

Leadville

Standing at an elevation of over ten thousand feet, south of I-70 and eighty miles west of Denver, the wonderfully atmospheric old mining town of LEADVILLE is the highest incorporated city in the US, with a magnificent view across to broad-shouldered, ice-laden mounts Elbert (14,433ft) and Massive (14,421ft), Colorado's two highest peaks. As you approach from the south, your first impression is likely to be of giant slag heaps and disused mining sheds, but don't let this put you off: Leadville is rich in character and romance, its old redbrick streets abounding with tales of gunfights, miners dying of exposure and graveyards being excavated to get at the seams.

In the light of this, visiting Leadville's rambling National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum, 120 W Ninth St (summer daily 9am-5pm; rest of year Mon-Fri 10am-2pm; \$3), is a patchy experience: skip the baffling dioramas and outdated mine-shaft models in favor of the lurid globs of precious minerals and the atmospheric old photos of weather-beaten prospectors and rough-and-ready sluicers. For a more illuminating romp through the town's grim early history, head for the Heritage Museum, just around the corner at 102 E Ninth St (summer daily 10am-6pm; \$2.50). Glass cases hold snippets on local fraternal organizations, quack doctors, music-hall stars and the like, while a host of smoky photographs portray the lawless boomtown that in two years grew from a mining camp of 200 people into Colorado's second largest city.

Of all Leadville's extraordinary tales, perhaps the most compelling is that of Horace Tabor, a storekeeper who supplied goods to prospectors in exchange for a share in potential profits, and hit lucky when two prospectors developed a silver mine that produced \$20 million inside a year. Tabor collected a one-third share and left his wife to marry local waitress "Baby Doe" McCourt in the socialite wedding of 1883 in Washington, DC, attended by President Chester Arthur. By the time of his death in 1899, Tabor was financially ruined. Baby Doe survived Tabor by 36 years, living a hermit-like existence in the godforsaken wooden outhouses on his only remaining mine - the Matchless Mine. The buildings still stand, two miles out on Seventh Street, and in the crude wooden shack in which she died, emaciated and frostbitten, guides recount the story of Baby Doe's bizarre life in full, fascinating detail (daily 9am-4.15pm; \$3). Also on Seventh Street is the Leadville, Colorado & Southern Scenic Railroad, (depot at 326 E 7th St; \$27; tel 719/486-3936), which takes passengers on a two-and-a-half-hour scenic trip to Fremont Pass.

Back in town, don't miss the Tabor Opera House, 308 Harrison Ave (Sun-Fri 9am-5.30pm; \$4), where you're free to wander onto the stage, through the ranks of red velvet and gilt seats, and around the eerie, dusty old dressing rooms, while recorded oral histories tell tales of the theater's golden days. They give no details, sadly, of the time in 1882 when Oscar Wilde, garbed in black velvet knee britches and diamonds, addressed a host of dozing miners on the "Practical Application of the Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration with Observations on Dress and Personal Ornament."

Leadville is an ideal base for some superb mountain biking, hiking and skiing. Bill's Sport Shop, 225 Harrison Ave (tel 719/486-0739), rents and repairs bikes, while Leadville Ski Country, 116 E Ninth St (tel 719/486-3836), has a full range of ski gear and snowmobiles, and can organize local ski packages. The resort of Ski Cooper (tel 719/486-2277), ten miles north, offers good downhill, cross-country and backcountry skiing, as well as lessons. Leadville's visitor center is at 809 Harrison Ave (summer daily 10am-5pm; tel 719/486-3900 or 1-800/939-3901). A good place to stay is the historic landmark Delaware Hotel, 700 Harrison Ave (tel 719/486-1418 or 1-800/748-2004; \$75-160), an atmospheric Victorian place where rates include a full breakfast; south of town on US-24 you'll find a string of cheaper motels, among them the dependable Super 8 (tel 719/486-3637; \$75-100). Leadville has a gratifying choice of places to eat and drink. Cloud City Coffee House and Deli, 711 Harrison Ave (tel 719/486-1317), serves bagels, buns and espresso in a grand old hotel lobby, while further along the street at no. 612, Columbine Café (tel 719/486-3599) dishes up imaginative fresh food with lots of vegetarian options, in simple diner surroundings. There's great Mexican and Southwestern food at the spartan La Cantina, a mile south on Hwy-24 (tel 719/486-9021), which also has dancing at the weekends. Among Leadville's fine bars, the Pastime Saloon, 120 W Second St (tel 719/486-9986), is a local favorite, with a great mountain view from its patio, and delicious wings and burgers. After his performance at the Opera House, Oscar Wilde drank at the wood-paneled Silver Dollar Saloon, 315 Harrison Ave (tel 719/486-9914); today, it's a welcoming, atmospheric place, filled with Irish memorabilia.