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COLORADO TRAIL

A S THE EAGLE FLIES, it is about 225 miles from Denver to Durango in southwestern Colorado. On one of Frontier Airlines' propjets, it's a trip of exactly an hour and two minutes. Quick, efficient, effortless.

But why fly this distance in 62 minutes when there's the possibility of walking it in two or three weeks? Working a little, relaxing, learning, exploring and getting to know the land.

This overland trek from Denver to Durango is not feasible today, but by 1976 it may be — that is if the people of Colorado and the US Forest Service succeed in one of the most ambitious and farsighted recreational projects ever attempted in the Rockies.

It will be called, simply, the Colorado Trail, and it will climb, bend, twist, weave and drop through some 350 miles of constantly changing landscape. En route, it may push into dense woods and amble along old secondary roads; it will pass through as many as six different National Forests, visit a number of historic sites, and it will skirt close by some of Colorado's major resorts: Keystone, Breckenridge, Copper Mountain, Vail, Aspen, Crested Butte, Telluride, Purgatory.

At least this is how it looks now in the tentative plan. As yet, no final lines have been drawn on the map — but this summer the Forest Service will have an exploratory crew of young people in the field as a first step toward nailing down the project. They'll be checking not only the approximate route (and alternatives along the way), but also noting everything from wildflowers to birdlife, elk droppings, rock formations and old mine sites. And then some.

However it eventually turns out, one thing is now sure: the new Colorado Trail will not be just another hiking path. The National Forests in this state have some 9,750 miles of them already.

As it's now envisioned, the Colorado Trail will be different. First, it will be a dual-purpose, year-round trail. The entire route will serve
"We're going in there to look for anything and everything a hiker might be interested in," explains Sally Edwards. "We want to be absolutely sure that people get more out of this trail than just exercise."

Her tone of voice is both enthusiastic and confident. Impressively so for a young girl who has just finished her sophomore year in college, and who is now heading up a survey of the first segment of the Colorado Trail.

Toward mid-July, Sally (she's a forest management major at Colorado State University) and her team of six high school students from the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) will begin a careful trek from Roxborough Park in southwest Denver. Their trail will follow up the South Platte River toward the little crossroads of Deckers. Almost simultaneously, three additional crews will set out in other areas of the Pike National Forest, all working together to map the initial leg of the Colorado Trail that is to terminate near the Keystone Ski Area.

Doug Coordes, age 20, a junior in wildlife biology at CSU, will supervise another group checking trail possibilities along the 25-mile stretch from the South Platte to the Lost Creek Scenic Area. Pat Kennedy, also 20 and a biology student at Colorado College, will lead her student-explorers over the route that traverses the craggy and little-known Tarryall Mountains up to 10,000-foot Kenosha Pass. Miller Hobson, an anthropology and recreation major at Colorado State, will run his students over the final leg in the Pike National Forest - topping the Front Range at Guanella Pass before angling down toward Keystone.

All four crews will be under Forest Service supervision, but the key to the trail's success may well ride with the high school students, all from the greater Colorado Springs area, who will do the lion's share of the survey work. All will be enrolled in the Federal Government's pleasantly innovative Youth Conservation Corps program - a scheme which puts young people out in the field doing various kinds of environmental work for eight weeks during the summer months.

At this point, no one knows what these crews will come up with. These young persons, almost 30 of them, are going through the Pike National Forest with minds wide open, which is true to the spirit of the planning now going into the Colorado Trail. The overriding mandate is simply to be alert to everything: bear tracks, calypso orchids, hummingbird nests, trout ponds, old forest fire sites, historic mine digging - the entire ecology of the proposed trail. In all probability, the student-explorers will do a lot better than over-trained adults.

All teams will take detailed field notes while surveying the trail, but even that will be only a beginning. Careful research will follow - historical, ecological, geological, whatever. If the pieces don't fit together after that, more work along the trail will be done. An entirely new route may emerge. Final plans for the Colorado Trail will still be flexible.

After groundwork in the Pike National Forest is well underway, study will begin on further stretches of the trail from Keystone southwestward to Vail, Aspen and Durango. Forest Service officials in those areas are already recruiting more volunteer explorers. These new teams will go into the field by midsummer after findings in the Pike National Forest are in.

It's a bold step, launching a major recreation project with inexperienced young people. But the Forest Service is convinced it's the way to go. "We want this to be a people's trail, not ours," explains Al Mullen of the USFS Regional office in Denver. "If our men went out there, I'm afraid some preconceived notion would get in the way."

"It's all going to be new to us," adds Sally Edwards, who will shortly set foot on her piece of the Colorado Trail for the first time, "that's just how it should be. We want to hit the country with the same wide-eyed wonder the early pioneers. I'd like to see the trail designed to give 20th-century hikers something that frontier experience."
hikers in the summer. Shorter stretches with connecting access loops will be marked and packed for ski touring in the winter.

Second, at carefully selected locations on the trail will be a series of rustic, back-country huts or hostels — the cozy bunkhouse-kitchen combinations of the type made both: famous and popular in the White Mountains of New Hampshire by the venerable Appalachian Mountain Club. Hut sites will be chosen to assure all-season use. Most likely, private concerns will build the shelters under special Forest Service permits.

Third, the Colorado Trail will not simply be a quick, breakneck route to every mountaintop along the way. The present USFS working concept is to let the path meander through a rich diversity of ecosystems and geologic formations, into areas of resource development as well as the scenic wilds.

Fourth, the main Denver-to-Durango trail could well turn out to be only the main artery of an even larger state system. Already, several major spur routes are possible: one route heading west from somewhere around Vail toward Grand Junction, another northward from Loveland Pass into Wyoming.

Fifth, it will be possible for summer hikers to reach the main trail at any number of points and explore it segment by segment, for the winter ski touring loops will also serve as summer access spurs. One could start at Vail and walk over to Aspen; or one could do just the Gunnison (Crested Butte) to Durango (Purgatory) stretch. A whole wealth of alternatives is possible. Furthermore, since scheduled airlines service the four points mentioned above, out-of-staters will actually be able to fly to their starting point, hike for a spell and fly right back home at the end.

No doubt about it: this is an interesting set of concepts. But what is the need in the first place? Why create such a project?

“We’re facing a real problem,” says Denver-based Rocky Mountain Regional Forester, Bill Lucas. “We might as well tackle it head-on and start planning now. To date, the Forest Service has worked almost exclusively in only three prime recreational directions — roadside campgrounds for vehicles, large winter resorts for skiers and wilderness for backpackers. But those are just the extremes; we’ve slighted all those people in the middle. The folks who need and want to get away from the crowd and off the well-beaten path, but who are not able or ready to plunge into rigorous backpacking or ski touring. That means an awful lot of average people are being shut out of the forests, and I don’t thing that’s good — or even right.”

Lucas is also aware of the spiraling recreational pressure on his lands. Between 1967 and 1971, visitor days on National Forest trails in Colorado increased a solid 100 percent — from 249,900 to an even 500,000 (making Colorado the number four hiking state in the entire US). Projections for the end of the century indicate further dramatic increases — from 400 to 600 percent!

“I’d like to think we can plan for this forthcoming pressure intelligently,” Lucas says. “If we don’t, it’s going to be chaos — and maybe ruin. Somehow, we’ve got to channel these newcomers into the Forests in a way that will be satisfying to them while still looking after the welfare of the land — at least try to direct the way it’s being used.”

The idea of a major intermediate hiking trail — more challenging than a path around city park, not as rough as a wilderness bushwhack — is a logical first step in dealing with the recreational boom on the National Forests. But it hardly makes sense to stop at that. Here’s where the really innovative thinking must start. Let the route become a “discovery trail” along which the hiker (or ski tourer) can learn as much as possible about the Forests. Design it so that the booming sport of cross-country skiing will be served during the colder months. Initiate a hut system to serve the public on a year-round basis — give them a new option for overnight stays in the mountains. Relate the touring loops and the huts to resorts with established downhill ski areas in the state — giving them a chance to broaden the scope of their own cross-country programs, as well as their summertime activities. Why shouldn’t a responsible ski area be in the hiking business? Some people fear commercializing at the huts (over-the-counter sales, Coke machines, etc.), but the Forest Service permit would control this from the outset.

At present, the Colorado Trail hasn’t even made it to the blueprint stage — just a few tentative lines and Xs on a map. Nothing firm. Just a set of concepts, ideas, possibilities — and most of all, questions in the minds of the USFS regional staff:

“What kind of trail country is out there in the Forests in the first place?”

“Shouldn’t we begin to make an inventory?”
"Who’s going to do that?"
"What about wilderness areas? Won’t we have to go around them?"
"How are we going to get people to stay in huts? Aren’t they all self-sufficient backpackers?"
"Who’s going to build the huts?"
"And operate them?"
"Where’s the money coming from?"
"Do the people really want this?"
"What about horses?"

Good questions—all of them. At the moment, most remain unanswered; all must be resolved before the project moves ahead.

"We can’t do this alone," says Lucas, "and we have no business trying to do it alone. All I want to do right now is get the ball rolling, start getting the public involved. We’ll listen to anyone who’s interested enough to comment, and put them to work if we can."

This is going to be a true Colorado Trail—as close as possible to being all things to all outdoor people.”

The paths in Colorado’s National Forests were mostly developed with purposes other than pleasure hiking in mind. Starting as deer and elk runs, they were first used by Indians (mostly Utes) for hunting and seasonal migrations. Later, white trappers, traders and miners trudged many of the same trails and cut more of their own. More recently, trails have been cut by forest fire fighters, sheepmen and cattlemen, timber crews, surveyors, etc.

All of the trails have one basic function: utility. They’re designed to get people from point “A” to point “B” as efficiently as possible. Some may pass through diverse and scenic country, but that’s purely incidental. They’re not true recreational trails.

Choosing the Denver-to-Durango route was the first step in making the Colorado Trail a genuinely rich and varied hiking experience. Unlike the oft-discussed (and seldom walked) Continental Divide Trail, which runs north and south almost exclusively above 10,000 feet, an east-west path would traverse a broad variety of terrain, flora and fauna: low-elevation sagebrush country and pinon-juniper woods; cense-spruce-fir forests from 9,000 to 11,000 feet; rolling, wildflower-dotted alpine tundra.

This glorious diversity is one key to the "discovery trail" concept behind the project. There’ll also be history—not only the obvious ghost towns, but also such lesser known features as old railroad trestles, ancient Indian campsites, abandoned homesteads, shepherder’s cabins. Yet another notion to swing portions of the trail through areas of development and resource use.

Informative brochures and trail maps are logical possibilities, but just about everyone agrees these will flop if they come out reading school texts.

"If we do this thing right," speculate Mullen, the USFS regional public affairs officer, "the trail will do most of the teaching itself; the trail and what’s along it."

It was only natural to make ski touring the second basic ingredient of the Colorado Trail. The sport itself is growing at a furious pace, shows no signs of slowing down. Yet, requirements of summer hiking and winterizing trails sometimes don’t always meet one thing, there’s the avalanche danger on steep slopes and overlooks during the...
season. Also, cross-country skiing is seldom a long distance proposition. (Inevitably, some daredevil will try to make it over the snow from Denver to Durango but he'll be a most exceptional case.)

The idea of connecting loop touring trails was advanced as a sensible solution to these differences. These spurs, designed expressly for cross-country skiing, give the main route a solid winter dimension. Portions of the Colorado Trail that serve both hikers and ski tourers will require special study and planning.

Presently, the Forest Service's concept is to tie in the touring loops at or near established ski areas, primarily because these resorts are already centers for cross-country skiing in the state. Most have designated trails and flourishing instruction programs; many are ready and eager to expand both. There's also every possibility that some mountain towns and smaller, independent ski touring operations along the way can be linked into the Colorado Trail.

In all likelihood, the huts will draw the most attention of any aspect of the overall plan. Though they are largely unheard of in the western US, these rough, intimate structures are a tradition both in the European Alps and in the White Mountains of New Hampshire where the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) built its first overnight hostel back in 1888.

The European huts vary greatly in size, design and amenities. Some have indoor plumbing, hot water, electricity, resident caretakers, private bedrooms and serve multi-course meals, plus beer, wine and schnapps. The majority, however, are more rustic, and the meals served more basic: soup, bread and cheese. A few offer no food at all; only cooking facilities where hikers can prepare what they pack in themselves.

The eight huts of the AMC are basically similar to their European counterparts, with bunk space for 38 to 90 guests. The typical plan is laid out in three basic parts: sleeping space, kitchen and dining-conversation area. In recent years, the AMC has been moving away from the dormitory to smaller, family-sized sleeping rooms — primarily because the contemporary hiker increasingly desires a quieter, less crowded experience.

HELP BUILD THE TRAIL

You can help build the Colorado Trail by sending in your ideas and suggestions to the Editors. Copies of all correspondence will be forwarded to the Denver regional headquarters of the US Forest Service for evaluation. Write to:

Help Build the Trail
c/o Colorado Magazine
7190 W. 14th Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80215

AMC huts are manned by teams of older high school and college students who backpack in 90 percent of the supplies (70 to 100 pounds a load), do all the cooking and keep the places generally shipshape. Gaslights provide illumination and also extra heat; electric generators and unnecessary motors need not mar the mountainside. Where possible, gravity flow takes care of pumping the water. The trend is to helicopter out all human waste in sealed 55-gallon drums; it's costly, but necessary to avoid pollution.

In New Hampshire, the standard rate for overnight lodging, plus a full supper and breakfast, is $11.00 — but a variety of discount rates is available, and children under ten get by for slightly more than half price. Reservations may be made in advance and usually are.

Are the AMC huts popular? Despite the backpacking revolution, the answer is an unqualified "yes." Figures for 1972 show some 35,000 overnight stays at the club's huts in their meager 100 days of operation. Many of the users are

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comparatively new to the mountains—or else families with younger children unable to pack much of a load. The hut hiker carries only one-third to one-half what the backpacker totes.

The New Hampshire huts also experience plenty of “returners”—people who know and enjoy the special camaraderie of these mountain shelters and who come back, year after year, for this good fellowship alone. Nor is it uncommon for backpackers on extended trips to drop in for a night’s break from the rigors of setting up camp, and a switch from the rather tasteless and mushy diet of freeze-dried food.

AMC huts are scattered strategically about the White Mountain National Forest on a network of trails that enable the hiker to move from one shelter to the next, with a good day’s walk in between. It’s not unusual for parties to spend an entire week or more in the woods, stopping for a night or two at every hut in the system.

That’s how the system works elsewhere. Obviously, these European and eastern models cannot be transported to Colorado without some modifications.

“They’re good precedents,” says Regional Forester Lucas, “but I don’t think we should be bound by them. They’ll serve us best as points of departure.”

One immediate difference will be the need for winterizing, so that the Colorado Trail huts can serve cross-country skiers during the snow season. A second difference is that the Alps and the White Mountains are relatively compact ranges; the Rockies are vast—even when one is looking only at a single 300-plus-mile hiking route. Tying together a complete system of huts will mean building many of them.

There will also be similarities. The AMC huts are built to withstand violent winds up to 200 miles per hour and loads of eight of ten feet of snow. They include...
special facilities like rodent-proof storage vaults and drying rooms where rain-drenched hikers can get their clothing and other gear back in shape. Sites are selected so that the huts can be firmly anchored in granite, with a ready supply of good water (a spring, pond or creek) nearby.

In the mountains above Castle Creek south of Aspen, four already-built ski touring huts will certainly provide more local information on the particular needs of a statewide system in Colorado. Visitors bring their own food and sleeping bags to these shelters: (three A-frames, one chalet) which are sparsely furnished, have wood-burning stoves and ample stashes of firewood. There are no resident caretakers, so vandalism is a constant problem. These huts are operated by the US Ski Association and may be used by groups of from two to twenty people; the cost is $2.50 a night, and reservations are made with an Aspen resident. Most people reach the newest of these four huts by taking the chairlift from town to the top of Ajax Mountain — and then touring for about seven and one-half miles on the generally level crest of Richmond Hill (average elevation about 11,300 feet).

The many programs and well-formed philosophy of the White Mountain huts could also very well be applicable along the Colorado Trail. More and more, for example, the AMC is stiffening its hiring requirements for hutmen. In addition to cooking a good meal, washing dishes, sweeping floors and packing 100 pounds, crew members must also be articulate interpreters of the environment. Even the most casual hut guest is a member of a captive audience and an apt target for the club’s conservation message.

Despite their many positive aspects, the New Hampshire huts are also receiving some fresh criticism — most of it stemming from the growing interest in wilderness. “Attractive nuisance!” they’re politely called. Yet there are some excellent arguments in their favor. The most important is that a well-located hut concentrates, controls and even relieves pressure on the forests. There are comparatively few signs of such problems as campsite sprawl, bootleg trails, free-lance garbage pits and trees stripped of their branches for firewood around the structures. The waste is helicoptered out, not left behind.

In short, the human pressure falls on the hut itself, less on the land around it.

As more and more people flock to the forests of Colorado, the advantages of the hut system will become more apparent. One eastern wilderness-type camping area was recently closed to backpackers because of heavy overuse. “We find that we are destroying what we are trying to preserve,” commented the local ranger. Hikers, thousands of them, had completely worn away the natural forest cover; severe erosion followed, with ponds experiencing a sickening bloom of algae.

Such a prospect may seem remote for the wide open National Forests of the Rockies, but already some of the West’s National Parks are experiencing kindred problems.

A hut system may not be the final answer, but there’s sense in the direction it points. And the possibilities of the entire USFS Colorado Trail package — hiking route, plus ski touring loops, plus shelters — are immense. The US Forest Service has come up with a good basic concept: the desire to plan for quality year-round recreation and an open mind. The agency will be putting an exploratory crew in the field this summer, but that’s about as far as it can go.

The next step is up to the people of Colorado: those associated with the ski areas, resorts, hiking and touring clubs and conservation groups — anyone interested in helping to shape a significant and unique outdoor recreation plan for the Rockies.