

FROM THE AWARD-WINNING PBS DOCUMENTARY

DRIVE IT TODAY

THE NATIONAL PARK-TO-PARK HIGHWAY
MODERN ROUTE GUIDE

11 STATES . 12 PARKS . 1 LOOP

5,000 MILES THE 1920 MOTORISTS DROVE IN 76 DAYS.

YOU CAN DO IT IN THREE GLORIOUS WEEKS.

PAVING THE WAY: THE NATIONAL PARK-TO-PARK HIGHWAY

A FILM BY BEAR WADE | WINNER OF FOUR TELLY AWARDS | [PAVINGTHEWAY.TV](https://pavingtheway.tv)

Before You Turn the Key

In 1920, twelve motorists left Denver on a 5,000 mile loop connecting all twelve National Parks of the American West. They had no gas stations, no motels, and no reliable maps. Roughly 1.5% of their route was paved. This guide retraces that same grand loop on today's highways, park by park, in the same clockwise order the inaugural tour drove it.

The 1920 tour took 76 days because the motorists stopped in nearly every town to give speeches about good roads. You will not need to do that. A comfortable modern pace is 21 to 28 days. A determined driver can do it in 14, but this loop rewards the long way around.

How to use this guide

Each leg lists the modern highways that most closely follow the historic route, approximate mileage, and one thing worth knowing before you arrive. Distances are point to point estimates without side trips. Always verify current road conditions, park entrance reservations, and seasonal closures at [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) before each leg. Several of the most beautiful roads on this loop close for snow much of the year.

When to go

Mid June through mid September is the only window when every high mountain road on the loop is reliably open, including Trail Ridge Road and the Going-to-the-Sun Road. The 1920 tour left Denver on August 26th and raced the snow the whole way. Leave in late June and you will not have to.

The one purchase to make first

The America the Beautiful annual pass covers entry to every park on this route for one flat price. The 1920 motorists would have found this miraculous. Buy it at the first gate.

LEG 1

Denver to Rocky Mountain National Park

APPROX. 70 MILES | US 36

Take US 36 northwest through Boulder and Lyons to Estes Park, the same gateway town where the 1920 tour made its first stop. Enter the park and, if it is open, drive Trail Ridge Road, the highest continuous paved road in North America, cresting above 12,000 feet.

Worth knowing: *The switchbacks that defeated 1920 automobiles are now a smooth climb, but afternoon thunderstorms arrive on schedule in summer. Drive the high country before noon. Timed entry reservations are often required in peak season.*

LEG 2

Rocky Mountain to Yellowstone

APPROX. 550 MILES | I-25, US 20/26, US 14/16/20

Descend to I-25 north through Cheyenne and Casper, then follow US 20/26 west to Shoshoni, US 20 through the Wind River Canyon to Thermopolis, and on to Cody. Enter Yellowstone through the East Entrance, tracing the old Yellowstone Highway the 1920 tour celebrated: it had been finished just three months before they drove it.

Worth knowing: *Give Yellowstone the four full days the 1920 motorists gave it. They stayed at the Lake Hotel, which still welcomes guests more than a century later. Book many months ahead.*

LEG 3

Yellowstone to Glacier

APPROX. 400 MILES | US 89, I-15, US 2/89

Exit north through Mammoth Hot Springs and Gardiner, then follow US 89 north through Livingston and White Sulphur Springs toward Great Falls, continuing north to Browning and the St. Mary entrance. In 1920 this took four and a half days on the Yellowstone-Glacier Beeline Highway. Today it is one long, beautiful driving day.

Worth knowing: *The 1920 motorists had to put their cars on a train here because Glacier had no roads. Your reward for living in the future is the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the east to west crossing Stephen Mather was championing when the tour came through. Vehicle reservations are typically required in summer.*

LEG 4

Glacier to Mount Rainier

APPROX. 550 MILES | US 2, I-90, SR 410

Take US 2 west through Kalispell and the Idaho panhandle to Spokane, the city where pathfinder Anton Westgard, gravely ill, was forced to leave the tour he had mapped. Continue on I-90 west past Cle Elum, then SR 410 over Chinook Pass to Rainier's northeast corner and up to Paradise.

Worth knowing: *Spend two days at Paradise like the 1920 tour did, and raise a coffee to Westgard in Spokane on the way through. Chinook Pass generally opens late May through November.*

LEG 5

Mount Rainier to Crater Lake

APPROX. 400 MILES | US 12, I-5, OR 58, US 97, OR 138

Drop south via US 12 to I-5, roll down the length of western Oregon, then cut southeast on OR 58 to US 97 and take OR 138 up to Crater Lake's north entrance. The 1920 party reached the lake over fifty miles of what one official called the worst road he had ever traveled.

***Worth knowing:** Drive the full 33 mile Rim Drive. The road the motorists suffered for is now one of the great scenic loops in America. The north entrance and Rim Drive are typically open July through October.*

LEG 6

Crater Lake to Lassen Volcanic

APPROX. 230 MILES | US 97, CA 139, CA 44, CA 89

Head south through Klamath Falls on US 97, then CA 139 through remote high desert to CA 44 west, entering Lassen at the Manzanita Lake northwest corner. In 1920, Lassen had erupted just six years earlier and did not contain a single automobile road. The tour had to admire it from outside.

***Worth knowing:** You get what they could not: the Lassen Volcanic National Park Highway, CA 89, winds directly through the volcanic heart of the park. It is usually snow free only from roughly July through October.*

LEG 7

Lassen to Yosemite

APPROX. 300 MILES | CA 89, CA 99, CA 120

Drop out of the mountains to the Central Valley, run south on CA 99 past Sacramento to Manteca, then climb CA 120 through Big Oak Flat into Yosemite Valley, the granite cathedral that anchored the California stretch of the 1920 loop.

***Worth knowing:** Reservations are frequently required for peak summer entry. Book early, arrive at dawn, and let the valley open up in front of you the way it did for the motorists.*

LEG 8

Yosemite to Kings Canyon and Sequoia

APPROX. 130 MILES | CA 41, CA 180, GENERALS HWY

Exit south on CA 41 through Oakhurst to Fresno, then CA 180 east into Kings Canyon, which in 1920 was tiny General Grant National Park, built around a single giant tree. The Generals Highway connects south into Sequoia beneath trees older than the Roman Empire.

***Worth knowing:** Stand at the General Grant Tree, the Nation's Christmas Tree, exactly where the tour stood. The Generals Highway is narrow and winding; take it slow like it is 1920.*

LEG 9

Sequoia to Zion

APPROX. 600 MILES | CA 99, CA 58, I-15, UT 9

Descend to Visalia and Bakersfield, cross the Tehachapis on CA 58, then take I-15 northeast across the Mojave through Las Vegas to UT 9 and Springdale, Zion's gateway. The 1920 tour detoured through Los Angeles here and then crossed this same desert on what would become Route 66, with dust in their food, their clothes, and their engines.

Worth knowing: *This is the longest leg, just as it was in 1920 when a 500 mile desert push nearly broke the party's resolve. Cross the Mojave in the morning, and consider an overnight in Las Vegas or St. George. Private vehicles are limited on Zion Canyon Scenic Drive in season; ride the shuttle.*

LEG 10

Zion to Grand Canyon

APPROX. 250 MILES (SOUTH RIM) | UT 9, US 89, AZ 64

Leave through the Zion-Mount Carmel Tunnel, an engineering marvel finished a decade after the tour, then follow US 89 south through Kanab to Cameron and take AZ 64 west along the rim to Grand Canyon Village. For the quieter North Rim, take US 89A and AZ 67 instead.

Worth knowing: *The 1920 motorists proved an ordinary car could reach this rim. Arrive for sunset at Desert View or Mather Point, named for the man whose vision built the highway you just drove. The North Rim closes in winter.*

LEG 11

Grand Canyon to Mesa Verde

APPROX. 280 MILES | AZ 64, US 160

Return east to Cameron and pick up US 160 through Tuba City and Kayenta, skirting Monument Valley, past Four Corners to Cortez, Colorado, and the entrance to Mesa Verde, the final park of the loop.

Worth knowing: Mesa Verde's cliff dwellings are reached today on good park roads, a far cry from the Knife Edge Trail the 1920 tour arrived on, famously described as slippery rotted misery. Many cliff dwelling tours require advance tickets.

LEG 12

Mesa Verde to Denver: The Homecoming

APPROX. 400 MILES | US 160, I-25

Follow US 160 east through Durango and Pagosa Springs, over Wolf Creek Pass and La Veta Pass to Walsenburg, then I-25 north through Pueblo, where the 1920 tour held its final meeting at the Congress Hotel, and on into Denver up the same South Broadway corridor where sixty automobiles escorted the motorists home on November 9th, 1920.

Worth knowing: When you roll into Denver, you will have closed the same grand loop that invented the American road trip. The 1920 motorists got a banquet. You have earned one too.

The Fine Print of Adventure

Total loop distance

Roughly 4,200 to 5,000 modern highway miles depending on rim choices and side trips, remarkably close to the 1920 mileage. The roads got better. The loop stayed grand.

Reservations and passes

Several parks on this route use timed entry or vehicle reservations in peak season, and policies change year to year. Check [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) for each park and [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) for bookings before you commit to dates. The America the Beautiful pass covers all twelve entrances.

Seasonal road closures to plan around

Trail Ridge Road (Rocky Mountain), the Going-to-the-Sun Road (Glacier), Chinook Pass (Rainier), Rim Drive and the north entrance (Crater Lake), the park highway (Lassen), and the North Rim (Grand Canyon) all close or restrict access outside summer. Build your trip between late June and mid September to catch them all open.

Go deeper

The book that inspired the film, *The Playground Trail* by Lee and Jane Whiteley, remains the definitive mile by mile guide to the original 1920 route, built from the archival photographs of tour photographer A.G. Lucier.

Watch the story before you drive it

PAVING THE WAY: The National Park-to-Park Highway tells the full story of the 1920 inaugural tour, from Stephen Mather's vision to Anton Westgard's sacrifice to the homecoming on South Broadway. Winner of four Telly Awards. Stream the two part series at pavingtheway.tv.

Safe travels, and take the long way around.

Bear Wade, Director