

## Following Hidden Trails

Contributed by Steve Gillman  
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Hidden and less-traveled trails offer scenery and surprises to hikers and explorers.  
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I am a follower of hidden trails. In fact, on at least half of the hiking trips I take lately, I'm off the trails altogether, bushwhacking into the unknown. What do you get for doing as Walt Whitman suggested, and taking the "road less traveled?" A bit of adventure. Here are some of the things myself and a friend or two have discovered off the beaten path in the last year.

{bot\_wrgoogle}Old Mines - We have run across at least fifteen abandoned and sometimes hidden mines, many of them far from any trail. One had a mystery involved, with a possible death (although the police seemed to have no interest) based on the clothes and unopened food left at a nearby campsite. Another went a thousand feet into a mountainside, and had a rotting photo of someone at the back, in a hole in the wall that appeared to be a shrine of some sort. Another ended at a vertical shaft which we could not see to the bottom of with our flashlights.

Old Houses and Towns - A couple months ago we lost the trail we were on and instead started to follow a dry wash. Twenty minutes from the car we came upon what looked like a ghost town. Upon closer inspection we discovered that it was an old ranch, with about six or seven buildings and three old cars from the fifties. After poking through the main house for a while (there was still a wood stove and a chair or two), we headed up the little creek that ran through the property.

Caves - Up the stream from that old ranch, I saw a spring coming out from under a large limestone rock. I knew this made caves in the nearby cliffs likely. Sure enough, five minutes later we were 100 feet into the hillside, looking through a narrow opening and wondering what we might find further inside the cave. I went back later and explored the system for over an hour.

Natural Oddities - In addition to the waterfalls and fantastic rock formations that we find whenever we follow hidden trails and canyon-bottoms, we are sometimes surprised. Ten miles south of the town of Fairplay (all of these examples are from Colorado), we stumbled upon a stream that came gushing straight out of a grassy hillside. We will likely return to see if there is any way to access the caves that the underground stream undoubtedly has carved uphill from there.

Rocks And Minerals - In addition to possible flecks of gold in the bottom of my gold pan (it's hard to tell for sure), I am always finding crystals, rocks and interesting minerals. In the spring of 2008 a friend and I became somewhat lost on the backside of a mountain, after climbing to the top to check out a cave or mine we saw. At some point we discovered boulders of quartz and followed them up the hillside. We came to an incredible fifteen-foot-high wall of white quartz, laced with veins of transparent/translucent mica. The wall had resulted from a miner blowing open the side of the mountain many years earlier. Since gold is often found with quartz, we may return.

Today (12/30/08), before writing this, I hiked a couple miles up a canyon near where we live. I try to take advantage of these occasional December days in the 60s. Trudging through the snow in my t-shirt, I eventually came to the end of my road-less-traveled, after it passed by an old mining building. From there I followed barely visible trails created by deer and elk through the scrub oak. At the top of a rocky (and dry) hill, I found an old camp site, with old tin cans from who-knows when. The day after tomorrow I may start the new year by hiking another hidden trail I've been meaning to explore.

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