



# HOME & AWAY

## Cripple Creek Strikes Gold

**Its mines ran dry, but this Colorado town is finding value in other endeavors.**

By Nancy Dickinson



Cripple Creek, Colo., spreads across the southwestern slope of Pikes Peak.

*Nancy Dickinson*

Just an hour southwest of Colorado Springs, Colo., tucked away in the Rocky Mountains is a small town christened Cripple Creek. Once a thriving gold mining town, Cripple Creek is now home to numerous casinos, bed-and-breakfasts, hotels and attractions. A visit to Cripple Creek is certain to entertain people of all ages and lifestyles.

Poverty Gulch Mine, discovered by Bob Womack on land that was homesteaded by his family since 1876, was the first gold strike in the area in 1890. Ore extracted from his claim assayed at \$250 a ton. However, roughly a year after his first strike, Womack celebrated too much one evening at a Colorado City bar and sold his claim for a mere \$500 and a case of whiskey. The benefactors of this inebriated deal were two Denver real estate men, Horace Bennett and Julius Myers, who subsequently built the

town one parcel at a time until Cripple Creek was formed.

Incorporated as a city in 1892, Cripple Creek has had to reinvent itself several times. In April 1896, two separate fires, four days apart, nearly destroyed the town, leaving just a few houses standing when the smoke cleared. However, because of the gold mines in the area, the town managed to recover and thrive, passing new laws that all new buildings had to be made of fire-resistant brick.

Rumor has it Cripple Creek earned its name from a creek running through the area, so christened by an unknown rancher after his cow and horse both broke legs trying to cross the stream. The citizens still refer to the town as The World's Greatest Gold Camp. By 1900, Cripple Creek mines had created more than 30 millionaires, and the town boasted a population of more than 10,000. But by the mid-1970s, most of the mines had nearly dried up and Cripple Creek's population plummeted to roughly 1,000. Today the Cripple Creek & Victor Mining Co. runs the area's gold mining operations.

### A Golden Opportunity

Cripple Creek seemed to be on its way to becoming just another sleepy mountain town. During the 1980s, the town managed to keep itself alive by catering to summer tourists. But in the colder months, visitors were almost non-existent—except for a couple hundred snow-lovers. In 1991, the voters of Colorado passed a law permitting limited-stakes gaming in the towns of Cripple Creek, Central City and Blackhawk.

Cripple Creek found itself thrust into the spotlight once again, not for its gold mines but for the riches at the tables. The first limited-stakes gaming license issued was to the Brass Ass Casino, located on Bennett Avenue in downtown Cripple Creek and owned and operated by the



Triple Crown Casino Empire. Opening at midnight, Oct. 1, 1991, the Brass Ass was the crown prince of the gaming industry in Colorado. From there, Cripple Creek has become home to 13 casinos, all hosting limited-stakes gaming, luxurious hotel rooms and restaurants.

Another casino housed in a historical building, Johnny Nolan's, was the gambling house known for serving a "square game" and was the most popular in the 1890s and early 1900s.

### **New Heritage**

With the future of the town now stable, elected officials began seeking ways to encourage tourism in the area. While gambling had helped the economy, officials wanted tourism geared toward families to be their future. The Pikes Peak Heritage Center opened its doors full-time to the public in 2007.

Any visit to Cripple Creek should start at the heritage center. Employees are ready to help plan visits and to share stories of the past. Upon entering the building, visitors will gain a sense of life in the mines as it was 100 years ago; the foyer of the heritage center is adorned with beams taken from some of the abandoned mines in the area. The three-level building is replete with the history of Cripple Creek.

For the kids, there are static and interactive displays, educating not just on the town's history but on the wildlife and area recreational opportunities. On one wall is a cutaway view of the Mollie Kathleen Mine, the first mine in the state owned by a woman. Another wall is covered in depictions of some of the tallest summits in the world, part of an interactive display about flora and fauna in the region.

A display on area wildlife includes dioramas of animals indigenous to the region. Standing tall are elk, a black bear, a raccoon, a cougar and a stegosaurus, glorious in their tribute to the nature surrounding Cripple Creek. The front of the heritage center, true to its mission, is a façade depicting a mine and old-time buildings as they looked in 1892.

Another new attraction is the Outlaw's and Lawmen's Museum. Built in a refurbished jail, this museum was once home to some of the famous and infamous residents and visitors to the city. Adorning the walls are photos and murals depicting life in Cripple Creek and the jail in its early days. The cells now stand open, allowing visitors to feel what it might have been like as a resident of the bar-windowed motel. The kitchen and dining areas are from the days when the sheriff provided meals for the inmates—unless he didn't just take the inmates home to feed them. The sheriff's old office is now a gift shop, hawking wares commemorating the town and its history.

### **Other Pursuits**

A trip on the Cripple Creek and Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad takes riders past a number of old mining camps. Several stops made along the route afford guides the opportunity to entertain with old mining stories. The trip grants many photo opportunities. The guides are well versed in the history of the area and isn't afraid to answer questions after the tour.



Visitors to the Mollie Kathleen, a working gold mine, will learn the history of Cripple Creek's mining days.  
*Nancy Dickinson*

To get up close and personal with a working gold mine, pay a visit to the Mollie Kathleen. The elevator holds nine people—though it is a tight squeeze—as it lowers visitors roughly 1,000 feet for an exploration of the history of gold mining in Cripple Creek.

The tour guides are either retired or current miners who are able to operate the equipment and answer questions, including what happened to the burros that once worked and lived in the mines fulltime—their descendants now roam wild in and around the town, unafraid of both cars and people. At the end of the tour, each visitor is given a small piece of ore—complete with amethyst or gold flakes—to commemorate their visit. The Mollie Kathleen mine also hopes to have a gold panning display, which will allow visitors to pan for their own gold, completed by

this summer.

Lodging in Cripple Creek is abundant, whether you need a hotel room or a space for a recreational vehicle. Many of the casinos have a hotel attached, and there are a number of stand-alone hotels and bed-and-breakfasts in the area, as well as RV parks surrounding the town. On the edge of Cripple Creek is a fishing camp, complete with small cabins, RV hookups and tent spaces. Colorado is known for its rainbow trout fishing, and there are several rivers and streams in the vicinity that easily accommodate travelers.

During the winter, the town becomes a wonderland, offering cross-country skiing snowshoeing in the Pike National Forest. Year-round, the Butte Theater, built in 1896 and renovated and re-opened in 2001, offers both community and professional stage productions including *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Dr. Jekyll's Medicine Show*.

Cripple Creek, though small, has as much to offer as any big city. There is something for everyone in and around the town, with views that are breathtaking.

While the Pikes Peak Heritage Center is a great first stop for planning your visit, if you'd like more information before you get there, visit [www.visitcripplecreek.com](http://www.visitcripplecreek.com). For information on Cripple Creek, Colo., contact your AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

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NANCY M. DICKINSON is a freelance writer based in Palominas, Ariz.

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