

# Blue Lakes Colorado: All You Need To Know



Tucked deep in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, the Blue Lakes are among the state's most breathtaking alpine gems. Known for their dazzling turquoise waters, dramatic peaks, and wildflower-filled meadows, these high-altitude lakes attract hikers, photographers, and nature lovers from around the world.

The lakes sit within the Mount Sneffels Wilderness, a rugged landscape just outside the charming mountain towns of Ouray, Telluride, and Ridgway. At nearly 11,000 feet in elevation, reaching them requires effort, but the reward is unforgettable with crystal clear lakes framed by jagged granite cliffs and carpets of vibrant alpine blooms in summer.

The Blue Lakes Trail has become one of Colorado's most iconic hikes. Whether you are looking for a challenging backcountry adventure, a day trip with panoramic mountain views, or simply a chance to stand at the shores of some of

the bluest waters in the Rockies, Blue Lakes offers an experience that feels almost otherworldly.

This guide covers everything you need to know before visiting. You will find details on the trail, the best times to go, nearby attractions, travel tips, and recommended places to stay so you can plan your trip with confidence!

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## Quick Facts About Blue Lakes

Essential details every traveler should know before planning a trip to Blue Lakes in Colorado:

- **Location:** Blue Lakes are located in the Mount Sneffels Wilderness of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado, between the towns of Ouray, Ridgway, and Telluride.
- **Elevation:** The Lower Blue Lake sits at around 11,000 feet above sea level, while the Upper Blue Lake is over 12,000 feet, making altitude adjustment important for visitors.
- **Hiking Trail Length:** The Blue Lakes Trail is roughly 8.6 miles round trip if you hike to the Upper Lake, with an elevation gain of more than 2,000 feet.
- **Hiking Difficulty:** The trail is considered moderate to strenuous due to steep climbs, rocky paths, and high elevation, but the scenery makes the effort worthwhile.
- **Accessibility:** The trailhead is about 15 miles outside of Ridgway, with the last stretch of road leading to the parking area being a rough dirt road. A high-clearance vehicle is recommended.
- **Entry Fees and Permits:** There is no entry fee for hiking the Blue Lakes Trail, and no special permit is required for day hikes. However, overnight camping requires a free self-issue permit at the trailhead.
- **Nearest Towns:** Ridgway, Ouray, and Telluride are the closest towns, each offering lodging, dining, and services for travelers.

- **Closest Airports:** The nearest regional airport is Montrose Regional Airport (MTJ), about 45 minutes from Ridgway. Larger airports in Durango and Grand Junction are also within driving distance.
  - **Best Season to Visit:** Late June through early October is the best time to visit when the trail is clear of snow and the alpine scenery is at its peak.
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## **How to Get to Blue Lakes**

Reaching Blue Lakes requires some planning, as the trailhead is tucked deep in the San Juan Mountains.

### **From Denver**

The drive from Denver takes about 6 hours. Follow I-70 west to Grand Junction, then take US-50 south toward Montrose and US-550 to Ridgway. From Ridgway, head west on County Road 7 until you reach the trailhead.

### **From Colorado Springs**

It takes roughly 5.5 hours to drive. Travel west on US-24 through Buena Vista, continue to Gunnison, and then follow US-50 to Montrose before connecting to US-550 and County Road 7.

### **From Durango**

The drive is about 3 hours. Take US-550 north through Silverton and Ouray, then turn west at Ridgway onto County Road 7.

### **From Montrose Regional Airport**

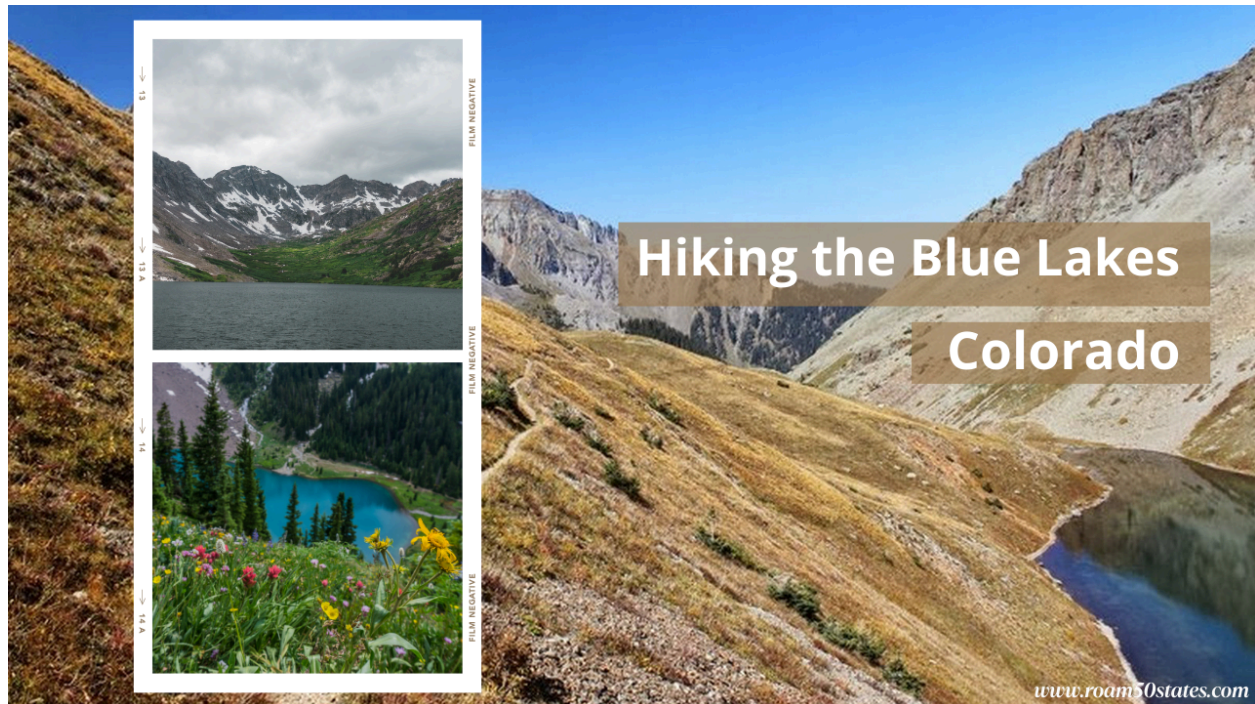
This is the nearest airport, about 45 minutes away. From Montrose, drive south on US-550 to Ridgway, then turn onto County Road 7 for the final stretch.

### **Trailhead Access**

The trailhead sits at the end of County Road 7. The last few miles are rough gravel, so a high-clearance vehicle is strongly recommended, especially after rain. Parking is limited and fills quickly during peak season, so arriving early in the morning is best.

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## Hiking the Blue Lakes Trail



The Blue Lakes Trail is one of the most rewarding hikes in Colorado, offering stunning alpine scenery at every turn.

### Trail Overview

The hike begins at the Blue Lakes Trailhead on County Road 7. The full trail is about 8.6 miles round trip to the Upper Lake, with a total elevation gain of more than 2,000 feet. Most hikers spend between 4 to 6 hours on the trail, depending on fitness level and how much time they spend at the lakes.

### Lower Blue Lake

The first major stop is the Lower Blue Lake, about 3.5 miles from the trailhead. This lake sits in a wide basin with jagged cliffs towering above it. The water is a brilliant turquoise color, especially striking on clear days. Many hikers choose this as their turnaround point since it already offers breathtaking views.

### **Middle Blue Lake**

Continuing past the Lower Lake, the trail becomes steeper and rockier as it climbs toward the Middle Blue Lake. This section requires more effort but rewards hikers with views of cascading waterfalls and lush alpine meadows. The Middle Lake is smaller but equally scenic, tucked against rugged cliffs.

### **Upper Blue Lake**

The final stretch to the Upper Blue Lake is the steepest part of the hike. Sitting above 12,000 feet, this lake is surrounded by rocky ridges and feels wild and untouched. From here, hikers can also see the surrounding peaks and even continue on to climb Mount Sneffels, one of Colorado's famous fourteeners.

### **Hiking Difficulty**

The trail is rated as moderate to strenuous. While not technical, the high elevation, steep sections, and long distance can challenge even experienced hikers. Proper preparation, pacing, and plenty of water are essential.

### **Seasonal Considerations**

Snow often lingers on the trail well into June, making July through early October the safest and most enjoyable months for hiking. Summer brings carpets of wildflowers, while fall adds golden aspens to the surrounding valleys.

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## **Best Time to Visit Blue Lakes**

The Blue Lakes are open year-round, but conditions vary dramatically with the seasons. Choosing the right time to go can make the difference between a challenging trek and an unforgettable adventure.



### **Summer (Late June to Early September)**

Summer is the most popular time to hike the Blue Lakes Trail. Snow has usually melted by late June, clearing the path to all three lakes. Wildflowers fill the alpine meadows in July and August, creating some of the most colorful scenery in Colorado. Daytime temperatures are mild, but evenings can still be chilly at high elevation. This is also the busiest time, so arrive early to secure parking.

### **Fall (Mid-September to October)**

Fall offers crisp mountain air and brilliant colors as the surrounding aspens turn golden. Trails are less crowded compared to summer, and the cooler weather makes hiking more comfortable. By mid-October, snow often begins to return, and the trail can become icy or slippery.

### **Winter (November to April)**

Winter transforms the area into a remote, snow-covered wilderness. The trail is typically inaccessible without snowshoes or skis, and the lakes are frozen. While the scenery is stunning, winter travel here is best left to experienced backcountry adventurers prepared for harsh conditions.

### **Spring (May to Early June)**

Spring brings melting snow and rushing streams, but the trail is often muddy and partially blocked by lingering snowfields. Access to the lakes may still be difficult until late June. However, this season offers solitude and fewer crowds for those willing to take on the challenges.

### **Overall Best Months**

July through early September is considered the best window for most visitors. The trail is clear, the lakes are at their brightest blue, and wildflowers are at peak bloom. For fewer crowds and vibrant foliage, late September is a beautiful alternative.

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## **Things to Do Around Blue Lakes**

While the Blue Lakes Trail is the main attraction, the surrounding San Juan Mountains are filled with adventures that make your trip even more rewarding.

### **Extend Your Hike to Mount Sneffels**

For experienced hikers, Blue Lakes can serve as the starting point for climbing Mount Sneffels, one of Colorado's most famous fourteeners at 14,150 feet. The route from the Upper Blue Lake is challenging but offers panoramic views of the San Juans that are unmatched.

### **Explore Yankee Boy Basin**

Just north of Blue Lakes, Yankee Boy Basin is another alpine wonderland. Known for waterfalls, rugged cliffs, and meadows blanketed with wildflowers, it is accessible by a rough road and is popular with photographers and off-road enthusiasts.

### **Camp Under the Stars**

Backpackers can spend the night near the lakes with a free self-issue permit. Camping here is a magical experience, with clear night skies and the sound of alpine streams echoing through the basin. Be prepared for cold nights, even in summer.

### **Visit Telluride**

Only about an hour away, Telluride is a historic mining town turned world-class mountain destination. It offers a free gondola ride with incredible views, boutique shopping, fine dining, and a vibrant arts scene.

### **Relax in Ouray Hot Springs**

Nicknamed the "Switzerland of America," Ouray is famous for its natural hot springs. Soaking in the steaming pools surrounded by mountain peaks is the perfect way to recover after a long hike.

## **Enjoy Ridgway State Park**

For travelers seeking a mix of outdoor fun, Ridgway State Park offers boating, fishing, swimming, and camping. It is a family-friendly stop just a short drive from the Blue Lakes trailhead.

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## **Travel Tips for Visiting Blue Lakes**

A successful trip to Blue Lakes requires preparation. High elevation, rugged terrain, and changing weather mean it is important to plan ahead.

### **Pack the Right Gear**

Sturdy hiking boots, layered clothing, and plenty of water are essential. Trekking poles can help with the steep climbs, and sunscreen is a must since the sun is strong at high elevations.

### **Start Early**

Parking at the trailhead fills up quickly during summer and fall. An early start also means cooler temperatures and more time to enjoy the lakes without crowds.

### **Prepare for Altitude**

At over 11,000 feet, the air is thin. Hike at a steady pace, drink water often, and consider spending a day in nearby towns like Ouray or Ridgway to acclimate before attempting the trail.

### **Watch the Weather**

Mountain weather changes fast. Afternoon thunderstorms are common in summer, so plan to finish your hike before mid-afternoon. Always carry a rain jacket.

### **Respect Wildlife**

Marmots, deer, and even black bears roam the area. Store food securely if camping and observe wildlife from a distance.



## **Leave No Trace**

Pack out all trash, stay on marked trails, and avoid picking wildflowers. The fragile alpine environment depends on visitors leaving it as they found it.

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## **Where to Stay Near Blue Lakes**

Whether you want a rustic campsite under the stars or a cozy mountain lodge with modern comforts, there are plenty of places to stay near Blue Lakes.

### **Camping Near the Trailhead**

Backpackers can camp near the lakes with a free self-issue permit, which allows for an unforgettable wilderness experience. For car camping, dispersed campsites are available along County Road 7, but they are primitive with no facilities. Arrive early to secure a spot, especially in peak season.

### **Lodging in Ouray**

Known as the "Switzerland of America," Ouray offers charming inns, historic hotels, and relaxing hot springs resorts. Staying here provides both convenience and a chance to enjoy the town's restaurants and shops after a day of hiking.

### **Staying in Ridgway**

Ridgway is the closest town to the Blue Lakes trailhead. It has small motels, cabins, and vacation rentals, making it a good base for hikers who prefer quiet surroundings. Ridgway State Park nearby also offers developed campgrounds.

### **Telluride Resorts and Rentals**

Telluride is about an hour from the trailhead and is ideal for those looking for a mix of outdoor adventure and upscale lodging. Options range from luxury resorts and boutique hotels to mountain condos with stunning views.

### **Montrose for Budget-Friendly Stays**

Travelers flying into Montrose Regional Airport may choose to stay in town before or after their hike. Montrose offers a wider range of chain hotels, making it a practical and often more affordable option.

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## **The Closing Statement**

The Blue Lakes in Colorado are a true alpine treasure, offering turquoise waters, dramatic mountain backdrops, and one of the most rewarding hikes in the San Juan Mountains. From summer wildflowers to golden fall colors, every season brings its own magic to this high-country paradise.

Whether you choose to camp under the stars, relax in nearby hot springs, or explore neighboring towns, a trip to Blue Lakes is more than a hike; it is an experience that stays with you long after you leave.

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## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **How hard is the Blue Lakes hike in Colorado?**

The Blue Lakes Trail is rated moderate to strenuous. It is about 8.6 miles round trip with over 2,000 feet of elevation gain. The high altitude adds to the challenge, but the views make the effort worthwhile.

### **How long does it take to hike to Blue Lakes?**

Most hikers take between 4 and 6 hours to complete the round trip, depending on fitness level and how much time they spend exploring the lakes.

### **Do you need a permit to hike Blue Lakes Colorado?**

Day hikes do not require a permit, but if you plan to camp overnight near the lakes, you must fill out a free self-issue permit at the trailhead.

### **Can you camp at Blue Lakes Colorado?**

Yes, camping is allowed near the lakes with a free permit. Be prepared for cold nights and follow Leave No Trace principles to protect the fragile alpine environment.

### **What is the best time to see wildflowers at Blue Lakes?**

Late July through early August is the peak wildflower season, with colorful alpine meadows surrounding the trail and lakes.

### **Is Blue Lakes Colorado dog friendly?**

Dogs are allowed on the trail but must be kept on a leash. Make sure to bring extra water and be mindful of the steep terrain.

### **How do you get to the Blue Lakes Trailhead?**

The trailhead is located at the end of County Road 7, about 15 miles west of Ridgway. The last section of road is rough, so a high-clearance vehicle is recommended.

### **Can you swim in Blue Lakes Colorado?**

Swimming is not prohibited, but the water is extremely cold year-round due to snowmelt. Most visitors simply admire the lakes from shore.

### **Is the Blue Lakes Trail open in winter?**

The trail is open year-round, but in winter it is snow-covered and only accessible with snowshoes or skis. Conditions are harsh and best suited for experienced backcountry travelers.

### **Which town is best to stay in for visiting Blue Lakes?**

Ridgway is the closest town, while Ouray and Telluride offer more lodging and dining options. Montrose is a good budget-friendly option near the airport.