

# SNOWY RANGE

FIND RIDING  
TREASURE IN

## Southern Wyoming

It looks like a scene from the Beartooth Highway... Why not? It's almost as good.

### By Dottie Rankin

The jumping off point for our June 28-July 1 Snowy Range Scenic Byway adventure was Laramie, Wyo.

However, reaching Laramie from our Gillette home base required a 250-mile trek.

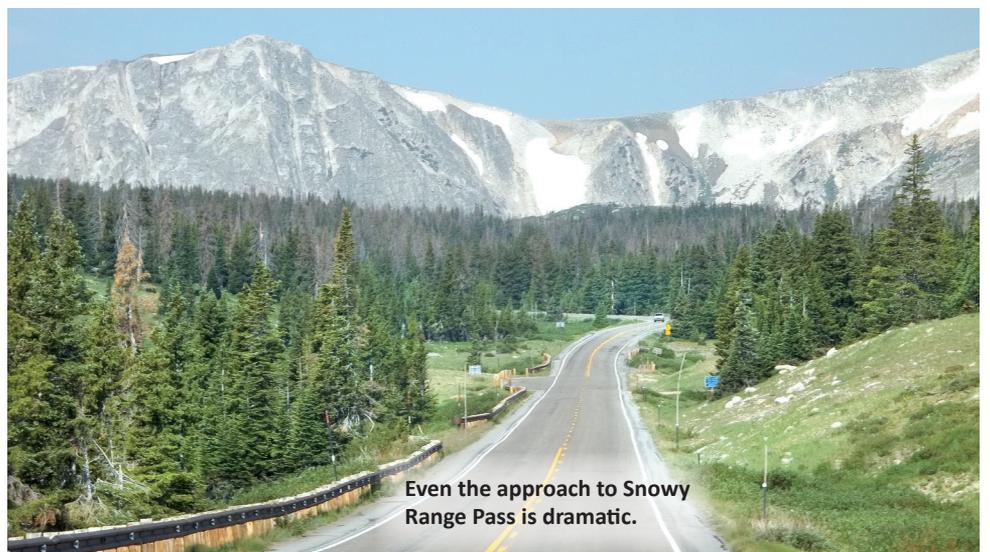
We would traverse the Wyoming prairie surrounding our Gillette home in northeast Wyoming, then edge along the foothills of the Laramie Mountains to the south before topping them and dropping into Laramie, the conclusion of our first leg.

The Snowy Range Scenic Byway follows Hwy. 130 for 29 miles through the center of the Medicine Bow National Forest. Snowy Range was the second designated National Forest Scenic Byway in the U.S. Construction began in 1920 and was completed in six years. It was originally

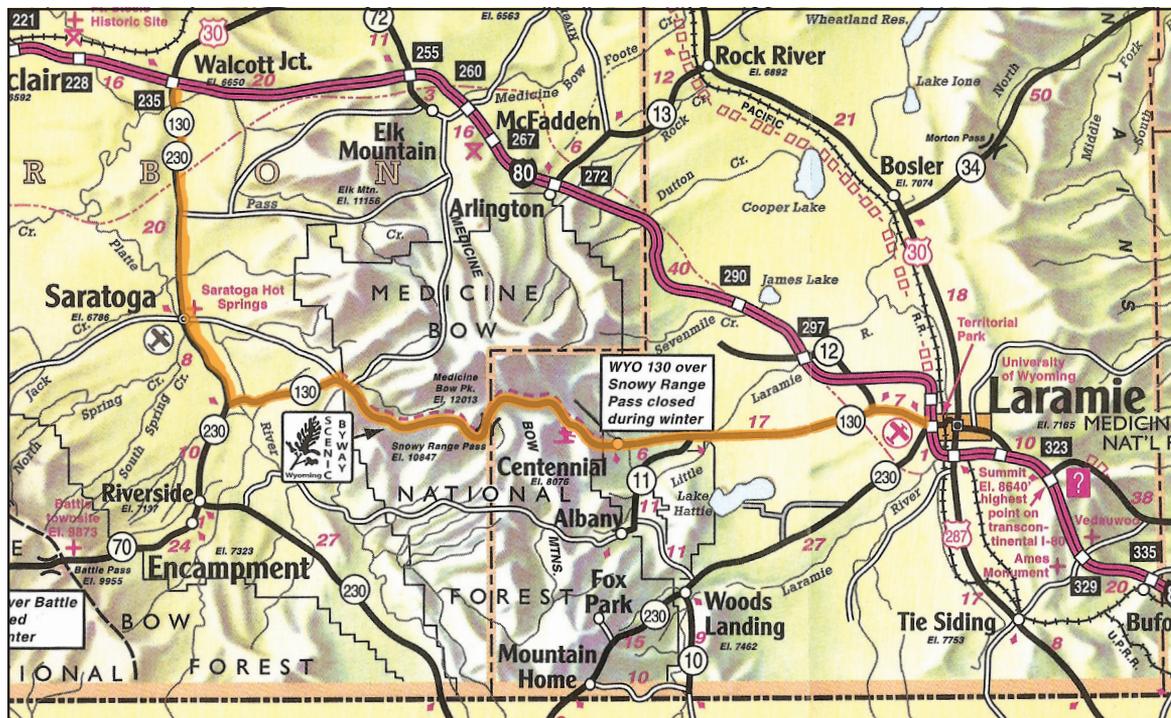
called the "Great Skyroad."

The Byway is located in southeastern Wyoming and can be accessed by exiting I-80 at Laramie or at Walcott Junction approximately 22 miles east of Rawlins.

It is interesting to note that the Byway is one of the shortest of Wyoming's scenic byways, both in length and in the number of months during the year it can be driven. It is not plowed during the winters so is closed from approximately November



Even the approach to Snowy Range Pass is dramatic.



town of Centennial is located 27 miles west of Laramie and was our first stop. This is where the landscape transforms with increasing beauty and the road becomes far more interesting to ride.

At 8,000 feet, Centennial could be regarded as the gateway to the Snowy Range Mountains and boasts year-round recreational opportunities.

This town was at first lightly populated by settlers seeking timber on Centennial Mountain which rises majestically above the town to the west. Railroad ties, the Homestead Act and gold all added to the growth of

to April; plan accordingly.

This scenic drive is a two-lane and travels over the second highest mountain pass in the state. The byway is one of the most scenic in Wyoming and, indeed, maybe even the nation.

Bright and early the next morning, we got the show on the road. West of Laramie, State Hwy. 130 is pretty much a straight shot and the scenery consisted of windswept and starkly barren high plains.

### Heading for the top

That desolation came to an abrupt end

about 25 miles from town where we started climbing and winding into the captivating and pristine alpine country of the Snowy Range.

Up to this point the road conditions were generally very good with ample shoulders and were pleasant to travel on.

The "Snowies," as the locals call them, are a part of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest. It is easy enough to imagine how the mountain range got its name judging from the snow still clinging to the peaks in July.

The quaint, charming, old mining

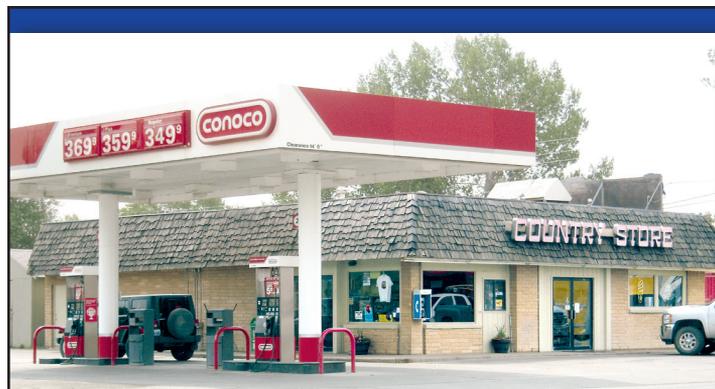
this historic town.

### Where the going gets good

We stopped in Centennial long enough to get a look around, absorb some of its history and take note of the interesting buildings.

Just past the town, Hwy. 130 started winding and we worked our way up into the range, navigating a few sweeping curves on our way to Snowy Range Pass.

The views from the top were breathtaking and picture perfect with



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12,031-foot Medicine Bow Peak as a backdrop. It is the highest peak in the Snowy Range.

Our next task was locating Libby Flats Observation Site which officially marks the highest point on the byway at 10,847 feet. This spot offers a great view of the Snowy Range mountains including Medicine Bow Peak and Sugarloaf Mountain.

There is a set of binoculars mounted in a

round stone structure atop the observation deck at Libby Flats. There was astounding scenic landscape in every direction. The beauty was so abundant and stunning that it was hard to know just where to look.

I was glad the road was in good condition and the decent shoulders allowed safe passage for the numerous bicyclists. There were also plenty of turnouts and roadside parking areas to accommodate the slow and gawking.



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## Medicine Bow Peak tragedy

*As beautiful and serene as Medicine Bow Peak is, it leaves a legacy shrouded in tragedy and sadness.*

*In 1955 United Airlines Flight 409 departed Denver and was headed to Salt Lake City when it crashed into the top of Medicine Bow Peak near the town of Centennial. It killed all 66 people on board. There were 63 passengers and three crew members.*

*At the time, this was considered the deadliest plane crash in U.S. history. Victims included five members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and military personnel.*



Convenient pullouts make snapping memory-making great scenics easy.

### Lakes on top of the world

Mirror Lake and Lake Marie, which are considered sister lakes and are right up the road from Libby Flats, were side-destinations. Both

these lakes are glacier-fed. During the early summer months there is “pink watermelon” snow up on the mountains that is due to bacteria that thrive on year-round glacial snow.

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There were scores of campers and day users. The natural beauty that surrounds the lakes is breathtaking. The signs said there was fishing, swimming and paddle boats.

### Snowy Range has it all

As a whole this route is a good mix of sweeping curves, a few sections of tight twisties and straight-aways with the occasional hairpin thrown in for thrills. It is

a ball to ride.

The surface is in good condition, the grade does not exceed 6.5 percent and has ample shoulders to pull over to the side. The visibility was a bit iffy at times with the blind curves and we had to be careful when passing. We often took advantage of the many pull-offs to let people pass and many others used them to let us by.

Touring the Snowy Range Scenic Byway took us a couple of hours but we stopped a lot to take pictures and generally play

tourist. The traffic was of medium volume and tended to bunch up around the most scenic spots.

In all, it was a fantastic journey and we encountered a huge diversity of landscapes, everything from prairie and barren high plains to alpine splendor and lakes at the feet of glaciers.

We headed back to Laramie with plenty of stories, dozens of photos and with our heads full good memories.

It was a good place to be.

## Saratoga, Wyo. – The “other gateway” to Snowy Range

Saratoga, situated along Hwy. 230, is the western access to the Snowy Range Scenic Byway.

Breathtaking views await and attract artists and photographers. The town is surrounded by Elk Mountain, the Snowy Range mountains and the Sierra Madre mountains.

There are hiking trails for those who are beginners or more experienced. Recreational choices abound.

When it is time to dismount and relax, don't worry, there are plenty of hospitality choices here. A good assortment of excellent restaurants, lodging,

shopping as well as a calendar full of local events to satisfy diverse interests are all available.

**There are motels, Victorian hotels, B&Bs, resorts, RV and tent camps, dude ranches, cabins ... whatever a traveler could desire.**

Just some of the “must do” experiences in Saratoga:

- Free hot springs, aka the “Hobo Pool.”

There is a changing room complete with showers and bathroom facilities. The hot pool averages 106

degrees at its coolest part to 119 degrees in its warmest. The “Not So Hot” pool is 100 degrees.

- Adjacent to the Hobo Pool is the Saratoga Municipal Swimming Pool which is one of the few remaining outdoor pools in Wyoming. Just the ticket after a long day in the heat and wind.

Both pools are located on Walnut Street.

- North Platte River. Saratoga has over 100 miles of freestone river flowing throughout the Platte Valley with blue ribbon trout galore. The river is easy to reach in several places at public accesses.



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*“This country offers some of the most scenic riding you can encounter - from plains to peaks”.*

*It's a destination you don't want to leave off of your bucket list”*

# Battle Hwy. 70 is great Snowy Range sidebar

By Dottie Rankin

Having just ridden the majestic Snowy Range Scenic Byway, our expectations for Hwy. 70, more commonly known as the "Battle Highway," were comparatively low.

Well, it compared very favorably! It has a beauty all its own and is stunningly picturesque.

Our fuel tanks were complaining but we found a fuel/convenience/general/feed store and makeshift coffee spot all in tiny Riverside, Wyo., located at the junction of Hwys. 230 and 70. The atmosphere, and the girl behind the counter, were very friendly. She seemed to know everyone.

Just down the road from Riverside is Encampment, or Grand Encampment as

was thinking slight surface breakage or rough spots. I didn't anticipate the road was gone!

We were detoured around – or right beside – 75-80 yards of asphalt and roadbed which had apparently detached and slid down the mountain in not one but two places. I was hoping the detour didn't end up sliding down the mountain with me on it!

We trust it has been repaired for the 2013 season.

## Aspen Alley

As much fun as we were having riding the gently curving and twisting road, we were anxious to find a local segue known as "Aspen Alley." We had heard how beautiful it was, but we didn't know where it was nor how well it was marked.

As we were riding west from Encampment we saw the first groves of aspen just about five miles west of town. The further west we progressed the more aspen trees we saw intermingled with ponderosa pine and

spruce. Quite a view!

When I saw the lead rider's tail light illuminate and stay lit, I knew we had struck "aspen" gold. We were approximately 23 miles west of Encampment and I gave a silent high-five when I saw Forest Service Road 801 on a big sign. The road is also known as Deep Creek Road.

It was very well marked and there was no doubt we had found the right route. Deep Creek Road/Forest



Aspen Alley forms a tunnel of vegetation.

Service Road 801 runs north from Hwy. 70 through the national forest. After about a mile we reached what is known as Aspen Alley, and oh what a mile it is.

It was gravel and usually packed gravel poses little problem, but this area was being logged and the road surface was covered with loose material, big chunks of wood with a ridge in the middle. The sides of the road were strewn with all kinds of logging debris.

Slow and steady was the pace and we made it unscathed.

I was surprised by the aspens here. Aspens usually appear ghostly with white bark and black knots, often stubby with twisted branches and trunks. Here they stand proud and tall, often over 50 feet! It was an awe inspiring sight to see the sunlight sparkling through the treetops that formed a canopy of sorts over the road.

Aspen Alley was a highlight of our Battle Highway explorations and is a must-see. I would do it again in a heartbeat.



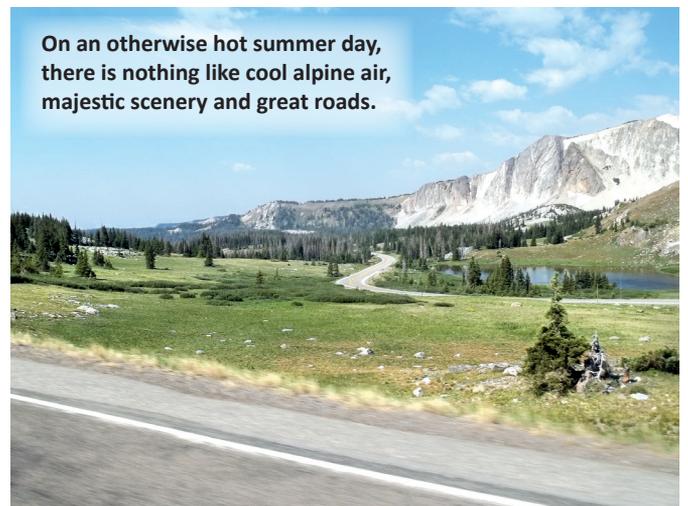
The Battle Highway has variety and some well radiused and tight turns.

it used to be known. This town has a long and interesting history but we had tracks to make.

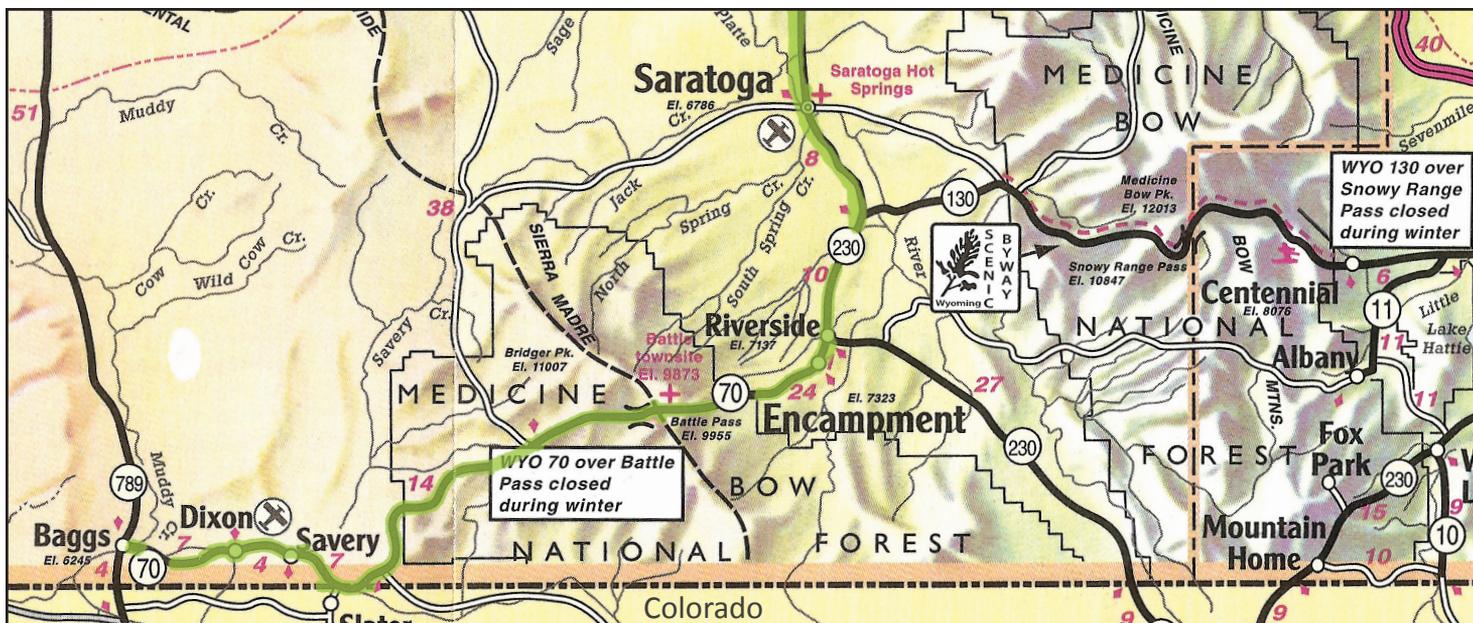
We were finding the roadway was not quite as quality as Snowy Range. The Battle Highway had a somewhat rougher surface, quite a few tar snakes and the shoulders were not very wide; however, not in bad condition.

There weren't as many turnouts but there was not as much traffic, either. If you are looking for a solitary route you can do at your own pace, yet a ride with plenty of curves, a hairpin or two and loads of fun to navigate, look no further.

We were 15 or so miles west of Encampment when we started seeing signs warning us of road damage. I



On an otherwise hot summer day, there is nothing like cool alpine air, majestic scenery and great roads.



### Little Snake River Valley

After we returned to Hwy. 70, we started descending the mountain into the pretty Little Snake River Valley through the towns of Savery, Dixon and our destination, Baggs. We even dipped briefly into Colorado but didn't know it until we saw the sign saying "Welcome to Wyoming."

As we continued the descent the road



Earl Rankin taking a break at Mirror Lake.

hideout.

This day included everything from glorious scenic displays of very different natures, treacherous parking lots, disappearing roads and a lot of history.

It included some fantastic motorcycle riding, some great roads, good food and beautiful weather. It was a day with diverse

and distinct pleasures. It was a complete, joyful and rewarding success.

Without a doubt the scenery between Riverside and Baggs along Hwy. 70 in southeast Wyoming is one of Mother Nature's most impressive displays.

I just added it to my list of favorite roads.



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flattened and mostly straightened out. We had an uneventful but blisteringly hot ride into Baggs, which was the end of the line for us.

We stopped at a little Mexican restaurant called El Rio for some lunch (it was delicious) and a cold soda and found a friendly, family atmosphere that was most welcoming in the heat of the day.

I am always on the lookout for the historical significance of the places we visit. Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and their Wild Bunch supposedly made Baggs their home. The Gaddis/Mathews cabin on Hwy. 789 in Baggs was reportedly the outlaws'