft and worth the side trip. As I said earlier, if you keep going in this direction you will end up in Lake City, where Alfred Packer invented the Manwich(needs another book). If you stay to the right at the intersection you will start descending down the Animas River Valley towards Silverton. The absolute coolest sight on this side is the ghost town of Animas Forks, which is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in the area. Partly because over the years the Y.C.C. and other organizations have done restoration work and partly because it was occupied for a bit during the 1960's, when some hippies called it home.

After Animas Forks, you can take your rig out of 4x4 because it is easy sailing the rest of the way to Silverton. You will pass some very historic spots including the very ruined town of Eureka, which was built on a flood plane, and Howardsville, named after a member of the Baker party of the 1860's. [The Old Hundred Mine Tour](#) is really the best mine tour I have ever been on so I always recommend it. Then this trip just goes downhill till you reach Silverton.



**Bridal Veil Falls on the downhill side of Black Bear Pass.**

**Black Bear Pass, Silverton > Telluride. “You don't have to be crazy to drive this road but it helps”.**



**This is the final side of the triangle and I saved the best for last. This road is legendary and actually**

has a song about it by [C.W.McCall called Black Bear Road](#). The turn off is about ¼ mile south of the summit of Red Mountain Pass on highway 550. It really did have a sign that said, "you don't have to be crazy to drive this road, but it helps", at the beginning of this one-way road, but it was often stolen. So now it just has a generic looking Forest Service sign. I would suggest locking down into 4x4 low because the climb begins here.

This side of the pass is not really eventful except for a few sections that will test your nerve, a great overlook of the Red Mountains, and be sure to stop at the top for yet another 12,800 foot view.

On the way down you will get to a spot where you will have a impressive view of an Circe Lake settled into the bottom of a basin. That lake is called Ingram Lake, the basin is Ingram Basin, the creek running out of the lake is Ingram Creek and the waterfall the creek forms as it drops off the "EDGE" is called Ingram Falls. Historically this road was Ingram Pass, but the big mine up here was the Black Bear Mine so I figure when folks started driving 4x4's over this macho road, Ingram just didn't fit as well as "BLACK BEAR".

On down the road you will cross a huge pile of rocks, this is called a Talus Glacier and, like an Ice Glacier, is slowly moving down the hill. About halfway across this you will get your first view of "To-Hell-You-Ride", so close but yet so far away. At the end of this pile you will see a gate that leads to the Black Bear mine. You can look up the side on your right to see remnants of the Black Bear's tram line that ran down to their mill, which hangs off the "EDGE" that you will see soon. Just imagine working on those Tram Towers!

At this point the road gets rougher and tougher as it starts to prepare you for the "Test", and trust me this is one test you don't want to fail. The picture in this chapter is me going town the Stair Steps to Hell (you ride) as you start down off the EDGE. Have faith that there is a road around that bend and try to notice on your left the ruins of the Black Bear's old stamp mill. Some Dead Heads

unfortunately burned down what used to be a large boarding house during a Grateful Dead concert back in the 80's.

The corner at the bottom of the steps makes for a good over look down at Bridal Veil Falls and the castle looking hydroelectric plant that is still in operation, plus Telluride and the Idarado Mines mill structure. This corner is your last chance to practice; the next one is the test.

As you pull into the test, do not try to turn right around this corner. Pull straight into the ELBOW, stop, crank your steering wheel to the left and back up as far as you can. Then crank to the right and pull forward as far as you dare, then repeat. Don't be afraid to repeat as often as you need to and watch your right rear corner as you pull around the rock located in the bend of the Elbow.

As you travel down all the Z's and W's the corners do get easier, but don't get over confident. A few years back some folks dropped their Jeep off of the 5th corner and fell 6-800 ft to their death.

Stop at the bottom of Bridal Veil Falls, look up and cool off from this huge evaporation cooler. Now, wasn't that fun!

Learn more from our Guide Book:

[The Tour Guide's Guide to Black Bear Pass \(BOOK\).](#)



The Yankee Girl Mine in the Heart of the Silver Triangle.

# Highway 550/Red Mountain Pass

## The Million \$ Highway- Ouray > Silverton



After all of this writing about the exciting 4x4 roads in the area it is a little hard to shift gears to talk about a two lane paved road, but I must admit this is one exciting paved road. Otto Miers known as “The Great Pathfinder” gets the credit for cutting Red Mountain Pass out of the side of this canyon in order to profit from tolls and it was improved for automobiles during the 20's. It is known as the Million Dollar Highway but why? That is a good question. Some of the storyies are as follows: 1- while Otto was blasting through the rock to create the shelf for the road bed, enough high grade ore was found to equal a million dollars. 2- the practice of using mill tailings as back fill and the poor metal extraction methods of the early mills led to over a million dollars being buried under the road. 3- (my favorite) An elderly lady from Texas on vacation in her 40 ' R.V came rolling down main street in Ouray with smoke rolling off her brakes yelling out the window "I wouldn't drive over that road again, even for a million dollars".

I will describe this trip from Ouray to Silverton because that is how it always plays in my head and because that is the direction that this [You-Tube Video travels](#).

As you are heading South out of Ouray up the Million Dollar Highway, be sure to stop at the Switzerland of America overlook. A bit further up the road you will travel through a short tunnel, around the next bend you will see some room to park where the road makes a sharp left, pull in here. The Colorado Highway Department just spent a gob of money redoing the bridge and creating a observation platform, so check this out as you helped pay for it. There are two things to note at this stop, one being the spectacular Bear Creek Waterfall that runs under the road. The other factoid is that back when this was a toll road, Otto Miers had his tollgate located on top of the Waterfall, which made it a bit difficult to sneak around. There is also a monument dedicated to Otto located here.

As the road progresses from the waterfall corner, you start to get a real feel for the shelf road cut into the cliff. This area is often called the Ruby Wall because there is a lot of red (Iron) in the rock. This area has a reputation for dropping rock on cars so be careful. Look across the canyon on your right and see if the lady at the antique store has her laundry hanging. That is a sign that it will be a beautiful day (really is just a joke).

Around the next swing is the turn off for Engineer Pass or also called the Alpine Loop. Note how tunneling under the highway and creating a man-made waterfall rerouted the creek. It would be a great place to inner tube.

There will be more spectacular shelf road until you reach the infamous River Side Avalanche chute. Look for the concrete snow shed, and you will see some monuments dedicated to a reverend and his two daughters killed in the 60's and another to three Snow Plow drivers killed over the years.

The following switch backs are actually climbing up a natural dam formed many, many years ago by a big rock slide, creating a lake that over many years has filled up with sediment to create Ironton Park, the only flat area you will cross until you get to Silverton. There was also a town close by that was also called Ironton. The three large Red Mountains, which are the Red

Mountains of Red Mountain Pass fame, are full of Iron, which makes them red.

You may be wondering why these mountains are so different from the gray peaks that surround them. The Red Mountains are the center of a volcanic calderas and the gray is the rim of the volcano. It makes for a pretty large crater.

This is the heart of the Red Mountain mining district, the second most productive Silver Mines in the country, second after the Leadville district. Keep an eye open for cool mine ruins as this area abounds with them. Most of the mines in this area were deep shaft mines. The tall towers are called head frames, or the top of the elevator that raised ore from near 1000ft in depth.

Along the way you will switch back through some rather modern mine ruins. This was the east portal of the Idarado Mine (combo of Idaho and Colorado), the west portal being in Telluride. A great story involved the Ouray basketball team. Returning home from a game in Silverton one winter day back in the 60's, the state highway dept was stopping all traffic because all the avalanches where running, so it was not safe to travel. The solution to get all the children home was to load them all on mine carts and take them through this mine to Telluride, where buses had gone over Dallas Divide to meet them. I would have enjoyed that trip myself.

Just a bit further you are at the top of the pass and the turn off for Black Bear. There used to be a really nice boarding house located on the knob on the left. It housed miners for a local mine and at one point housed early tourists on a scenic rail road trip that came up from Silverton and went as far as Ironton Park. A stage couch took them into Ouray to meet another train to continue their journey. Unfortunately this boarding house was torn down just a few years ago over some shady real estate scam being played on the Forest Service. But they claimed it was over liability and that it was located to close to the highway.

Then its down a huge sweeping switch back corner that follows the old R.R bed. When you get to the bottom, you will find the ruins of the town of Chattanooga, once the end of the line for the

R.R, hence the ruins of the large loading chute and why this R.R was known as the Chattanooga Line (chu-chu). Now it is just down hill till Silverton, the original point of the triangle.

I hope you enjoyed this little introduction to some of the vehicular Adventure to be found in the San Juan Mountains. Be sure to follow our continuing adventures at our Blog [www.alpineparadise.com](http://www.alpineparadise.com) and like our page on [Facebook](#)

**See you in the Hills! Clay**

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