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DENVER LIFE

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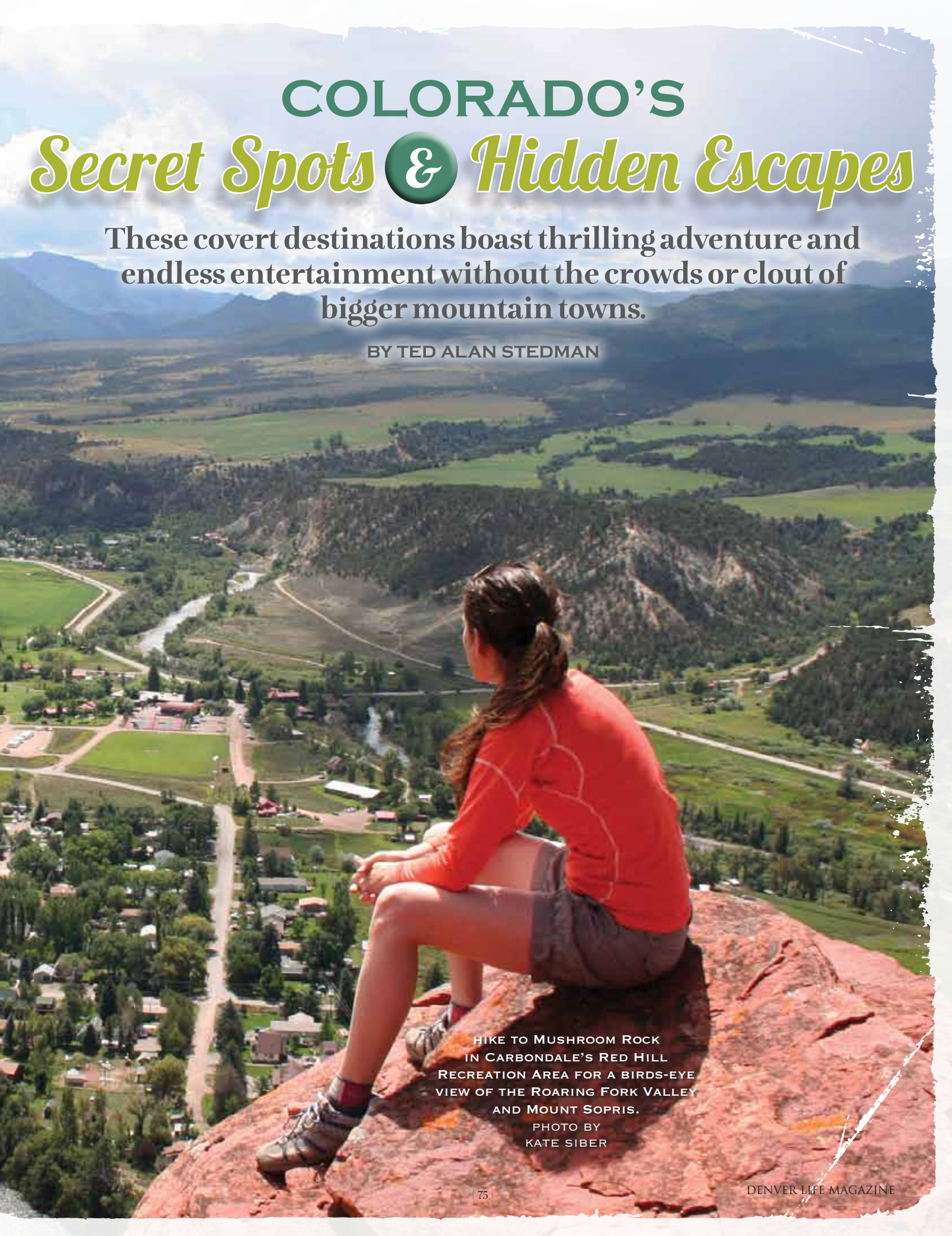
An aerial photograph of a town nestled in a valley, with a large mountain range in the background. The town features a mix of residential houses, commercial buildings, and green fields. A road winds through the town. In the foreground, there are red rock formations. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. A green text box with a white arrow pointing to a mountain peak is overlaid on the image.

ON THE NORTHWEST END OF THE
ELK MOUNTAINS, 12,966-FOOT,
MOUNT SOPRIS HAS TWO SUMMITS,
ADDING RISE AND LENGTH TO THE
TRIP OF ANY GO-GETTER LOOKING TO
BAG BOTH SUMMITS.

COLORADO'S *Secret Spots & Hidden Escapes*

These covert destinations boast thrilling adventure and endless entertainment without the crowds or clout of bigger mountain towns.

BY TED ALAN STEDMAN



HIKE TO MUSHROOM ROCK
IN CARBONDALE'S RED HILL
RECREATION AREA FOR A BIRDS-EYE
VIEW OF THE ROARING FORK VALLEY
AND MOUNT SOPRIS.

PHOTO BY
KATE SIBER

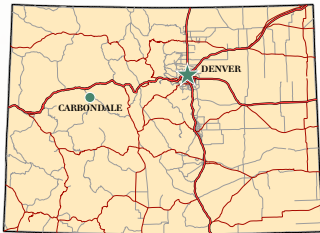


When it comes to packing the bikes, boots, boats and other outdoor tools for Colorado road trips, chances are most of us fall prey to the charms of the big guys; the Vails, Winter Parks, Fruitas and Salidas that rightfully have earned distinction among adventure revelers. But in a big state with lots of nooks and crannies, what about veering to parts unknown—those little gems and one-horse towns where the outdoors is inescapably in your face (with less people)? Hold that thought and check out these quintessential Colorado escapes that still hover somewhere south of mainstream.

Carbondale

CRITICAL STATS:

▲ ELEVATION: 6,181 feet 👤 POPULATION: 6,489 🚗 MILES FROM DENVER: 170



THE VIBE: A mellow free-thinker's town populated by New West types, adventurous, independent professionals and a growing number of second-home owners. Carbondale is a friendly, unpretentious town free of the glitter of its up-valley Aspen neighbor.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: Spring Gulch Nordic Trail System (springgulch.org), near town, is a little-known gem with fantastic rolling terrain for classic and skate skiers. And the town's signature backdrop, Mount Sopris, happens to possess the longest continuous vertical rise in Colorado.

EAT & SLEEP: **Village Smithy** (villagesmithy.com), a "Carbondale legend," has the best hearty meals in town, such as the chili-laden Santiago Skillet breakfast. The **Roaring Fork Beer Company** (roaringforkbeerco.com) offers seasonal beers year-round—my current pick is their Slaughterhouse Lager—and tasting rooms with views of Mount Sopris. With its riverside location on the Roaring Fork, **Carbondale Comfort Inn & Suites** (carbondale.com/comfort-inn) recalibrates the notion of what a national lodging chain can be.

RESOURCES:

- ✦ **Ajax Bike & Sport**, ajaxbikeandsport.com
- ✦ **Roaring Fork Anglers**, roaringforkanglers.com
- ✦ **Blazing Adventures**, blazingadventures.com
- ✦ **U.S. Forest Service**, Aspen-Sopris Ranger District, 970.319.2670

SPORTING PURSUITS:

With Mount Sopris towering 6,783 feet above Main St., it's a given that self-propelled exploits are at Carbondale's doorstep. The town not only rubs shoulders with the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness and at least 50 designated trails in White River National Forest, but it also claims four major rivers, the Colorado, Crystal, Roaring Fork and Frying Pan, all within a 10-minute drive.

Mountain bikers can crank out a rousing 30-miler on the Hay Park Trail. The loop connects a combo of dirt roads, double- and single-track from the Thomas Lakes Trailhead to Basalt, skirting the base of Mount Sopris. This advanced ride is worth 3,200 feet of elevation gain and explores stately aspen groves with so many jaw-dropping views of 14ers, such as Capitol Peak, you'll be making more stops than a school bus. Your reward for all the uphill chugging is a long descent that spits you out on Capitol Creek Road.

Bipedal enthusiasts should take a stab at summiting 12,953-foot Mount Sopris for incredible panoramas of the Roaring Fork Valley, area 14ers and the surrounding Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. Many summiteers opt for an overnigher to rest, explore and absorb the scenery during the seven-mile (one-way), 4,253-foot summit bid. The Mount Sopris Trail begins at the Thomas Lakes Trailhead before heading up the east ridge to Thomas Lakes and the chilly option of a quick swim. Following the ridge puts you on some loose scree, where you'll connect with the main summit ridge before crossing the half-mile saddle to the west peak of Mount Sopris.

And all that water surrounding Carbondale? The Roaring Fork and Frying Pan are designated Gold Medal Waters, meaning there's trout up to 26 inches in these parts. Guided boat trips

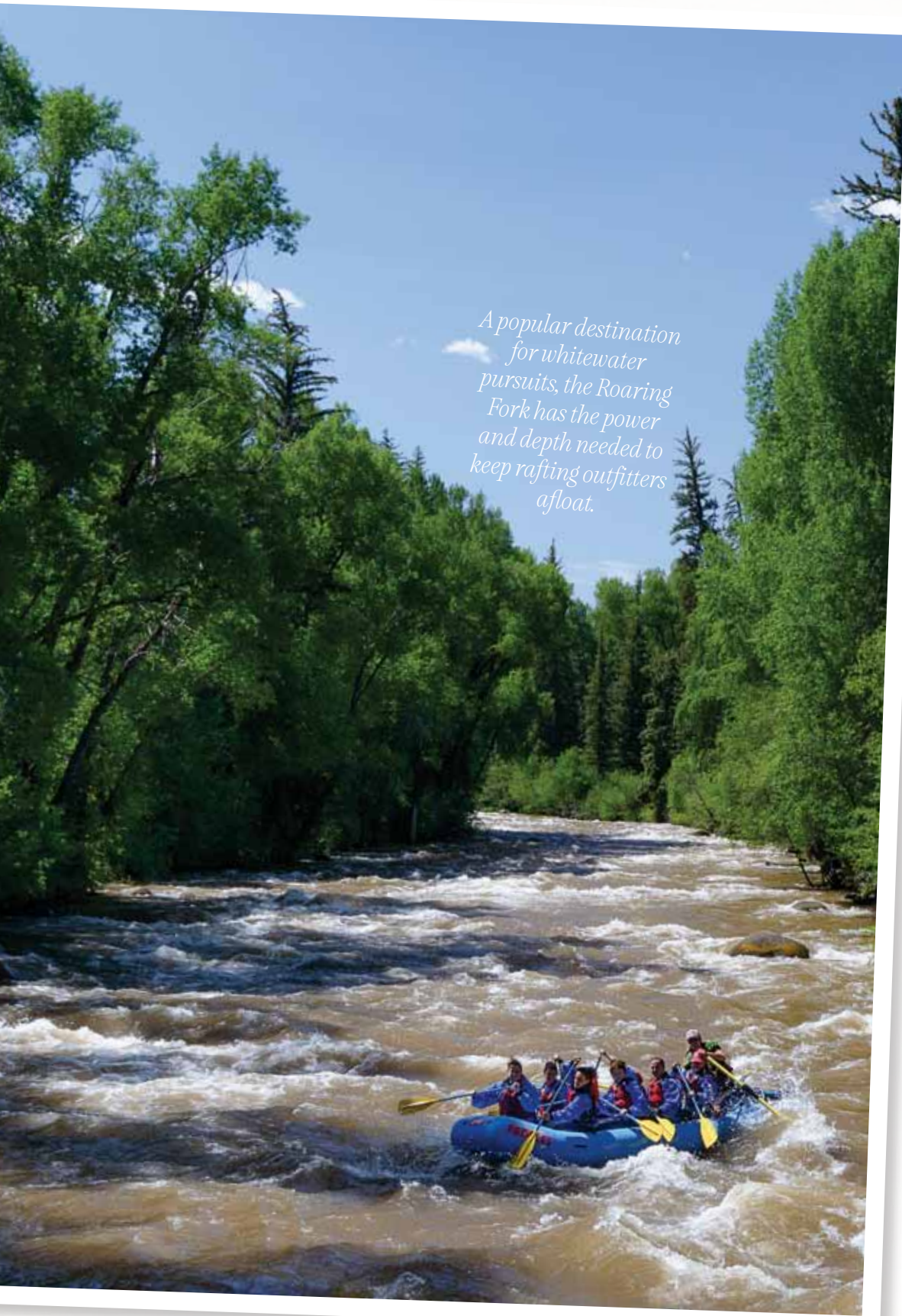
on the Roaring Fork from town along the 14-mile stretch into Glenwood Springs will likely net you fat browns and rainbows. Or you can simply wade fish any of the two public miles of access in Carbondale. For paddlers, Carbondale's pretty much a do-it-yourself affair unless you go up or down valley to reputable raft-

ing and kayaking outfitters such as Blazing Adventures in Aspen. There are plenty of play holes nearby, including the Roaring Fork's Class II-III Cemetery (Don't worry, just a reference to the nearby cemetery). If you're a confident expert, the Crystal River's infamous Meatgrinder, a Class V+ monster near Redstone, is waiting.



THE GOLD MEDAL WATER OF THE ROARING FORK RIVER IS KNOWN FOR ITS LARGE BROWN AND RAINBOW TROUT.





A popular destination for whitewater pursuits, the Roaring Fork has the power and depth needed to keep rafting outfitters afloat.

Head east to three drive-to's where history, and pre-history, come alive...



Technicolor Canyon Walk

Southeast of Denver lies a startling surprise. A fissure in the otherwise endless rolling plains leads into a bizarre labyrinth of hoodoos, mushroom-capped pinnacles, gargoyle-like spires and towering canyon formations festooned in pastel hues of rose, lavender, ochre and goldenrod. Opened in 2005, **PAINT MINES INTERPRETIVE PARK** is one of Colorado's most spectacular, if not obscure, natural oddities. Nearly five miles of trails lead hikers on a journey through 750 acres of eroding gulches and clays colored from



leaching minerals Native Americans used 9,000 years ago to make pottery. Get a leg up on the summer swelter with an early a.m. visit, when fox and antelope make Paint Mines an especially animated wonderland.

elpasoco.com

RAFTING BY GEORGE HENDRIX; BEER COURTESY OF ROARING FORK BEER COMPANY; FLY FISHING COURTESY OF ROARING FORK ANGLERS



Jurassic Journey

Southeast Colorado's rolling plains hardly seem like the zip code for the largest dinosaur trackway in North America.

But at **PICKETWIRE CANYONLANDS**, you'll find 1,300 footprints of meat-eating Allosaurus and massive Apatosaurus that lumbered here 150 million years ago. Carved by



the Purgatoire River, the remote canyon's 8.7-mile trail courses beneath red rock bluffs spilling onto a wide river bottom. Just shy of four miles, you'll first spot the ruins of the 1871 Dolores Spanish Mission, while nearby cliffs showcase 5,000-year-old Native American rock art. Another 1.6 miles plunks you at the track sites, where signs describe how dinosaur herds left their preserved footprints on a shallow lakebed until erosion and geological forces exposed broad slabs of limestone.

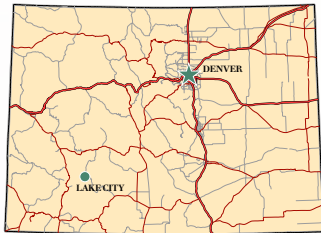
If the 10.6-mile round-trip for the dinosaur tracks sounds too audacious, opt for the guided four-wheel drive tour coordinated through the local Forest Service office. For overnights, four free first-come, first-served primitive campsites are available at the trailhead.

exploresoutheastcolorado.com

Lake City

CRITICAL STATS:

▲ ELEVATION: 8,671 feet 👤 POPULATION: 391 🚗 MILES FROM DENVER: 255

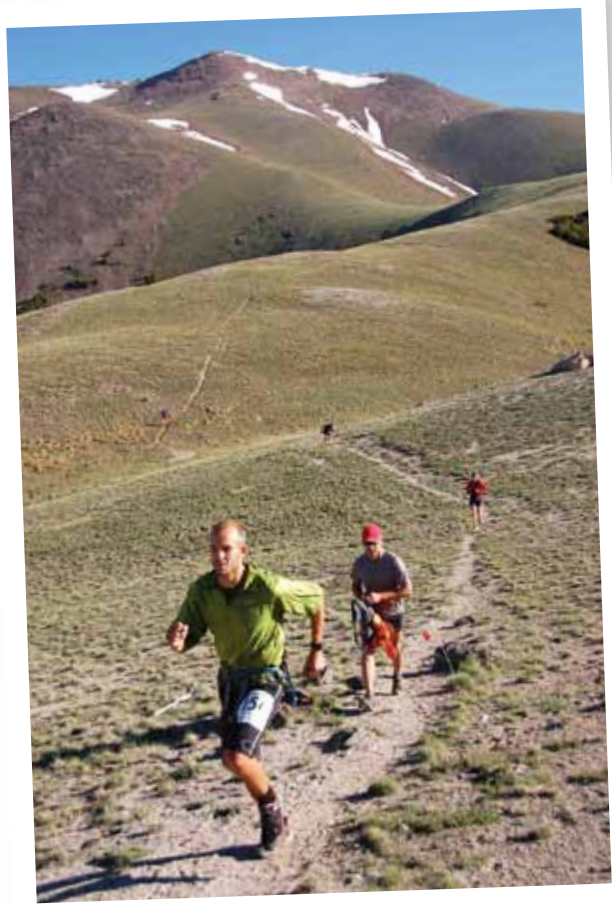


THE VIBE: Waves from strangers, no traffic lights and a sense that you've stumbled into a secluded Shangri-La deep in the San Juan Mountains... A 10-minute walk gets you anywhere in this little town. People in Lake City are unhurried, but it's not unusual to see fitness folks out in the early morning light in any season, pursuing their personal communion with the local geography on foot, skis, snowshoes, kayaks or bikes.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: This is the place to get lost. Hinsdale County, whose only town is Lake City, is 95 percent public land, and half of that is wilderness. Lake City is surrounded by the Uncompahgre, Powderhorn, Weminuche and La Garita wildernesses, which include five 14ers and 26 13ers.

SPORTING PURSUITS: Never mind that starving cannibal Alfred Packer ate here, a dubious distinction many in Lake City would rather forget. Get past the skull-duggery and this area is a wilderness haven, blessed with glorious creeks and trails.

For anyone who can hammer out marathons in their sleep, a big step up would be Lake City's storied San Juan Solstice 50



EACH JUNE, ULTRA-RUNNERS GATHER FOR THE SAN JUAN SOLSTICE 50 MILE RUN, A RUGGED RACE THROUGH THE SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS.

Endurance Run, an offshoot of the wicked Hardrock 100. Just completing the 50-miler is a feat and testament to your survival instincts. The annual run consists of five main sections, including a side-stitching 4,500-foot climb up Alpine Gulch; a 4,000-foot slog up to the old mining town of Carson; a 41-mile, 2,000-foot haul along the Continental Divide; and a descent to 11,361-foot Slumgullion Pass, followed by a final hump over the Vicker's Ranch Plateau. It goes without saying that this monumentally demanding run is for

ultra-experienced runners, who incidentally have a good chance of encountering potentially lethal lightning, freezing sleet, hypothermic conditions and even bears.

The rest of us might enjoy taking five days to climb the five area 14ers: Wetterhorn, Uncompahgre, Handies, Redcloud and Sunshine peaks. Each rate no more than a Class III climb; very doable for anyone with strong



14,015-foot Wetterhorn Peak involves a class three scramble using your hands and feet; hard hats are recommended to protect against falling rock.



Lake City boasts plentiful wildlife which makes for interesting encounters on the nearby roads and trails.

disposal, there are plenty of less-airy trails and backpacking options. A classic backcountry trek in the Uncompahgre Wilderness (aka “Switzerland of America”) is a shuttle hike connecting the East and Middle forks of the Cimarron River, right below the vaulting faces of 14ers Uncompahgre and

Wetterhorn. The 14-mile journey has the characteristics of the Alps, with precipitous jagged peaks, late summer snowfields and incredible expanses of wildflower-studded tundra.

quads, good lungs and common sense at exposure points. All trailheads are within easy striking distance from Lake City.

But, with the four surrounding wilderness areas at your



EAT & SLEEP: Enjoy your joe at the **Mocha Moose** (mochamoosecoffeehouse.com), smack dab in what qualifies as historic downtown Lake City. Housed in the 1881 Avery Building, the **Restless Spirits Saloon** (restlesspiritssaloon.com) is the town’s social nexus and serves up tasty pizzas, burgers and sandwiches. Rub shoulders with locals at the saloon’s fabulous Old West-style bar. Forest-shrouded **Arnold’s Pleasant View Resort** (pleasantviewresort.net) is a collection of comfy cabins, each with a scenic deck for dining and drinks. And steps from Lake San Cristobal is **The Inn at the Lake** (inat-thelake.org), a charming mountain retreat with 10 rooms and a delicious daily breakfast.

RESOURCES:

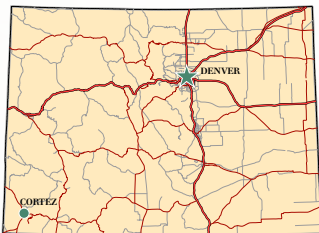
- ✦ **The Sportsman Outdoors & Fly Shop**, lakecityflyshop.com
- ✦ **San Juan Solstice 50 Endurance Run**, lakecity50.com
- ✦ **U.S. Forest Service, Gunnison Ranger District**, Lake City, 970.641.0471 or 970.944.2500



BIKERS DISCOVER SPLASHES OF SUMMER COLOR AMONGST THE TALL PONDEROSA FOREST DURING RIDES ON THE MAVERICK LOOP OF THE BOGGY DRAW TRAIL ABOVE DOLORES, COLORADO.

CRITICAL STATS:

▲ ELEVATION: 6,200 feet 👤 POPULATION: 8,474 🚗 MILES FROM DENVER: 382



THE VIBE: Laid-back, diverse and tolerant. Cortez counts environmentalists, Sage Brush Rebellionists and hard-core outdoor enthusiasts, along with real-deal cowboys and agriculturists, as its citizens, not to mention a sizeable population from the Southern Ute Tribe.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: Geography rules! Outdoor enthusiasts can travel between arid desert and lush 10,000-foot mountains in under an hour's drive. Think Moab and Durango with 1/100th the crowd. With more than 6,000 documented sites containing 12th century Ancestral Puebloan artifacts in nearby Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, there's more archaeologists per capita here than any place else in North America.

SPORTING PURSUITS: This Four Corners town was once known as the "Dark Corner," a convergence of massive mountains and desiccated desert where anyone (outlaw Butch Cassidy was a Cortez figure) could hide out from the law, clear up to the early 1900s. That says a lot about the landscape; remote, rugged and unforgiving.

During summer months Cortez cooks, so it's best to seek relief in the cool high country. A mountain biking standout is Boggly Draw Loop on the Ponderosa-shaded mesa above

the town of Dolores, just a few miles up Highway 145 from Cortez. The nearly nine-mile ride can actually be stitched together with two other loops, the 11-mile Bean Canyon trail and the five-mile Maverick Loop, for a somewhat epic route that pans out to nearly 25 miles. The elevation is give-and-take, without any serious climbing except for a short grind up the Bean. You'll be treated to a fast roller-coaster ride of ups and downs while enjoying the panoramas of two ecosystems.

For a completely surreal experience, try flat-water kayaking



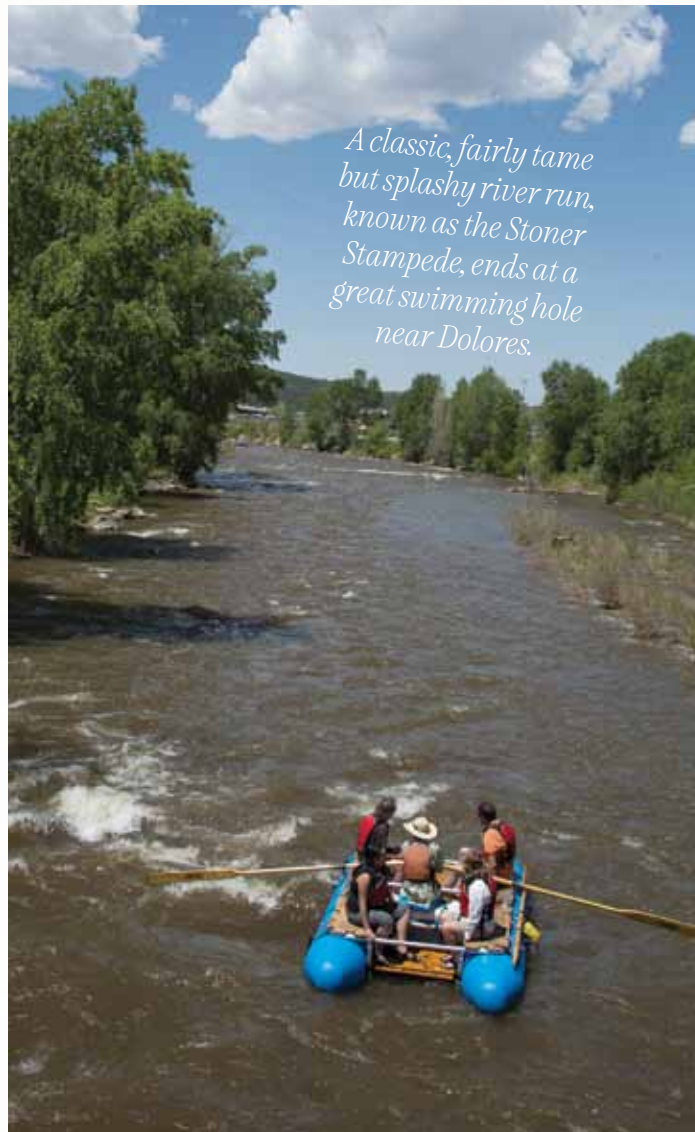
High Plains Drifting

It's where the Dust Bowl's devastation gave way to ghost towns and abandoned lands later reclaimed as protected federal grasslands. And it's where author James A. Michener's historical fiction novel *Centennial* was based. But today, the novel's "Rattlesnake Buttes" are properly known as Pawnee Buttes, twin 300-foot-high sandstone monoliths presiding over the windswept plains like misplaced sentinels. As centerpieces of **PAWNEE NATIONAL GRASSLAND** in northeast



Colorado, the sky islands are internationally recognized for migratory birds, along with blooming wildflowers, fox, coyote and an assortment of other high plains critters. Our advice? Lace up your boots, grab your binos and peruse the easy three-mile round-trip Pawnee Buttes Trail. You'll traverse colorful eroded sandstone arroyos and islets of woodlands, followed by wide-open prairie giving way to the spectacle of the distant buttes. Keep your eyes peeled for hawks, eagles, falcons and other migratory species that zoom along the buttes. Know that the birding bounty comes with a slight caveat, as select trail sections are closed March 1 - June 30 during nesting.
fs.usda.gov/arp

A classic, fairly tame but splashy river run, known as the Stoner Stampede, ends at a great swimming hole near Dolores.



or stand-up paddleboarding in Colorado's second-largest body of water, the 4,470-acre McPhee Reservoir, 23 miles north of Cortez. The reservoir measures 12 miles tip-to-tip, but an umpteen number of fingers quadruples the shoreline miles. Here, you're essentially in the desert, surrounded by towering rock walls, afloat on a liquid maze. An interesting consequence of droughts is that the lower water level has exposed a bounty of Ancestral Puebloan (Anasazi) ruins and cliff art.

There's also whitewater fun on the Dolores River, which is enjoying a somewhat better water year than last. Above the hamlet of Stoner, paddlers can play on the Stoner Stampede, a big Class III wave that's great for perfecting your rodeo moves. In Dolores, you can meander among numerous wave trains as the river cuts through town, right down to Riverside Park, the site of a considerable river restoration project that helps fish and buoys rapids. Float farther and you'll hit Joe Rowell Park and the last rapid in town, which appropriately coincides with The Beach, a nice sandy take-out spot and a great swimming hole to boot.

EAT & SLEEP: Get pumped at **Silver Bean Coffee** (970.946.4404), a jumpin' java joint housed in an Airstream trailer, or break a sweat at the **El Grande Café** (970.565.9996), known for spicy, green chili breakfasts. For cool-downs, it's **Coyote J. Brewing** (jfar-gos.com), the local's pick for craft beer and pub eats. Stay at the chain lodges, or if you root for family-owned businesses, hang your hat at the **Tomahawk Lodge** (angelfire.com/co2/tomahawk). Clean and newly

remodeled, with 24/7 coffee and a welcome mat for pets, it's wonderfully retro; a time capsule from the nation's motel hey-days.

Silver Bean Coffee



RESOURCES:

- ✦ **Kokopelli Bike & Board**, kokopellibike.com
- ✦ **Wilderness Aware Rafting**, inaraft.com
- ✦ **U.S. Forest Service, Dolores Ranger District**, 970.882.7296

MOUNTAIN BIKING AND BOATING BY SCOTT D.W. SMITH; SILVER BEAN COFFEE BY BILL LEWKE