

Downtown Durango, CO

## HIT THE ROAD, JACK *Day-tripping in Colorado*

Load up the kids, a case of bottled water, the Colorado road map, and a fleece or two. We're going day-tripping – Colorado-style.

by Amanda C. Mitchell

IT'S TEMPTING TO HUNKER DOWN IN FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS, especially since most of us have settled in the mountains partly to escape or recover from the "shoulds" and "musts" of our previous lives. For once, we are free to do absolutely nothing with our day and not feel guilty about it. But eventually, perhaps months or even years after making our home here, we may begin to experience a bit of restlessness, or more likely, curiosity to explore the Colorado beyond our long, narrow valley. Within a two-hour drive, our Cordillera homes are accessible to the countless contrasts of landscape and local culture that make Colorado a great place to live and to explore.

Day-tripping is a Colorado pastime in and of itself. And if you have time for a weekend stay, the options are endless - north, south, east, and west. I-70 links the Vail Valley to practically every jumping off point east and west of the Continental Divide. From the highway, a myriad of mountain roads lead to fascinating stops in all directions.

## DUE EAST

Summit County, home of ski resorts Keystone, Breckenridge, and A-Basin, is (at over 9,000 feet) the essence of high-country living. Dillon Reservoir is a water lover's destination, with a variety of boats for rent and the quaint mountain town of Frisco bumping up along its shore. An old mining town with quaint shops, restaurants, and inns, Breckenridge meshes the flavor of the Old West with the best of today's pedestrian pleasures. Vail Resorts has dedicated the past few years to building Keystone's base village, a polished Old West motif replete with a variety of places to shop, dine, and sip your favorite warm beverage, with a Starbucks perfectly placed in town center. Although A-Basin, further up the road, neglects to offer much in the way of pedestrian entertainment, the scenery alone is worth the trip. Anytime of year you are almost guaranteed to run into snow. With a summit elevation of 13,050 feet, A-Basin offers the highest skiable terrain on the North American continent. If you want to make a full day of it, consider a loop trip over Loveland Pass from A-Basin into Georgetown and then back to Vail via I-70.

To many, the allure of living in the tranquil mountain setting of the Vail Valley is its proximity to the big-city amenities of the state capital. Denver is only a two-hour drive east from Vail and offers the best in metropolitan life. Art museums, sports arenas, a downtown amusement park, and hundreds of boutiques, clubs, and restaurants provide endless options for the city-starved mountain resident.

On your way to the city, Georgetown and Idaho Springs are two notable sightseeing stops along the interstate. Two prospecting brothers struck gold in Georgetown in 1859. The Georgetown Loop Railroad was constructed almost 20 years later with the goal of reaching Leadville, another mining boomtown. The railroad never reached its ultimate destination, and construction stopped in Silver Plume, another mining camp 2 miles up the valley. Operating today, after reconstruction in the 1980s, the Georgetown Railroad offers an 80-minute train ride with panoramic views from historic Georgetown to Silver Plume and back, crossing the Devil's Gate trestle bridge.

Further east along I-70 sits the old mining town of Idaho Springs. Miners struck gold in Idaho Springs in the mid 1800s as well. Try your hand at gold-panning at the Phoenix Gold Mine, the only working mine in Colorado open to the public.

## DUE NORTH

In contrast to Summit County's high-alpine setting, U.S. 40 North to Steamboat Springs twists and turns through high-desert landscape scattered with traditional ranches and cowboy towns, offering the

motorist a trip through the Old West and its ranching history. Steamboat, like Breckenridge, is an old mining town with plenty to offer the modern-day traveler. The town is a walker's paradise with a recreation path running alongside the Yampa River. A plethora of cafés and bakeries provide numerous choices for a well-deserved lunch stop.

East of Steamboat Springs by way of U.S. 40 lies the village of Grand Lake and the beginning of Trail Ridge Road. Grand Lake is a gateway town to Rocky Mountain National Park, another must on the list of day-trips from Vail. Grand Lake is the largest glacial lake in the state. The mountain giants of Rocky Mountain National Park loom over the picturesque village and extraordinarily blue waters. With an abundance of tourist shops and dining options, the town is a nice place to stretch your legs before directing the car east through the National Park. Trail Ridge Road through Rocky Mountain National Park is the highest continuously paved highway in the United States, 11 miles of which are above 11,000 feet. It will take approximately 1 hour 15 minutes to reach Estes Park on the other side. The town of Estes Park is another popular tourist stop, offering "boardwalk-style" eats and treats.

## DUE SOUTH

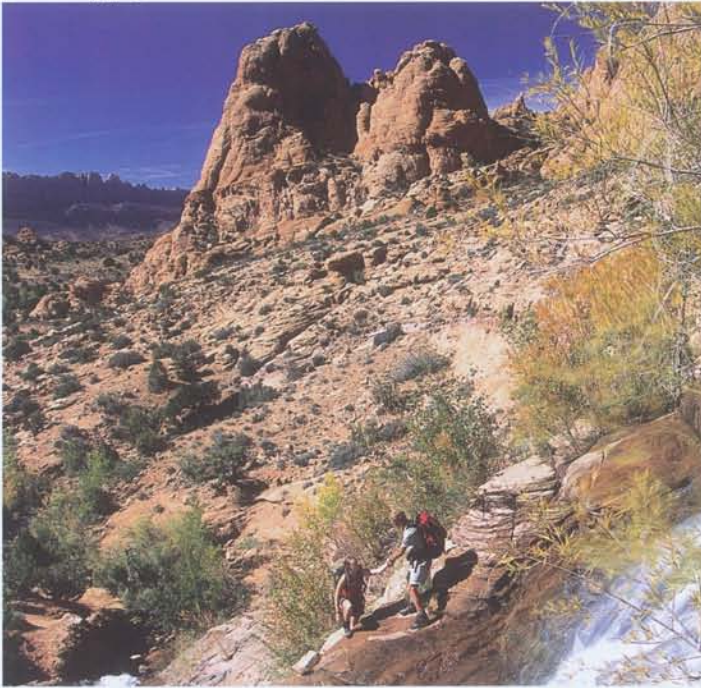
In Southwestern Colorado, wide-open pastureland meets the "Switzerland-esque" San Juan Mountain Range. The region is largely undeveloped and is accessible only by small mountain roads. Although too distant for day-tripping, a number of weekend loop trips should be considered, with legs of the journey crossing brush-stubbed mesas, winding along steep stone canyons, and twisting through narrow mountain valleys.

Stops in the region include the scenic mountain towns of Crested Butte, Telluride, Silverton, and Ouray. Each town played its own unique role in Colorado mining history, and all have been beautifully restored for today's savvy traveler, blending the region's rich local history with the convenience of modern day amenities.

Crested Butte, in southwestern Colorado, was originally a mining camp town. Today the downtown is a whimsical place, an unusual blend of brightly painted storefronts and old miner's shanties. Travelers may consider making a western entrance into town via scenic Kebler Pass, a well-traveled dirt road open only during the snow-less months. Otherwise, there are a number of worthwhile stops, including the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Monarch Pass, and Blue Mesa Reservoir (Colorado's largest body of water), along the more lengthy eastern route from Leadville.

Further south, Telluride's Alp-like backdrop and charming Victorian main street will captivate the weary traveler. With its rich mining history and remote location, tucked within a glacial canyon at the base of the San Juan Mountains, a visit to Telluride is an escape to a distant time and place.

Another "not to be missed" stop in the region is the historic 1882 Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, a 45 mile winding journey from Durango through dramatic mountain scenery to Silverton.



*Clockwise: Hiking in Moab, UT, Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, ice climbing in Ouray, and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.*

Durango and Cortez are included on a larger extended weekend loop but are worth the time. Both are gateway towns to Mesa Verde National Park. Cortez is one of the world's most complete preservations of Anasazi (or Ancestral Pueblo people) cliff dwellings.

## DUE WEST

As one travels west on I-70 towards the Utah state line, the landscape makes a stunning transition from the greens and browns of high-alpine vegetation to the reds and oranges of desert sand.

The drive through Glenwood Canyon is spectacular, and the town of Glenwood is an enjoyable place to stretch your legs and experience the thriving local culture, not to mention the relaxing waters of Glenwood Hot Springs. Discovered by the Ute Indians, these thermal waters were believed by the Indians to be healing. The nearby vapor baths also offer massage and natural saunas. New this year to Glenwood Springs is the Iron Mountain Tramway, taking visitors up the nearby mountain for spectacular views of the area and an opportunity to dine at Exclamation Point Restaurant.

*Crested Butte, photo by Tom Stillo*



Aspen, south of Glenwood on Highway 82, provides the day-tripper with a cultural scene reminiscent of one's favorite metropolitan area in miniature. With high-end shops and award-winning restaurants, Aspen is the most polished stop on any northwestern Colorado tour. An afternoon is well-spent exploring the town's profusion of art galleries, representing recognized American artists of all mediums. During the summer months, consider a loop trip via the awe-inspiring vehicular trek up Independence Pass. On the other side of the pass, you will enjoy views of the Presidentials (a series of mountains towering over 14,000 feet) and stops in the old western towns of Twin Lakes, Leadville, and Minturn before reaching I-70 once again.

Further west on I-70 from Glenwood Springs, the western towns of Grand Junction, Fruita, and Palisade are great spots for sampling (literally) the fruits of Colorado's farming industry, with vineyards, apple orchards, and peach farms dotting the landscape. Vail locals are known to load up their bikes as soon as the lifts close and head to Fruita, an

area growing in popularity as a mountain biker's paradise and much closer than the highly-subscribed biking destination of Moab.

#### MORE TO COME

Once the Winnebago is packed and the dog has found a comfortable spot in the backseat, the Colorado day-tripper's options are endless. The Vail Valley could not be more perfectly placed for exploring the great state of Colorado, its diverse topography and cultures. So what are you waiting for? Be sure to pack an emergency kit with plenty of blankets and bottled water, and hit the road Jack!

In this issue, we have only touched on a handful of day-tripping opportunities available to the curious Colorado traveler. Upcoming, Cordillera Living will be sending interested parties on day-tripping adventures within a short drive of their Colorado homes. Their day-tripping experiences will be covered in future issues of the magazine. (Please write to us with your favorite day-trips from Cordillera). ❧

### A PLACE TO ESCAPE

Many of us have made our home in the Vail Valley in an attempt to escape. Escape from the waiting ... in traffic, in check-out lines, in subway terminals. Our home in the mountains is a place where we can slow down and appreciate every breath, every sip of coffee, every quiet, unhurried moment in our day. It may take months or even years to experience restlessness in this new space that we have created for ourselves, this pocket of peace within and without the whirling of the world. ❧