

Ouray-Area Fall-Color Cheat Sheet

Google Maps

I am including links to two Google maps: One for the Ouray area and another for the Ridgway area. All the points listed in this Cheat Sheet are on these maps, plus many more. It is my planning map for when I go to Ouray. Enjoy!

Ridgway area:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zxytoCjVKsz0.kJcTn2u-C5-0&usp=sharing>

Ouray and Silverton area:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zxytoCjVKsz0.kyP7NFKPBIQ4&usp=sharing>

Around Ouray

It is not for naught that Ouray bills itself as Switzerland of America. Rugged peaks surround a gem of a town.

All of Main Street is a National Historic District. Notable structures include the Ouray County Courthouse, St. Elmo Hotel, St. Joseph's Miners Hospital (now Ouray County Historical Society and Museum), Western Hotel, Wright's Opera House, Beaumont Hotel, City Hall, and Walsh Library.

The economy of this former mining town is entirely based on tourism now. Summer brings wildflower seekers, off-roaders, mountain bikers, and motorcycle riders. Autumn brings pilgrims seeking the best leaf color in colorful Colorado. Winter is for hardy ice climbers. Photographers love Ouray any time of year.

Around Ouray are some scenic locations great with and without fall color.

Start: Ouray at the intersection of 6th and 550 (38.0227738, -107.6715249)

Name	From 6 th and 550 ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Box Canyon Falls	Go south for 0.6 miles. Turn right (south) onto Camp Bird Rd. Continue 300 feet and then take a slight right onto Box Canyon road. Continue 0.3 miles.	38.01826, -107.677807	It's a 285-foot waterfall in a box canyon! With a view of the textbook Angular Unconformity thrown in. A metal walkway takes you to the base of the falls. Walk both the Box Canyon Falls Trail and the High Bridge Trail which includes a clear view of the Angular Unconformity. Birds like this canyon too.	Mist from the falls makes surfaces slick, especially if temperatures are near freezing. Wipe your leans before each shot. Take a tripod because it's dark in the slot canyon.
Baby Bathtubs Trail	Go south for 1.2 miles. Turn left (east) onto CR 16. After about 500 feet, make a slight left onto Amphitheater Campground Road. Continue about 400 feet and park.	38.017948, -107.66524	Hike about 0.5 miles east along the colorful water-scoured rock streambed of Portland Creek. The bathtubs start at 0.3 miles.	There are cobbles along the creek, so watch your footing.
Amphitheater Campground	Go south for 1.2 miles. Turn left (east) onto CR 16. After about 500 feet, make a slight left onto Amphitheater Campground Road. Continue for 0.9 miles. Take a slight right and go another 600 feet.	38.0224507, -107.6629471	On a mountain slope overlooking Ouray, the Amphitheater is both a campground and a viewpoint. Set among Gambel oak and confers, it provides views of crags to north and south. It is perfect for a long-exposure image of the street grid of Ouray after dark.	
Cascade Falls	Go north two blocks. Turn right (east) on 8 th Avenue. Continue for about a quarter mile and park. Hike 0.2 miles east up a 175-foot elevation rise to the base of the falls.	38.0249797, -107.6668632 (Park)	Cascade Falls is visible from all over town, but especially lovely from its base. Shoot up to a slice of sky. Or, use trees to frame the falls and red cliffs. For silky-water pictures, use a tripod and neutral-density filter for a long exposure.	The trail is moderately rugged and steep; and around the falls, slippery. Wear a slicker and shoes that grip when wet. Wipe your lens before each shot.

Highway 550 - The Million Dollar Highway

Highway 550 from Ouray to Silverton routinely makes the worldwide top-ten list of scenic roads—and the list of the most dangerous and scary in Colorado. The "Million Dollar" designation technically only applies from Ouray to Red Mountain Pass, but, hey, we won't be so picky.

To the photographer, this highway offers layer-cake cliffs, U-shaped glacial valleys, cirques, red mountain slopes, gaudy boulders, ancient calderas, sweeping curves, panoramic vistas, avalanche chutes and shelters, ghost towns and mining ruins, aspen groves, mountain lakes, and some of the cleanest air in the United States. Use this route to assess the state of leaf color throughout the region. Red Mountain pass is usually the first area to peak, around September 25th.

As I mentioned, Highway 550 can be scary and dangerous. Much of the route is just two narrow lanes with vertical drop-offs unprotected by guardrails. Did I mention late-to-work locals and distracted tourists? Throw in a little ice and snow, and ... you get the picture.

Length: 41.8 miles

Start: Ouray at the intersection of 6th and 550 (38.0227738, -107.6715249)

End: South entrance of Old Lime Creek Road (37.657834, -107.809181)

Site	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Lookout Point	1.4	Park on the right.	38.0166164, -107.6707846	Look northward down on Ouray. Come after sunset for a long-exposure shot of the street grid of Ouray.	Stay off the road and watch out for distracted drivers.
Bear Creek Falls	2.8	Park on the right.	37.999963, -107.660206	Shoot this 200-foot waterfall from directly above. You can get rainbows on a sunny afternoon.	Park in the parking area, well out of traffic. And stay in the viewing area.
Double-S curve	5.8	Park alongside the road, either above or below the curves. You want your vehicle out of your picture.	37.967021, -107.659385	Four switchbacks in a row! Although there is no view where the whole complex is visible, you can get cars going both directions in one shot. Red Mountain Creek is just to the west.	Pull as far off the road as you can and watch out for distracted drivers who swing wide on the curves.

Site	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Crystal Lake	6.4	Park along road. Walk west.	37.959607, -107.662539	With luck (or persistent visits), you can get a magnificent dawn shot of two glowing Red Mountains mirrored in the lake. For the best viewpoint, go to the far side of the dam. Also shoot up the slopes across the road.	This spot is popular with scene-clogging photographers and tourists. Try not to kill any of them.
Ironton ghost town	8.5	Turn left (east) onto CR 20D. Continue for 750 ft.	37.933367, -107.680264	Just a few hundred feet down CR 20D, Ironton offers several well-preserved original buildings.	Assume that the ground is underlain with hidden mineshafts and that buildings collapse at the slightest touch.
Idarado mine complex	11.3	For the overlook, take the drive (right) up to the overlook parking lot. For the trestle area, pull off the road to the left into the area near the trestle.	37.91474, -107.70212	From the overlook you can see a vast swath of the Idarado Mine complex, including the entrance to the Treasury Tunnel (behind a metal door in the hillside), Yankee Girl Mine head frame and tailings dump, and the trestle that carried the tracks going from the Treasury Tunnel to a mill in the valley. Be sure to take a look at the various houses near the overlook. Photographing near the trestle, offers a variety of viewpoints for the area around Yankee Girl Mine.	
Red Mountain Pass	13.1	--	37.896581, -107.713437	The road around 11,008-foot Red Mountain Pass provides great views of mines, especially in late-afternoon light, and of the red slopes and orange mine tailings.	
FS 825	13.2	Turn left (east) onto FS 825 (AKA CR 14). Continue 5.9 miles back to 550, south of Chattanooga ghost town.	37.8958531, -107.7135873 End: 37.8582352, -107.7240372	This moderately easy drive takes you above tree line with view of many surrounding mountains. You can also watch Jeeps climbing the start of the Black Bear trail across 550.	Do not climb on or drive near mining structures.

Site	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Chattanooga ghost town.	16.1	The ghost town is on both sides of the road.	37.875833, -107.726389	Here, a few remaining mining structures provide foreground for leaf color. This site actually works best on a cloudless afternoon.	Park off the road and take care crossing the road.
Christ of the Mines Shrine	22.4	Turn left (east) onto 15 th Street. Continue for 0.5 miles and park. The shrine is on the left.	37.812844, -107.671021	Above Silverton, 500 feet up the side of Anvil Mountain, you find a 16-foot-tall, 12-ton Carrara-marble statue of Christ in an alcove of colorful local rocks that provide an aura. Capture images from the side with mountains in the distance and from behind with Silverton below.	
Hillside Cemetery	22.8	Turn slightly left onto CR 2. In 300 feet continue straight (east) on Greene St (110) for 1.2 miles. Continue onto County Road 34 for 0.2 miles. Go slightly left onto Co Rd 34A. Park along the road outside the gate.	37.819215, -107.654190	Capture gravestones with the street grid of Silverton below and mountains above. Search for interesting grave markers; for example, Kid Thomas who was lynched, baby Violet who lived only 14 days, or the earliest burial from 1875.	
Little Molas Lake	28.9	Turn right (west) onto FS 584. After 0.8 miles turn left to stay on FS 584. In 500 feet, turn left into the parking area.	37.742757, -107.70833	Get here in the evening for reflections of Snowdon Peak to the southeast or the Needles Mountains to the east.	

Site	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Molas Overlook	29.3	--	37.7372, -107.69731	The overlook is near 10,910-foot Molas Pass, the highest point between Silverton and Durango. The overlook provides panoramic views over lakes to near and distant mountains. Be on the lookout for black bears, elk, mule deer, and mountain goats.	
Andrews Lake	30.1	Turn left onto Andrews Lake Road. Continue for 0.7 miles.	37.728231, -107.710733	Andrews Lake is the classic Rocky Mountain lake. Walk around the lake and get shots of surrounding mountain ranges. Hike up the Crater Lake Trail to capture the lake in its setting.	
Old Lime Creek Road	41.8 or 33.5	Turn left (east) onto Old Lime Creek Road. Continue 12 miles back to 550. You can drive either direction. From south-to-north, drop-offs are on the right side.	South end: 37.657834, -107.809181. North end: 37.721281, -107.749609	Keep your eye out for a vast beaver pond covered with lily pads, a low stone wall beside the road, a Road Narrows sign on an already narrow road, views down into Lime Creek, aspen groves, willow groves, butterflies, and birds.	In places the road is a bumpy one-lane trail with steep drop offs, blind corners, and two-way traffic. You need 4WD, high ground clearance, and rugged tires.

CR 14 Cutler Creek Rd.

County Road 14 provides a scenic, if bumpy, ride through autumn color.

Start: Ouray at the intersection of 6th and 550 (38.0227738, -107.6715249)

End: 38.09121, -107.67190

From 6th and 550 in Ouray, drive 2.1 miles north. Take a slight right onto CR-14 (Dexter Creek Road). After 1 mile, turn left onto CR 14A. Continue about 2.8 miles. Along the route enjoy views of Whitehouse Mountain that combine Red rocks and yellow aspen. Take a vertical panorama where the road crosses the creek. Backtrack to the pasture with the crude barbed-wire fence. Hike into the pasture to find rainbow aspen (green, yellow, orange, and red on one tree.)

This road has deep ruts and big bumps! You will need 4WD with high ground clearance. Plus, patience and experience.

Highway 62

Highway 62 runs west from Ridgway to Placerville. Along the way are the snowcapped Sneffels range which backstops authentic Western ranches. It is one of the most productive fall-color routes anywhere.

Start: At the intersection of Highways 62 and 550 in Ridgway (38.1517193, -107.74855790).

End: At the entrance to Last Dollar Road (38.099307, -107.912693).

Length: 12.1 miles.

Along Highway 62 and its tributaries you can frame up combinations of long valleys, snowcapped peaks, meadows bordered with aspen boles, dense forests of aspen and scrub oak, curving roads, rustic fences, reflections in ponds and mud puddles, hay bales, cattle, and working cowboys. While Highway 62 is paved and easy to drive, the side roads may require an off-road capable vehicle and driver.

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
CR 5 (Girl Scout Camp Road)	0.8.	Turn left (south) onto South Amelia Street. In 0.3 miles, turn right (west) onto CR 5. Continue 8.9 miles. In the Uncompahgre National Forest, the road becomes FS 852 or Miller Mesa Road.	38.147214, -107.764206 End: 38.05735, -107.751793	The best fall color usually occurs the first week in October. CR 5 is not as busy as CR 7 or CR 9.	Until you reach the National Forest, the road crosses private land. Stay on the road or directly beside it. In the National Forest, the road is rougher and can be slippery after snow or rain.

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
CR 7 (East Dallas Creek Road)	4.9	Turn left (south) onto CR 7. Continue for 7.4 miles.	38.139113, -107.816262 End: 38.04265, -107.811778	Stop at the pond with a view to Mount Sneffels. The pond is on private land, so shoot it from the road. Views get dramatically better as you go south, especially the last couple of miles. After mile 7, you encounter a valley filled with willows that is spectacular at sunset.	Until you reach the National Forest, the road crosses private land. Stay on the road or directly beside it. Once on Forest Service land, the road gets rocky, rutted, and slippery.
CR 9 (West Dallas Creek Road)	6.2	Turn left (south) onto CR 9. The sign says Dallas Creek Road. Continue 5.8 miles. CR 9 becomes FS 850 where you enter the Uncompahgre National Forest.	38.124446, -107.832956 End: 38.056447, -107.853416	The route goes through the middle of the 17,000-acre Double RL Ranch, owned by Ricky and Ralph Lauren. The cowboys and cattle are real, and the aspen and oak are spectacular.	Photographers along the road are considered paparazzi. Stay on the road. Hang back if you see a helicopter taking off or landing. It can kick up lens-ruining dust and rocks (deliberately?). On the National Forest, the road is rougher, ruttier, and muddier.
Dallas Divide	10.7	Turn left (south) into the parking area.	38.0937, -107.888317	The Dallas Divide is the easiest place to capture spectacular fall color. It offers a 200-degree view of aspens, cottonwood, and scrub oak stretching out to the snow-capped Sneffels range. It is best shot around sunrise or sunset. It is especially dramatic with a storm blowing through. Don't miss the wooden fence on the eastern end of the parking area. The extensive views here make it a perfect place to gauge the progression of leaf color.	Mid-day is the worst time to capture the scene because it requires shooting into the sun, as the view is to the south.

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Last Dollar Road	12.1	Turn left (south) onto Last Dollar Road (58P). Continue about 21 miles till you reach 145 near Telluride. The route may be labeled CR 58P on the northern section, FS 638 in the middle, and CR T60 on the southern end.	38.099307, -107.912693 End: 37.953538, -107.895784	In addition to the usual glories, LDR throws in flocks of sheep, a vast scree field, impressive ranch gateways, and stunning views of Wilson Mesa and Wilson Peak. Drive it again in early July for the wildflowers.	The middle section is narrow, bumpy, and rutted, with several small stream crossings. When wet, it is impassable. Do not attempt it without a 4x4 with high ground clearance and off-road tires.

Ridgway State Park

Ridgway State Park is a triple blessing for photographers: a convenient base of operations, a scenic and wildlife-rich area, and a viewpoint for distant mountain ridges. Wildlife includes 140 species of resident and migratory birds, deer, elk, big horn sheep, moose, marmot, black bear, bobcat, and mountain lion. At sunset, views from Elk Ridge Campground and the Visitor Center Overlook are sublime.

From the intersection of 550 and 62, go north on 550 for 4.5 miles. Turn left into Ridgway State Park. To reach the best viewpoint, continue 0.5 miles and then turn left onto Elk Ridge Campground Road. Continue 0.5 miles.

GPS coordinates: 38.2198285, -107.737362.

Owl Creek Pass Road

The Owl Creek Pass road has what the fall photographer needs: every leaf color possible; picturesque ranches, stunning vistas; jagged, serrated; and fluted ridges; volcanic towers, spires, and chimneys; the setting of a classic John Wayne movie, wildlife,

and the occasional cattle drive. And an ordinary car can do the main route: No narrow ledge roads, no rocky, rutted trails! The roads along forks of the Cimarron, however, will require a 4X4.

The route starts 1.7 miles north of 550 and 62 in Ridgway. Turn onto CR 10 east and just follow signs to Owl Creek Pass and then Silver Jack Reservoir. The route described here ends at Beaver Lake Campground. The road itself continues another 17.2 miles to Highway 50.

Start: Intersection of 550 and Ouray County Road 10 (38.1739718, -107.7420614).

End: Beaver Lake Campground (38.2506677, -107.5450587).

Caution: Google Maps and most GPS units have the route wrong. At 5.4 miles in, they try to take you onto a rough, overgrown side road. Just follow the signs.

Some of the mileages here may be a bit off. **Use the GPS coordinates.**

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Ranch zone	0 – 6.0		38.1903334, -107.6539136	Find patterns among ranch buildings, hay bales, horses, and cattle all linked by fences, roads, and driveways and backstopped by mountain peaks.	If you encounter cattle on the road, go slow, really slow.
Oak forest	6.0-9.0		38.1908983, -107.6333142 (and a mile either side).	Shoot close-ups of clusters of burgundy, crimson, orange, and gold leaves. Put some mountains in background.	When parking, pull as far off the road as you can. There are some hidden ditches and drop-offs, so be careful.
Vista Point	9.1	Turn right onto the spur road for 0.2 miles.	38.1806521, -107.6204181	At sunset and slightly later, shoot Courthouse Mountain presiding over aspen and oak forests.	
Mountain views	10.0 – 12.0		38.1819382, -107.6115077	Look north to the Cimarron Ridge and southwest to Mt Sneffels both with a mid-ground of oaks and aspens - especially lovely after an early snow.	Find a good place to pull off the road and then walk back if necessary.

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Aspen groves	11.5		38.1670222, -107.5881189	Miles and miles of aspens. Capture the pristine white boles rising 50 feet to the glowing yellow canopy. Seek out golden ferns and large lichen-covered boulders on the ground.	
Katie's Meadow	14.4	Look for the meadow on the left (west) with a zig-zag wooden fence along its edge.	38.1621339, -107.5678495	Get the zigzag wooden fence along the southern edge. Listen to hear Robert Duval tell John Wayne, "Pretty big talk for a one-eyed fat man." and watch Wayne respond by putting the reins in his mouth and a pistol in each hand.	
Owl Creek Pass	15.4		38.154419, -107.559328	OK, it's only 10,114 feet and hemmed in by tall aspen. Shoot up through the canopy overlapping the road to get Courthouse Rock or to capture the sun as a starburst.	
Cimarron West Fork (CR 860)	15.7	Turn right (south) onto FS 860A. It is the first road east of the pass, at the start of a sweeping 180-degree curve. After 1.5 miles you reach Courthouse Mountain Trailhead. Beyond this point the road gets rough.	38.20308, -107.517085 End: 8.14421, -107.525167	Look for gaps where the branches frame spires and towers. Capture small scenes. Look for lynx and bobcat.	South of the Courthouse Mountain Trailhead, the road gets rough. Turn around before you get stuck.
Cimarron Middle Fork (CR 861)	21.8	Turn right (south) onto CR 861 (861.1?) and go about 4.6 miles.	38.20308, -107.517085 End: 38.14421, -107.525167	Look for gaps with views of mountain peaks and ridges. Stop and examine the double-log fence. Shoot it from either direction with mountains and leaf color in the background.	The road gets rougher as you head south. Turn around before you get stuck.

Name	Miles along route	From main route ...	Position	Description and notes	Cautions
Cimarron East Fork (CR 858)	22.0	Turn right (south) onto CR 858 and go about 1.3 miles.	38.205487, -107.515668 End: 38.194752, -107.496672	Along this short span you will find, stately cows, cottonwoods and aspens, roads meandering in and out of the forest, and views up at craggy ridges and peaks.	
Silver Jack Reservoir	24.4	Look on your left. You can't miss it. Explore the campground too.	38.2329047, -107.5392868	Shoot reflections from the road looking east and from the dam looking south. Also get some views of High Mesa, east of the reservoir. Use wooden fences and roads to weave interesting compositions. Aspens here can be green, yellow, orange, and yellow at the same time.	
Beaver Lake	26.5	Follow the signed entrance road on the left.	38.2506677, -107.5450587	Walk all around the lake. You won't find great reflections but you will find interesting vegetation ready for close-ups.	