

by Staff Sgt. Ben Bloker

# Conquering the Peak

by Capt. Christine L. Kunz

Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. — climbing Pikes Peak.

Staff Sgt. Kimberly Micheloni's house is nestled in the shadows of the often snow-covered Rocky Mountain chain, as is anyone fortunate enough to be stationed at the academy. Everyday she sees Pikes Peak while sitting on her deck at home.

At the top is a place where the air can be 40 percent thinner and the temperature 30 degrees cooler from the bottom. Altitude sickness is common. To go by foot requires a climb of 13 miles and an ascent of 7,500 vertical feet. But it's still one of the most popular recreational activities for the nearly 6,000 Air Force people at the Air

"To be at the academy is to be at the heart of the outdoors," said the defense paralegal, assigned to the academy's 10th Air Base Wing. "You notice this mountain the first day you move in. How can you not?"

Although she and others have hundreds of outdoor activities waiting for them, the 14,110-foot Pikes Peak seems to grab hold of everyone. Holding the title of the most visited mountain in North America and the second most visited mountain in the world behind Japan's Mount Fuji, this peak is a Colorado icon.

"The Peak has become a great place to take visiting friends and family,

as well as a great place for weekend family outings. The hiking and driving along the scenic highway are great ways to get away from the city life without the expense of a vacation," Sergeant Micheloni said. She and her family have been stationed at the academy for two years.

Today, visitors can reach the summit by cog railway, car or foot.

The 8.9-mile Pikes Peak Cog Railroad was built in 1891 and typically operates from April through October. During the three-hour ride up the mountain, visitors often catch glimpses of part of the state's largest herd of Bighorn Sheep.

"The rail is the best way up the mountain, especially in the fall," said Col. James Spencer, director of plans and programs for the academy. "The route takes you through so many of the beautiful aspen stands." He and his family have been at the academy for two-and-a-half years and have been to the top of Pikes Peak more than four times.

The 19-mile Pikes Peak toll road, the second highest highway in the world, was completed in 1916 at a cost of \$350,000 and is open year-round, weather permitting. There are many scenic overlooks for visitors to stop and get a bird's-eye view of Colorado Springs during the two-hour roundtrip.

For those who want to hike the

mountain, Barr Trail is the longest trail ascending any of the state's 54 highest mountains, and offers the greatest base-to-summit elevation gain. There's even a base camp half-way up for weary travelers to spend the night, but reservations are recommended and a must during the peak summer season.

Second Lieutenant Greg Hignite has been up Pikes Peak the way most visitors reach the top — by car and railway — but he also decided once to scale the majestic mountain by foot.

"It took me and my wife two days, but it was well worth it," said the 31-year-old public affairs officer. "I've never been able to do something like that until I got here. It's a



by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung



**Air Force members and their families stationed at the academy**

are in the shadow of the often snow-covered Rocky Mountain chain, including the 14,110-foot Pikes Peak (right). This Colorado icon is the most visited mountain in North America and inspired "America the Beautiful." Every Fourth of July, automobile and motorcycle racers from around the world compete in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb (below right), navigating 156 hair-raising turns for 12 miles in a little more than 10 minutes. One of the favorite ways for visitors to reach the top of the mountain is on the cog railway (far right), where a three-hour round-trip ride gives riders a chance to view the alpine landscape and glimpse Bighorn Sheep.

great form of exercise, not to mention the spectacular 360 degree view.”

To many residents, Pikes Peak offers a simple way to see the world.

“It’s easy to lose perspective of the beauty and greatness surrounding you when you are wrapped up in living life,” Sergeant Micheloni said. “Something about the Peak makes my problems seem smaller.”

In 1893, Katherine Lee Bates, a Massachusetts author and teacher, was so inspired by the view from atop Pikes Peak that she composed the lyrics to “America the Beautiful.”

If feeling like you’re on top of the world doesn’t entice you, perhaps three events there will.

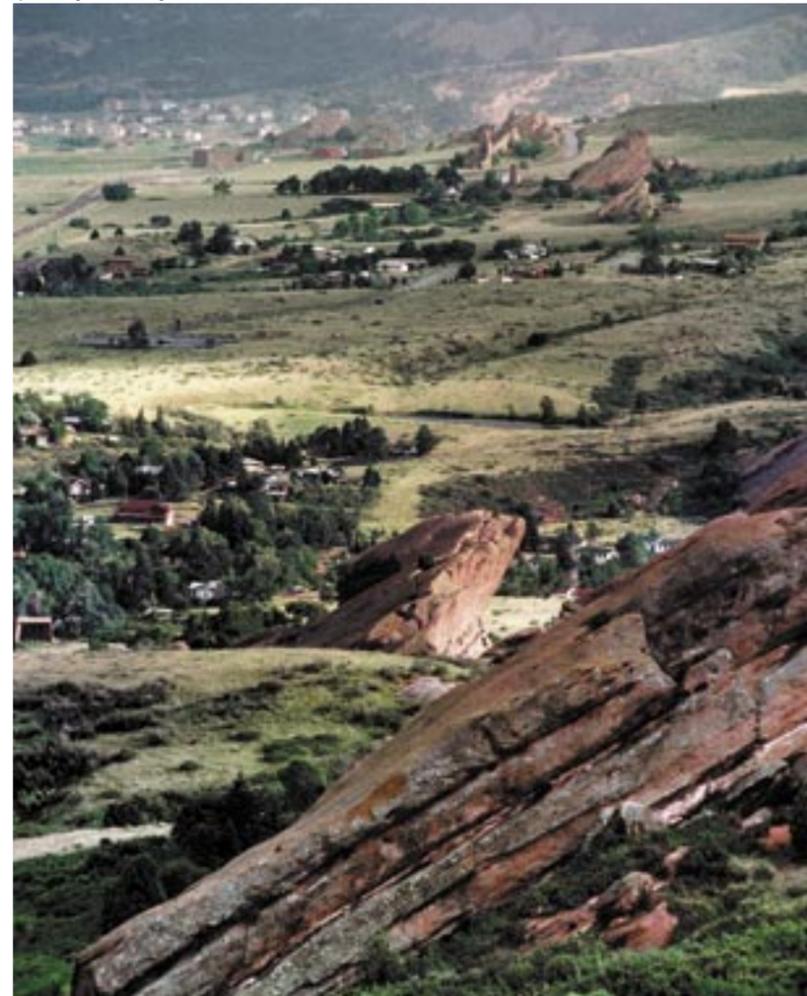
Automobile and motorcycle racers from around the world compete in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb every Fourth of July where they negotiate 12 miles and 156 hair-raising turns in a little more than 10 minutes. Each August, runners compete in the Pikes Peak Marathon. The 26-mile record, up and down Barr Trail, is three hours and 24 minutes. And an annual New Year’s Eve fireworks display is done from the summit.

Pikes Peak is named for Zebulon Pike, an early explorer of the Southwest. He first sighted what he termed the “Great Peak” in mid-November 1806. A few days later, he attempted to climb it with a small band of men. Heavy snows in the 10,000-foot area turned back his party. He over-estimated the mountain’s height at more than 18,000 feet and is said to have claimed that it might never be climbed. However, a botanist who climbed many peaks in Colorado, Edwin James, ascended the mountain in 1820. By the mid-1800s, a trail was well-established

to the top, and the first woman, Julia Holmes, climbed it in 1858.

The U.S. Signal Service, an early weather bureau, built a telegraph sta-

by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung



**Even the 40-minute journey from the academy to Pikes Peak Highway** is a scenic one as visitors wind through a majestic western landscape on U.S. Highway 24. There are many other natural areas to visit in the immediate area, including Garden of the Gods, Cave of the Winds, Manitou Cliff Dwellings and Seven Falls.

tion on the summit in 1873 to monitor the weather, and a guard was posted in Manitou at the beginning of the trail to collect a toll for hiking to the summit.

Today, Pikes Peak is a magnet for travelers, and more than half a million people, including airmen, have found ways to reach its summit.

by Tech. Sgt. Ken Wright

## Air Force Academy, at a glance

**Mission:** The staff and faculty of the Air Force Academy develop and inspire future air and space leaders with a vision for tomorrow through academic and military instruction. The academy prepares future officers to assume leadership roles for the 21st century.

**Location:** 10 miles northwest of Colorado Springs, at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and about 60 miles south of Denver.

**Getting around:** By air: Colorado Springs Airport offers large and small commuter flights daily connecting to Denver International. By road: Three major highways surround the city, which is relatively small, and traffic is usually light compared to major cities.

**Population:** Colorado Springs: about 360,890. Air Force Academy:

about 6,000 full time with 1,900 active duty and 4,000 cadets.

**History:** Colorado Springs was founded in 1871 at the base of Pikes Peak and is considered a military town with 30 percent of the population active or retired military. The academy is the youngest of the service academies. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a congressional bill establishing it on April 1, 1954. The first class of 207 history-making cadets graduated on June 3, 1959. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson authorized a student increase in the cadet wing from 2,529 to 4,417. The first class to include women entered in 1976 and graduated in 1980. Legislation passed in 1991 required the number of students to drop to 4,000.

**Climate:** There are more than 250 days of sunshine a year with an annual winter average of 30 degrees and an annual summer average of 80 degrees. Temperatures are genuinely pleasant as the mountain

range keeps the humidity and heat away. **Cost of living:** Moderate to expensive. Housing costs, for example, are 3.5 percent above the national average. **Education:** Good public schools with eight universities and 11 colleges. **Recreation:** If you like hiking, mountain climbing, hunting, fishing and water sports, then Colorado Springs is the place to be. But for a change of pace, the city offers some diversions, including a host of nightclubs, concerts and other events. Plus there are weekend trips to nearby Denver and several ski resorts. **More Info:**

www.springsgov.com;  
www.coloradosprings-travel.com;  
www.usafa.af.mil;  
www.afcrossroads.com.

## Winding through five life zones

Plant and animal life is extensive and varied on Pikes Peak, as visitors can see when they go through five of the eight distinct life zones that exist in Colorado.

■ The Eastern Plains Zone (up to 6,000 feet) is comprised of wildflowers and grassland and is home to many small animals like prairie dogs and rabbits.

■ The Foothills Zone (6,000 to 8,000 feet) is composed of small bushes and

trees such as scrub oak, juniper, sagebrush and pinion pine and is inhabited by raccoons, skunks, various squirrels, deer and an occasional bear and mountain lion.

■ The Montane Zone (8,000 to 10,000 feet) has various wildflowers and small shrubs, but large forests of pine and Douglas fir, as well as the colorful aspen tree, are predominant. Deer, elk, bear and mountain lions can all be found at this attitude.

■ The Subalpine Zone (10,000 to 11,500 feet) is less hospitable. Englemann spruce, Douglas fir and bristlecone pine provide

dense forests. Some bristlecone pine trees on Pikes Peak could be more than 2,000 years old.

■ The Alpine Zone (11,500 feet and above) tundra includes tiny flowers, mosses and lichen during the short growing season. The yellow-bellied marmot hibernates during the winter, but the bighorn sheep migrate to lower and more hospitable regions. Pikes Peak is home to one of Colorado’s largest bighorn sheep herds, and riders on the cog railway frequently see many of these animals.

