Travel Treasures in Historic HELENA, MONTANA

by Lou Jurassic

Gate of the Mountains 20 miles from Helena

The place we now know as Helena, Montana benefits from a rich landscape. It's a land of many treasures. Some more visible than others.

Lewis and Clark encountered plenty of unexpected vistas during their Voyage of Discovery through America's West. Among the most dazzling: a narrow channel of the Missouri River about 20 miles north of present day Helena. As their boat rounded a bend, canyon walls more than a thousand feet in height soared on either side. An awestruck Meriwether Lewis named the passage "Gate of the Mountains." That was in the summer of 1805. Explorers have been marveling at the sight ever since.

Modern voyagers enjoy two-hour cruises departing from the Gate of the Mountains Marina just off I-15. While mankind's footprints have obliterated most of the Lewis and Clark land route, the river remains virtually unchanged. Native American pictographs still decorate the rocks. Eagles and falcons continue to soar through the canyon. Otters splash along the shore; deer are prevalent. Elusive mountain goats and Bighorn sheep can be seen from time to time, high atop crags. Guides are adept at spotting wildlife and provide a wealth of information about the area, too. Every cruise takes a break and puts ashore for fifteen minutes so passengers can stretch their legs. Those inclined to linger in the pristine environment can wait an hour or so for the next boat to pick them up. There's a nice picnic spot and a trail to Mann Gulch, the site of a horrific 1949 forest fire that took the lives of 13 firefighters. The boat ride also passes by the gulch and the tour guide offers details of the tragedy.

This year's season begins May 23 and extends to September 20. Times vary. There's also a dinner cruise that requires advance reservations. No matter when you take the trip, an afternoon spent at the Gate of the Mountains offers unspoiled scenery and a fresh perspective on both nature and history.

Visitors to this part of Montana would do well to become acquainted with Helena's own fascinating past. While many modern cities trace their founding to a mining boom, Helena possesses a gold heritage of mythical proportions. In 1864 as the War Between the States ravaged the U.S., prospectors rambled across the West hoping to strike it rich. Four miners, frustrated with the hard work and their lack of success, were tempted to give up on Central Montana and head south. They decided to stake one last claim at a place they termed "Last Chance Gulch."

Their last-ditch efforts paid off big time with Montana's largest gold strike. Soon rowdies from mining camps all over the country as well as Civil War veterans were pouring into the burgeoning tent city. Lawlessness plagued the mining camp that begot present day Helena. To allay the murder and mayhem, a band of vigilantes took justice into their own hands. Lynchings became commonplace. In time, so did millionaires. Gradually the roughshod settlement transformed into a proper city. Over the next two decades, the Last Chance Claim produced gold worth more than $3 billion in today's dollars.

In 1875 Helena became Montana's territorial capital. The prosperous community retained the position with statehood in 1889. By that time, manors lined the rambling streets of a fine, albeit haphazard, city. Active mining claims interfered with attempts to survey a proper map grid so downtown blocks grew up in an irregular patchwork that still exists today.

Other remnants of yesteryear contribute to Helena's charm. The main thoroughfare, Last Chance Gulch, still follows the winding path of the gold-laden creek. The impressive state capitol building, built between 1899 and 1912, was recently restored to its original grandeur and deserves a visit. (Be sure to pay special attention to the ceiling of the rotunda. It features more than 90 stained glass windows.)

Glass ceiling in capitol

The Mansion District, as its name implies, still sports elegant residences built by 19th-century gold titans. The more pretentious structures demonstrate a variety of styles—Gothic, Baroque, Italianate as well as Victorian. They're sprinkled among common structures in what remains a quaint and charming neighborhood. For a glimpse into the 19th-century's affluent lifestyle, visit the original Governor's Mansion, a Queen Anne dandy built in 1888. It's located at 304 North Ewing Street and open for tours on Saturdays through the end of April. The schedule expands during the summer.

Equally impressive is the ornate St. Helena's Cathedral, a Gothic wonder featuring lofty spires and stained-glass windows imported from Germany. It's at 530 North Ewing Street, just two blocks from the Governor's Mansion. Note that St. Helena's continues to function as a Roman Catholic church. Visitors should be respectful of worshipers. While you're strolling the streets, shopping in the Last Chance Gulch retail district, or dining in one of the many nice restaurants, keep in mind that there may still be gold beneath your feet. It's speculated that veins of subterranean ore are still downtown.

Governor's Mansion

For added insight into Lewis and Clark, the history of gold mining and a lot more, pay a visit to Montana's Museum at 225 North Roberts Street. It's a repository for facts, artifacts and art about all of Montana, including Helena—the city built on hidden treasure. ■

IT'S A DATE:

Each year, Helena High School students take the town on a trip back in time with the Vigilante Day Parade featuring floats depicting significant moments in history. The event is April 30 this year and begins at noon on Helena Avenue downtown.

BUSINESS PROFILE

Helena Institute

Nestled in a picturesque valley of the Rocky Mountains is Helena, Montana's capital city. Helena takes you from your virtual life and lets you live—lets you experience. Helena's diverse community has banded together to create the Helena Institute. The Institute has taken the classroom to the mountains, to the streams, to the kitchen, to the trails, to the potter's kiln, to the fireside, to the barn and to everywhere in between. Classes offered by the Helena Institute can teach you how to ride horses on the Continental Divide, teach you how to can and preserve fruits and vegetables just like your grandmother used to do, or they can teach you how to bike down rocky steep grades at wild speeds.

If you're an aspiring artist, you can enroll in a weekend-long table making class. Discover the art of woodworking, experience the dovetail joint, the art of inlay, create a table.

If you're an outdoor enthusiast, run Helena's world-class trail system and find out just why it was voted one of the country's top trail running towns by *Trailrunner Magazine*.

If you're a culture lover, learn what it takes to be a successful photographer by spending two days exploring Helena's famous landmarks.

To find more classes visit **helenainstitute.com** and go from e-world to the real world.

Helena—Learn to Live