



The Pioneer Mountains provide a scenic backdrop to the Wise River in the foreground.

Scenic byway a destination by itself

Story and photo
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Roads are not usually destinations, but the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway in southwestern Montana defies this logic.

This 45-mile stretch of road, designated a scenic byway in 1989, is worth driving just to view the surrounding mountains, the Wise River and the wide meadows. If time allows, there are numerous side attractions along the route well worth visiting.

The roadway, which the state just finished paving last fall, slices through a little-traveled area of the state. Imagine an upside-down U with the U being the Big Hole River. The Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway slices right through the middle of the U.

Traversing through Montana's largest national forest — the 3.32 million acre Beaverhead National Forest — the roadway climbs more than 2,000 feet in about 30 miles from the Big Hole drainage as it follows the Wise River uphill. Along the way it passes through a beautiful glacier-carved valley dotted with large meadows and stunning views of the Pioneer Mountains. Watch out for the cows, though, as they have free access to the road, as well.

This is high, harsh country. Winter comes early and stays late. It's a wonder that one small town along the way wasn't named Polar instead of Polaris.

The highway tops out at more than 7,800 feet. The tops of surrounding peaks, such as Maurice Mountain, are another 2,000 feet

How to get there

Take Interstate 90 west out of Butte about seven miles past Rocker and then turn south onto Interstate 15 as if you were traveling to Dillon. Nineteen miles after the interchange, take the exit to Highway 43 to the west and pass through the town of Divide, following the Big Hole River to the town of Wise River. Turn south at Wise River onto the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway. The GPS coordinates for the intersection are North 45 degrees, 47.542 minutes, West 112 degrees, 57.300 minutes. The elevation is 5,701 with an accuracy of 17 feet. Drive south on the scenic byway,

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For more information on the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway, see the links in this story.

stopping at any of the many attractions along the way. The winding road has a speed limit of 45 mph. It's about 47 miles to the end of the byway, which terminates at Highway 278. The coordinates for this turnoff are North 45 degrees, 16.878 minutes, West 113 degrees, 07.289 minutes at an elevation of 6,146 feet with an accuracy of 15 feet.

higher. So even though the roadway climbs considerably, visitors still feel overshadowed by the surrounding 9,000-foot-plus peaks.

This area is popular with summer campers, since there are numerous campgrounds along the route. In addition, there is fishing in the Wise River as well as surrounding mountain lakes and in Grasshopper Creek on the south end of the road.

Tired of driving? Soak your bones in Elkhorn Hot Springs about 10 miles from the southern terminus of the byway.

For rockhounds, there's a specific site set aside along the route for digging up quartz and amethyst crystals at Crystal Park, 26 miles from the northern start of the route.

Still not satisfied? Visit the old mining town of Coolidge nestled along one of the area's many backroads. The roads are also popular with ATVers.

In the fall, the area is a lure for hunters. Elk and deer are the main attractions, although mountain grouse can also be found.

In the winter there is cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling and even downhill skiing at Maverick Mountain. The ski hill's one lift provides access to 2,000 feet of vertical and 22 named trails. Lift tickets cost \$25 for adults, \$17 for juniors.

The nearby Grasshopper Inn provides lodging for winter and summer visitors, as does Elkhorn Hot Springs. Rates start at around \$40.

This route hooks in well with last week's Out and About, the historic mining town of Bannack. So make a weekend or take a week and explore this stunning corner of Montana.

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