

Colorado / Glenwood Springs

Hanging Lake

DISTANCE: 3 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1150 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

Hanging Lake is one of Colorado's otherworldly gems. Its wispy waterfall tendrils, gumdrop-green waters, cliffside location (hence the name) and lush surroundings make it one of the state's most popular hikes and are why it was named a National Natural Landmark in 2011.

Branching off I-70 just 10 miles east of Glenwood Springs in the spectacular Colorado River-carved Glenwood Canyon, the Hanging Lake Trail is a must-stop along this scenic patch of highway. The trail is relatively short — just over a mile — but it's quite steep and rocky.

There are, however, plenty of places to rest along the way, take epic photos of the canyon and the river flowing through it, and explore rocky hideways. And handrails on especially tricky parts of the trail help keep you moving in the right direction. Making it to the top will take your breath away!

A walkway surrounds the lake, from which you can gaze into its hypnotic waters and spy the native trout frittering within. According to the National Park Service's National Natural Landmarks Program, "Hanging Lake is a unique example within the Southern Rocky Mountains ... of a lake formed by travertine deposition, " which we know better as a form of limestone deposited by mineral springs. Here, "natural geologic and hydrologic processes continue to operate as they have done throughout the history of the lake. The site also supports one of the best and largest examples of a hanging garden plant community." (See other mineral waters at work at the nearby Glenwood Hot Springs Resort, home to the world's largest hot-springs pool.)

Getting to Hanging Lake Colorado

A Hanging Lake permit and shuttle system is in place to protect the fragile ecosystem and provide visitors with high-quality experiences through education and interpretation at the Hanging Lake Welcome Center and along the trail. Permits will be required year-round, visitors can reserve a permit at VisitGlenwood.com.

During the peak season, from May 1st through October 31st, no parking is allowed in the Hanging Lake Rest Area off I-70. Visitors can park at the Hanging Lake Welcome Center at 110 Wulfsohn Road, Glenwood Springs CO 81601 and board the Hanging Lake Shuttle.

During the off-peak-season visitors will be able to park at the Hanging Lake trailhead. Forest Service Rangers will check permits throughout the year. To arrive by car, if driving eastbound I-70 (toward Denver), you can take the Hanging Lake exit. If you're headed westbound (toward Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction), things are a bit trickier: You'll use the Grizzly Creek exit, cross the highway and get back on I-70 headed eastbound. Then, you'll take the Hanging Lake exit.

Visitors who would rather bike or hike to the Hanging Lake trailhead can do so and enjoy the riverside Glenwood Canyon Recreation Path from the town of Glenwood Springs (9.5 miles). However, a permit will still be required year-round no matter how you get to the trailhead.