



# ROAD TRIPPING IN Southwestern Colorado

Writer Suzanne Wright

In terms of geography, history, weather, culture and food, southwestern Colorado has more in common with New Mexico than it does with Denver, still more than six hours away. When locals talk about a weekend getaway, they mean Santa Fe, not Boulder.

After hearing my neighbors rave about the Four Corners region of Colorado, I tossed a suitcase in my SUV and headed out from Cave Creek for a leisurely week of road-tripping.

My first stop was Mesa Verde National Park, which claims to be the archeological center of America. Mesa Verde – “green table” in Spanish – was home to the ancestral Puebloans (the politically correct term which replaces Anasazis) from 600 to 1300 A.D. It’s a UNESCO World Heritage site with more than 5,000 archeological sites, including 600 cliff dwellings.

Even if you’ve seen cliff dwellings at Montezuma National Monument in Arizona or Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, you haven’t seen anything on this scale. There was a hushed reverence as 12 of us leaned in to hear the ranger lead a tour of Cliff Palace, Balcony House and Long House. In both guide and guest, there was a respect for these enterprising ancients who created elaborate stone dwellings that sustained these remarkable communities for more than 700 years.

From Mesa Verde I made my way to Durango, the contemporary heart of southwestern Colorado. Linguistically, it’s pleasing to say Durango, which explains why both a boot company and a car company have named their products after this storied town.

Situated in the Animas River Valley and surrounded by the gorgeously photogenic San Juan Mountains, downtown Durango is about as picturesque and vibrant as a Western town gets. Founded in 1880, Durango has always been a railroad town and its best-known attraction remains the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. It was an atypical day -- raw and rainy -- as I climbed aboard. I’d long wanted to experience the famed scenery along the route, which parallels a 48-mile stretch of national forest.



# Durango

I settled into a first-class car for a half-day trip, bundled up and as excited as a kid. There were kids of all ages on the coal-fired, steam-powered train, excitedly exclaiming and snapping photographs. To gain two perspectives, take the train ride up to Silverton and the bus back, allowing you to experience both the intimacy of the twisty lower canyon and the majesty of the Million Dollar Highway.

Coloradans eat well. The altitude and exercise seems to stoke diners' appetites and the creativity of the chefs. One of the real surprises of the trip was just how good the local restaurants were; I scribbled "unexpected mountain gourmet" in my notes. This area has a strong agriculture heritage and a long-held "eat local" mindset that predates the trend now sweeping the rest of the U.S. Regardless of culinary preferences or budget, the bold mountain cuisine with its honest flavors and hearty portions matched the high country views.

On the advice of a local shopkeeper, I had a memorable lunch at Cyprus Café. The lamb sloppy joe with cinnamon-scented tomato sauce offered a delicate, North-African twist on a beloved childhood favorite. This was definitely not my mama's Manwich. At Chimayo Stone Fired Kitchen, as the name implies, the pizza was stellar: a chewy, toothsome crust topped with sweet caramelized onions and housemade fennel sausage, covered with fontino and taleggio cheese and kissed with truffle salt. Wash it down with a margarita made with fire-roasted jalapenos and muddled cucumber, so potent I could smell the libation before the server set it on the table.

As unlikely as it may seem, Durango also boasts a French bakery called Jean Pierre that will transport you to the Left Bank. I particularly loved the orange chocolate croissants and was delighted to find that after 3 p.m. anything left in the case is two-for-one.

Next I made for Pagosa Springs, renowned for having the world's deepest geothermal hot springs. Pagosa is a name given to the town by the Ute Indians; "pah" meaning waters and "gosa" meaning boiling. They are odoriferous, owing to the many minerals that bubble up through Mother Earth's depths, including sulfate, potassium, magnesium, iron, manganese and zinc.

I experienced the healing these springs offer a road- and hiking-weary traveler firsthand at The Springs Resort & Spa. Open to the public, the resort features 23 soaking pools



# Pagosa Springs

with temperatures ranging from 98 to 110 degrees perched over the San Juan River. Some pools are social, some are quiet; like Goldilocks, you'll find one that is just right for you. Mine was 103 degrees and silent. Soaking under warm sunshine was wonderful, but I most enjoyed soaking in relative solitude under a clear night sky winking with stars.

The next morning, before heading up to see the season's first snow at Wolf Creek Pass, I fueled up at Pagosa Baking Company, where I indulged in a slice of ham quiche (ask for a ladle of bracing green chile chicken on top), strong coffee and a fist-sized, gluten-free pumpkin muffin.

Wolf Creek Pass sits on the Continental Divide at nearly 11,000 feet. Driving the serpentine Highway 160 mid-week before the ice of winter settled into the slopes was a pleasure. I stopped several times, hiking briefly on forest access roads before arriving at Treasure Falls. After obliging a couple from Texas their portrait framed by the dramatic 100-foot falls (they return the favor), we discussed our respective road trips. All three of us were animated as we discussed hiking trails, scenic drives, our favorite eateries. A highlight of any trip is always the people you meet and the camaraderie you share. Southwestern Colorado seems to bring out the best in folks.

Over the next couple of days, I crammed in several more noteworthy meals. At Farrago Market Café, I lunched on Moroccan chicken salad and a coconut macaroon at a sunny picnic table under autumn gold aspens. At the adjacent First Crush, I sampled – and purchased – several gourmet flavored olive oils and vinegars. At the Backroom Wine Bar, I split a killer lamb sausage pizza with the friendly female bartender. Pagosa is the kind of town where it's easy to hang with the locals. The fanciest meal in town is the Alley House Grille, where at a table near the fireplace I tucked into plump, green curry mussels and a tender rack of lamb with rosemary roasted fingerling potatoes.

Perhaps my favorite Pagosa meal was at the welcoming Riff Raff Brewing Company, where I spent my final night sampling seasonal beers: one made with spruce tree tips, one pumpkin ale, another spiked with red chile. This seems to be where the town's waitstaff gather after they finish their shifts and there's a cool, loose vibe. The cabrito (goat) burger with cotija cheese, ale caramelized onions and hatch chilies on a fluffy roll elicited a thumbs up from a dreadlocked 20-something.





I loved staying in a rustic rental home nestled amid cottonwoods downtown just a short hike to the town reservoir for panoramic views. The 1926 cottage has been restored in an eco-friendly, chic way reflective of the town's values. There's a copper soaking tub in one bathroom and a hot tub outside. But what I liked best were the doe and her fawn that nibbled on fruit-bearing trees in the yard in the mornings and late afternoons.

# Ouray

My last stop is Ouray, known as the "Switzerland of America." In a state blessed with gorgeous vistas, the drive from on San Juan Skyway is truly eye-popping. The section between Silverton and Ouray has been dubbed the "Million Dollar Highway," though you'll hear varying stories as to why. Some say it cost a million dollars a mile to build; others say the fill dirt used in its construction contains a million dollars of gold ore. But everyone agrees that the splendid views of

snow-capped mountains along this curving stretch of highway are easily worth a million dollars.

The winter population of Ouray is just 800 hearty souls. But I immediately decide they are lucky: I'm besotted with my first jaw-dropping glimpse of this gorgeous town surrounded on three sides with rugged Rocky Mountain peaks that rise to 13,000 feet.

There are hundreds of miles of historic Jeep roads, so I joined Colorado West for the Imogene Pass scenic tour. The second highest drive-able pass in the state offered spectacular views – and a few heart-stopping moments – along with the rich mining history. Arriving back in the center of town red-cheeked and a bit chilled, I immediately made for Mouse's Chocolate coffeehouse for a hot chocolate and a "scrap" cookie.

Two-thirds of Ouray's original Victorian structures are still occupied. The excellent Ouray County Historical Museum is shuttered in the winter, but the quirky

Ouray Alchemist is well worth an hour, if you can keep your private tour to that. After he flips his sign to "Closed," Curt Hagggar, said alchemist, will regale you with tales of his obsessive collecting. Some of his artifacts date to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

I fell into an easy daily rhythm, hiking the excellent five-mile Perimeter Trail on a shelf above town, taking in Cascade and Box Canyon Falls and dropping into town at different access points to shop, eat and chat with locals.

I split my stay between the deluxe Hot Springs Inn and the modest Wiesbaden Inn. Each has its charms. Overlooking the Uncompahgre River, the Hot Springs Inn is somewhere I'd love to live fulltime, with its darling Western décor, private balconies and handcrafted beds. The Weisbaden has a funky vapor cave and is run by a sweet-natured Texan named Linda.

Ambling the streets of Ouray, I ran into the front desk clerk from the Hot Springs Inn who treated me to excellent fish and chips at O'Brien's Pub and Grill. I literally bumped into Richard, the Jeep driver who doubles as a piano player at night at the Outlaw Restaurant. A fellow traveler from Florida, a retired doctor, shared a bottle of Malbec with me at the bar at the Beaumont Grill.

After two days, folks wave in greeting, recognizing a familiar face. I am tempted to stay ... forever. For now, I savor every minute and look forward to returning to southwest Colorado in other seasons.

Southwestern Colorado is unpretentious and authentic, affordable and family-friendly. To learn more about Durango, visit [www.durango.com](http://www.durango.com). Log onto [www.visitpagosasprings.com](http://www.visitpagosasprings.com) and book the MacCabe Creek Cabin in Pagosa Springs at [www.incrediblepagosa.com](http://www.incrediblepagosa.com). To plan your trip to Ouray, log onto [www.ouraycolorado.com](http://www.ouraycolorado.com).

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