



Tallgrass Prairie's historic limestone ranch house was built in 1881.

about the prairie ecosystem, Kansas's ranching heritage, and the pre-settlement landscape.

Visitors can tour the preserve's historic buildings and grounds, which on many summer weekends are staffed by living-history interpreters building rock walls, working in the garden, churning butter, and performing other tasks of ranch and farm life between the 1880s and 1930s. The schoolhouse feels completely authentic with its period desks, schoolbooks, and blackboards. Nature trails allow you to explore creekside woodlands, tallgrass prairie (hiking from the park headquarters to the schoolhouse and back), and a

section of lowland prairie that's been restored after decades as farm- and ranchland.

From May through October, daily bus tours take visitors deeper into the prairie, with explanation of its geology, Indian and Western history, and biological diversity. The area is home to 40 to 60 different kinds of grasses, and 300 species of herbs and flowers, not to mention coyote, jackrabbits, white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, and more. Those wanting an even closer view can hike the preserve's backcountry trails.

The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is located midway on the Flint Hills National Scenic Byway, which stretches along 47 miles of Highway 177 from Cassoday in the south to Council Grove in the north.

WHERE: 85 miles northeast of Wichita. Tel 620-273-8494; www.nps.gov/tapr. **When:** tours and backcountry trails May–Oct. **FLINT HILLS SCENIC BYWAY:** www.byways.org. **WHERE TO STAY:** Cottage House Hotel, Council Grove. Tel 800-727-7903 or 620-767-6828; www.cottagehousehotel.com. **Cost:** from \$70. **BEST TIMES:** spring for spectacular green grass and for wildflowers; fall for autumn colors and the highest grass growth.

A Road to the Top of the World

BEARTOOTH SCENIC BYWAY

Montana

Called America's most beautiful road by no less a traveler than the late Charles Kuralt, the Beartooth Highway has viewpoints every bit as spectacular as those in neighboring Yellowstone National Park (see p. 676).

With 20 peaks reaching over 12,000 feet in elevation—including Montana's greatest, Granite Peak, at 12,799 feet—the Beartooth Mountains offer some of the highest and most rugged landscapes in the country. The byway also passes through a series of ecosystems, from lush pine

forests to alpine tundra in the space of just a few miles. The mostly two-lane highway climbs in looping switchbacks from the handsome small-town tourist mecca of Red Lodge over the massive uplift of the Beartooth Plateau to tiny Cooke City, at Montana's northeast entrance to

Yellowstone. Plan to spend most of the day making this 68-mile drive: You'll want to pull off at every scenic viewpoint to study the rugged peaks with glacier-carved cirques spilling down into U-shaped valleys.

The byway crests at 10,974 feet at the aptly named "Top of the World," a photo opportunity with few rivals. From here to Cooke City are wonderful alpine meadows that, once the snow has melted (this can be as late as July), are filled with wildflowers, icy trickles of water, glistening lakes, and a number of inviting trailheads. Be sure to take the short spur road up to the Clay Butte Lookout for magnificent views.

This uber-scenic highway is bracketed by two appealing towns. At 7,651 feet, Cooke City is remote, retaining a bit of a wild edge from its mining-camp roots, while at the base of the byway, Red Lodge, a former coal-mining center, offers lovely mountain surroundings, excellent restaurants, and spring skiing at nearby Red Lodge Mountain. Both the city's history and its newfound status as a center for Rocky Mountain chic are represented by the Pollard Hotel. Built in 1893, it was the only brick building in the city, and it quickly became Red Lodge's hub. Restored in the 1990s, today it offers old-fashioned Western atmosphere—the pine-paneled lobby and dining room fairly breathe turn-of-the-20th-century elegance—fused with modern comfort and convenience.

Get a feel for this country, and for how people live here today, at the 12,000-acre Lazy E-L Ranch, a working livestock operation 25 miles west of Red Lodge. The Mackays, who have



The Beartooth Mountains represent the largest contiguous land area above 10,000 feet in the U.S.

owned and operated the ranch for four generations, open it up to small groups only: A family or group of eight can reserve the ranch to themselves for a week. Guests have the option of joining the ranch crew on horseback as they move cattle and perform ranch chores; exploring the glorious landscapes by fishing trout-rich creeks, hiking, or mountain biking; or simply kicking back and enjoying the comforts of their historic log cabin and the dramatic mountain scenery of this mighty beautiful corner of Montana.

WHERE: between Red Lodge and Cooke City in southern MT. www.byways.org. **When:** closed mid-Oct–late May. **POLLARD HOTEL:** Red Lodge. Tel 800-POLLARD or 406-446-0001; www.thepollard.net. **Cost:** from \$75 (off-peak), from \$125 (peak); dinner \$40. **LAZY E-L RANCH:** Tel 406-328-6858; www.lazyel.com. **Cost:** from \$1,595 per person per week, includes meals and activities. **When:** mid-May–Sept. **BEST TIME:** mid-June for the Red Lodge Music Festival (www.redlodgemusicfestival.org).

Montana's Prime Lakefront

FLATHEAD LAKE

Bigfork, Montana

For generations, Montanans have made the annual trip to Flathead Lake for idyllic summer holidays—swimming, boating, and fishing on the largest natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi. Ringed with mountains,