



Sunset

Travel Guide

Western Colorado:
Ski Resorts & Year-Round Adventures 2011

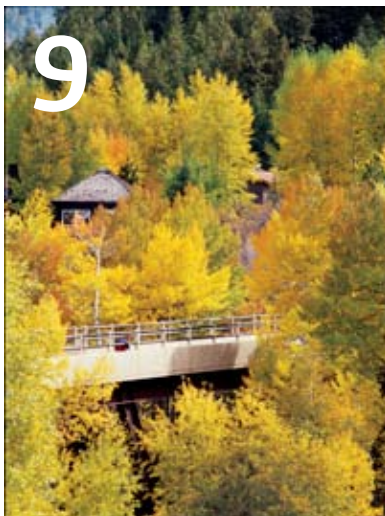


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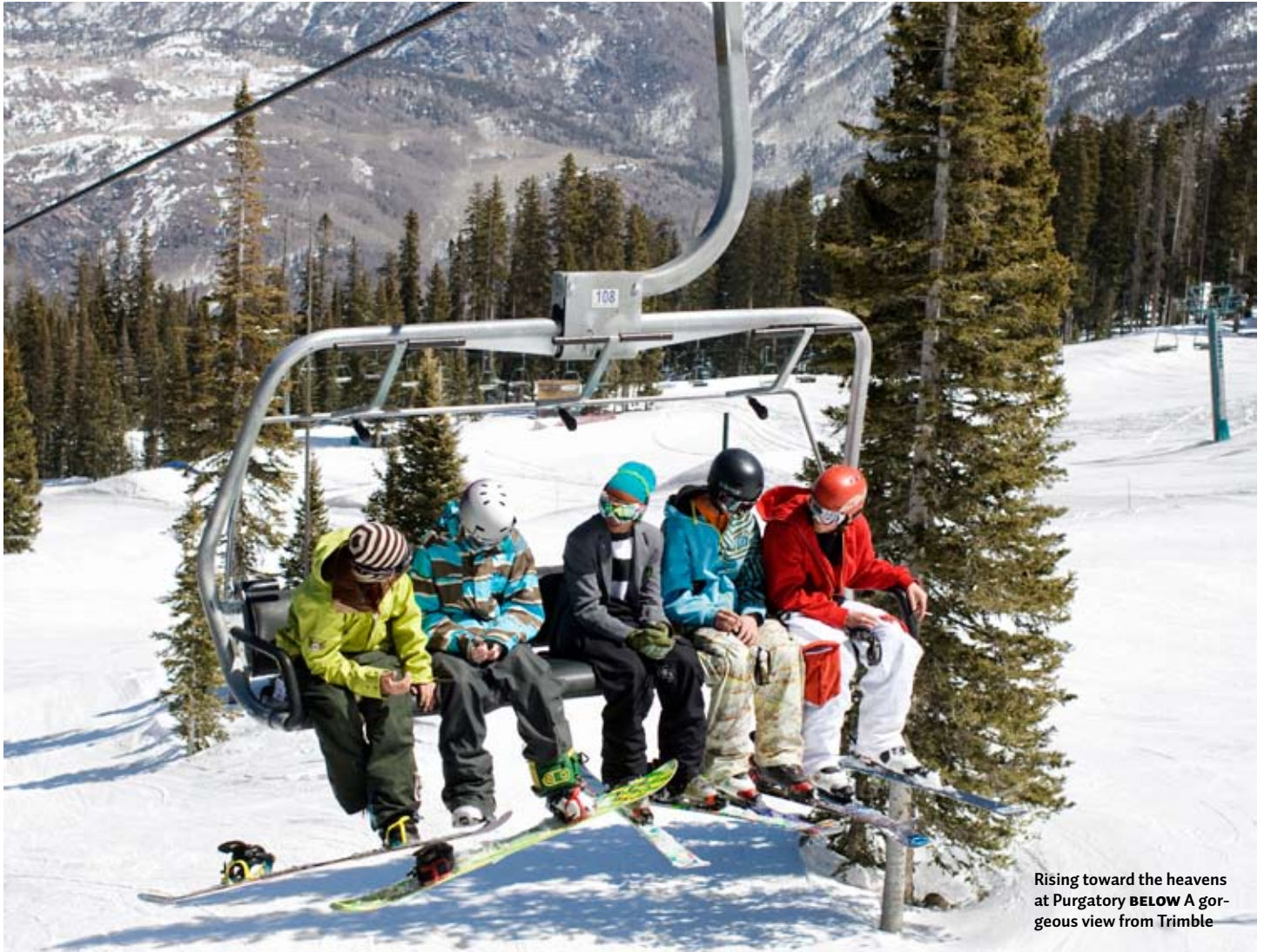


Four seasons of fun in the Rockies

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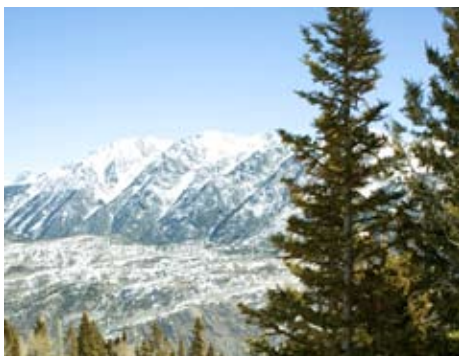
COVER: ZACH DISCHNER (ON FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS), CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP: EBBE ROE YOVINO-SMITH, DAVID FENTON, JAMES BOONE



Rising toward the heavens at Purgatory **BELOW** A gorgeous view from Trimble

Day trip to Durango

This outdoors-loving town throws a great winter party



The run-down on the town

WHY GO IN WINTER There are plenty of snowy adventures in the nearby San Juans.

BEAT THE MIDWINTER BLUES Join the annual **Snowdown Winter Celebration**, with softball games on skis, a parade, and a scavenger hunt (Feb 2-6, 2011; snowdown.org).

ELEVATION 6,512 feet

ANNUAL DAYS OF SUNSHINE More than 300

POPULATION 16,000

MEET THE LOCALS College students, ranchers,

environmentalists, and urban transplants lured by the mountains and the Animas River.

DRESS CODE Cowboy boots or ski garb

HISTORY LESSON The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Company founded Durango in 1880 as a mining town to process gold and silver hauls.

BEFORE YOU HIT THE SLOPES Stop by **Bread** bakery for maple-oat scones (\$; 970/247-5100).

BEST-SELLER LIST Louis L'Amour wrote many of his novels in room 222 of the **Strater Hotel** (from \$109, including breakfast; strater.com).

WILD WEST HAPPY HOUR Stop by Strater's **Diamond Belle Saloon** (970/247-4431).

Sun-soaked slopes

Locals know that **Purgatory at Durango Mountain Resort** (a half-hour from town) has some of the best weather of any ski area in the country—with sun breaking out after



The Strater **ABOVE** The area's historic railroad **LEFT** Rochester Hotel

snow-dumping storms. In the 2009-2010 season, the resort added 125 acres of expert tree-skiing terrain to its existing 85 runs. *Lift tickets from \$67; durangomountainresort.com*

A snowy throwback ride

Hop aboard a 129-year-old steam-powered train, and check out the snowy San Juan National Forest at 18 mph. The **Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad** used to haul precious metals from Colorado's mines, but now it's just for fun (and occasional film cameos: It appeared in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, among others). The 52-mile loop to Cascade Canyon shows off frozen waterfalls, snow-draped evergreens, and the white-

capped San Juans, and includes a stop for a campfire lunch. *From \$59; durangotrain.com*

Drink local

The **Durango Brewing Company** crafted its first ale in 1886, and the Amber Ale is still a local favorite. For fun under \$5? Four-ounce beer samples are \$1, and a pint is \$4. If you work up an appetite, the tasting room serves burgers made with locally raised organic beef. \$; 3000 Main Ave.; 970/247-3396.

Stargaze while you soak

The warmest place to spot stars in Durango's often cloudless skies is from the two natural hot-spring mineral pools at **Trimble Spa &**

5 more winter essentials

TAKE A HIKE Rent snowshoes at **Pine Needle Mountaineering** (*half-day \$10, full day \$15; 835 Main Ave.; 970/247-8728*), then drive 30 minutes north to **Coal Bank Pass**, where a moderate trail through the woods leads you to 360° views from the meadows of Engineer Mountain.

STOP FOR HOT CHOCOLATE **Jean-Pierre Le Cafe Chic**, at the corner of Main and College, pours the best hot chocolate in Durango, with windows looking out onto the bustle of downtown. After turning out more than 5 million baguettes and croissants, the baker has the recipes perfected. \$; 601 Main Ave.; 970/385-0122.

LET THE DOGS DO THE WORK Check out the snowy mountainscape from a new vantage point: the helm of a dogsled. The guides at **Durango Dog Ranch** will help you handle the reins of Alaskan and Siberian huskies as they race through white evergreen forests. \$400 for half-day trip for 2 adults and 1-2 small children, including guide and instruction; durangodogranch.com

WINTER WONDERLAND À DEUX

At **Blue Lake Ranch**, cross-country ski or snowshoe past stands of 150-year-old cottonwoods along a riverside trail, or dogsled or ride horseback through the snowy woods nearby. Fuel up first with a hearty breakfast of tamales and scones (served with heavenly ranch-made preserves and wildflower honey). *From \$90, including breakfast; two-night minimum; bluelakeranch.com*

GO BACK IN TIME Spend an afternoon exploring the Ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings at nearby **Mesa Verde National Park**. \$10 per vehicle; nps.gov/meve

Natural Hot Springs, 7 miles north of town. While soaking in the 100° water, keep an eye out for owls perching in the poolside pines. \$8; 6475 County Rd. 203; trimblehotsprings.com

Make it a weekend

You can easily spend a couple of days exploring Durango. The 15-room **Rochester Hotel** (*from \$129, including breakfast; rochesterhotel.com*), built in 1892, has the best hotel breakfast in town (with a menu that changes daily), tea and cookies every afternoon, and cruiser bikes for guests—useful on snow-free winter days.

Luxuriating in fresh powder **RIGHT** Telluride's snow-dusted landscape



Telluride hotel splurges

ENJOY STELLAR VIEWS At Mountain Village, the ski-in, ski-out **Capella Telluride** combines stone-and-timber design with spectacular scenery—like sunset over Mt. Wilson and San Sophia Ridge from your balcony. From \$295; capellatelluride.com

STAY IN AN IGLOO After a day of guided snowshoeing or skiing in the rugged backcountry of Colorado's San Juan Mountains, cozy up in a snow palace hand-built for two. No, not by you—by Joshua Butson, owner of **Telluride Alpinism**, who learned to build igloos from a guide who lived with Inuits in Quebec. Sturdy and windproof, the igloos are a surprisingly toasty 32°, warmed by natural insulation and body heat. From \$300 per person, including guide, gear, and three gourmet meals per day; tellurideadventures.com or 970/728-4101.

Telluride for less

End-of-season savings put this ritzy ski town within reach

Nestled in a box canyon, the perfectly preserved Western town is dwarfed by 13,000-foot peaks and Bridal Veil Falls, Colorado's tallest free-falling waterfall. With only one road in or out, tiny Telluride is easy to miss. And for most of ski season, it can feel impossible to pay for. However, as winter winds down, locals know that prices drop, sunshine is reliable, and a thick base of snow usually holds out through early spring.

And if you're not a local? This is your best chance to make a trip to a one-of-a-kind ski town—uncrowded, charming, with jagged peaks and above-treeline bowls that are the closest you get in North America to the Alps. The gondola at Telluride Ski Resort (\$98; tellurideskiresort.com) ascends right from town to the ridgetop, with the Mountain Village great for sweeping vistas and cruiser runs. The above-treeline Revelation Bowl,

however, is where to get jaw-dropping views, which could make you swear you're in Switzerland—without the nine-hour flight (or fares in euros).

Thankfully, there's no faux-Bavarian village to match. Telluride is truly Western, with a historic district of gingerbread Victorians and saloon fronts preserved since the days of Butch Cassidy, who staged his first bank robbery here.



New Sheridan Hotel
RIGHT Gorrone Ranch



4 ways to save on a Telluride trip

FLY FOR HALF THE PRICE Nonstop flights from Los Angeles, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Denver, Dallas, and Houston land at Telluride Regional Airport, the highest commercial airport in North America, or Montrose Regional Airport, a little more than an hour away. Late-season flights can be found for under \$200 round-trip, versus high season's \$500 or more.

SLEEP FOR A SONG Towards the end of winter, **Telluride Resort Lodging** (tellurideresortlodging.com) offers a late-season ski-and-stay package that seems (almost) too good to be true: a condo or home starting at \$99 per person per night—lift ticket included. Just how good a deal is this? A lift ticket alone runs \$98 a day.

If you're more of a hotel person, the historic **New Sheridan Hotel** (newsheridan.com), in the heart of town, underwent a renovation in early 2010 but retains its Old West

charm. Beginning March 19, 2011, you can get a room for \$160 per person, including lift ticket. And if you book a stay between March 22 and April 3, 2011, the **Hotel Telluride** (thetelluride.com), a cozy mountain lodge with free shuttle service to the gondola and restaurants, throws in two lift tickets with a room for \$363 per night (two-night minimum), compared with its usual \$299 rate for just the room.

SKIP THE RENTAL CAR Instead of renting a car at the airport, spend just \$30 round-trip for a **shuttle** from the Telluride airport or \$96 from the Montrose airport (tellurideexpress.com). Everything in town is within walking distance, and a free **Galloping Goose bus** makes a loop every 10 to 20 minutes (7 a.m.—midnight; telluride-co.gov). Lifts whisk you straight to the slopes, and if you want to après-ski in Mountain Village, that's not a

problem either—a free gondola runs from town to the village from 7 a.m. to midnight.

SEARCH FOR THE FREEBIES Nordic skiing in the **Town Park**, the **Valley Floor**, or the **Telluride Golf Course** is always free. If the snow at the base is sparse, the **TopAten Nordic and Snowshoe Area** (\$20 lift ticket; tellurideskiresort.com) offers trails through the forest and along mountain ridges. You can also join a downhill ski host at the top of **Coonskin Lift** for a two- to four-hour exploration of ski trails and Telluride's colorful history (10 a.m.; free with lift ticket; tellurideskiresort.com). And at mid-mountain lunch spot **Gorrone Ranch** (\$\$; tellurideskiresort.com), skiers listen to live bands and loosen up with free chair massages (1–3 p.m.). Finally, don't miss the **Free Box** (Colorado Ave. at Pine St.), where locals deposit their castoffs. You might just find the perfect book, game, or down coat.

NEW SHERIDAN HOTEL, SEBRENNER (ON FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS)



Remède Spa's signature waterfall room

Winter wonders

Attain Aspen nirvana with a spa-and-ski combo

There's a booming spa scene in this Rocky Mountain ski town, which is surrounded by miles of backcountry terrain and not one but four downhill resorts. The elevation takes some getting used to—downtown is just under 8,000 feet, and the top of Highlands Bowl, one of the most famous destinations for hard-core downhillers, passes the 12,000-foot mark.

SPA Fortunately, after you've made your

muscles nice and sore, you're just steps from a cluster of truly creative spas. In a town of posh resorts, the **St. Regis Resort** is one of the poshest, and its **Remède Spa** offers the most indulgent hot-stone massage around. Spend a decadent afternoon wrapped in a thick robe, hopping from the steam room to the hot tub to the oxygen lounge to the relaxation room, fully kitted out with tea, snacks, and platters of Jacques Torres chocolate

truffles. But it's the communal (read: bring your bathing suit) waterfall room that elevates this spa experience to world class. Stone grottoes and a series of grand 6-foot cascades surround a waist-deep, crescent-shaped lounging pool. At one end is the bliss-inducing waterfall chair: Imagine an armchair made of tile with a spout just above where your neck rests. As you settle in, turn a timer on the wall to your left, and a gentle cascade of warm water rolls over your body and down into the pool. Absolute nirvana. *Massages from \$90 for a half-hour; 315 E. Dean St.; stregisaspen.com or 970/429-9038.*

STAY Aspen invariably conjures up thoughts of \$500-and-up hotel rooms, and there are plenty of those. But for a simple but comfy, contemporary room in a convenient Main Street location, try the **Hotel Aspen**, which offers super-snuggly down comforters and other modern touches like iPod docks and Wi-Fi. It's close to Aspen Mountain's Silver Queen gondola and right on the free shuttle line for Aspen Highlands, Buttermilk, and Snowmass. In any other city, it would be considered luxury. *From \$169, including breakfast and après-ski hors d'oeuvres; hotelaspen.com or 800/527-7369.*

SKI A winding 10-mile drive outside Aspen, snowy **Castle Creek Valley** is home to a smattering of high-end vacation homes, a tiny ghost town, and some incredibly scenic cross-country ski terrain. Just \$15 buys you a day pass to explore 22 miles of groomed trails crisscrossing a serene, intimate landscape of pines and aspens. But the best part about skiing here comes when it's time to break for lunch. The Pine Creek Cookhouse, a luxury backcountry log cabin restaurant reached on skis, snowshoes, or by horse-drawn sleigh, warms the weary to the core with a roaring fire, hot cider, and super-healthy gourmet lunches like house-smoked rainbow trout salad. *Ashcroft Ski Touring: \$15 day pass; \$20 snowshoe or cross-country ski rentals; at the end of Castle Creek Rd.; 970/925-1971. Restaurant: \$\$\$; \$35 sleigh ride (reservations required); at the end of Castle Creek Rd.; 970/925-1044.*

SIP AND SWIM Check out Aspen's hippest après-ski scene, the **39 Degrees Lounge** at the swanky **Sky Hotel**. Just a snowball's toss from the Silver Queen Gondola, the lounge's outdoor pool and hot tub begin to simmer at 3, when guests and nonguests alike suit up and hop in gratis. Non-ski season visitors, rejoice: the hot tub is open year-round. 709 E. Durant Ave.; 970/925-6760.



Cathedral Lake trail
RIGHT Limelight
Lodge



blue columbines, and firs. There's a 2,000-foot elevation gain up to 11,866 feet, but the alpine views are a sweet reward.

Mountaintop asanas

Only in Aspen would a guided hike come complete with a mountaintop open-air yoga class. Nearby Snowmass keeps it real with daily **yoga hikes** (\$54, lift ticket included; aspen-snowmass.com or 877/282-7736).

Get off the beaten path

One of the town's best-kept secrets is the **Aspen Center for Environmental Studies** (Hallam Lake visitor center: closed Sun; 100 Puppy Smith St.; aspennature.org or 970/925-5756). Play naturalist with mushroom-foraging classes, photo safaris, and free guided hikes.

Catch a free concert

The **Aspen Music Festival** (Jul-late Aug; aspenmusicfestival.com or 970/925-9042) draws the biggest names in classical music. Virtuosos like violinist Sarah Chang and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet perform in the town's three music venues, and many of the events are free. Grab a spot on the lawn by the Benedict Music Tent for an evening concert.

Splurge: dinner with a view

Not to be a skier to glimpse Aspen's best mountaintop views; just jump into a Sno-Cat and head up Aspen Highlands for an intimate four-course meal at **Cloud 9 Alpine Bistro**. What's for dinner: Look for seared diver scallops and smoked goat cheese-stuffed beef tenderloin. *Sno-Cat Dinners on Thu*; \$130, including transportation; reservations required; 970/923-8715.

Aspen summer

Join in on the season's buzzy scene without breaking the bank

Discover new digs

We like the spacious rooms and mountain views at the **Limelight Lodge** (from \$180, including breakfast; third night free; limelight-lodge.com). And check out that pool.

Seek out cheap eats

Have a pint at the **Aspen Brewing Company** (557 N. Mill St.; 970/920-2739) before grabbing a buffalo burger in the bar at **Jimmy's** (\$\$; 205 S.

Mill; 970/925-6020). For dessert, stroll over to **Paradise Bakery & Cafe** (320 S. Galena St.; 970/925-7585) for the best gelato in town.

Hike in summer

Duck out of town to catch the wildflowers and snowcapped peaks. Our favorite hike? **Cathedral Lake Trail** (in the White River National Forest; www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver), a challenging 5.6-miler lined with wild sage,

The Maroon Bells anchored with fall foliage
BELOW Biking on the Rio Grande Trail



Aspen in the off-season

Explore Colorado's historic town in autumn—when hiking, foliage colors, and prices are at their best



Somewhere in between the twisting turns, skyscraping peaks, and rustling aspen trees shimmering in the sunlight, in autumn, you can have the beauty of Independence Pass—the highest paved road in the state—to yourself. It's true that the harrowing backroad to Aspen isn't for the faint of heart, but the last of the autumn leaves are hued amber and scarlet, and you can revel in the stunning scenery without a litany of SUVs threatening to kiss your bumper.

Unlike the Aspen of ski season, when A-list celebrities, fur-flaunting tourists, and Rocky Mountain—high rates dominate the resorts, autumn is blissfully serene, pristinely beautiful, and affordable. The weather is typically sunny and warm during the day, cool at night. Although the town's wonderful performing arts scene ebbs a bit and some shops and public transit services have reduced hours Aspen is enjoyably laid-back in fall—and because it's level, walkable, and easy to get around, you don't have to rent a car.

The area's beauty increases tenfold in fall. Aspen groves edging the town shimmer with gold. One can meander along hiking and biking trails, behold mountain views, and slumber in a gloriously appointed hotel room, while enjoying dandy fall deals. This leaves more coinage in one's pocket for dining and shopping, major highlights of this place.

MARKWALLAGHER (ON FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS), JAMES BOONE



Aspen trees awash in seasonal colors
RIGHT View from Independence Pass



Day one: Soak up the scene

To explore local history, head to the visitor center in the historic sandstone Wheeler Opera House, where you can load up on info for your Aspen assault: a free town map, a free shuttle bus map and schedule, the free local paper for discount coupons, and a map of a self-guided historical downtown walking tour. Aspen's rural past is embodied in a few buildings at the Marolt Open Space. To get there, walk to the Rubey Park Transit Center and hop on a free city shuttle. In the fall, the Castle/Maroon bus is part of a four-route system running every 20 minutes or so. Get off near the Aspen Valley Hospital at the trailhead leading to the Holden/Marolt Mining & Ranching Museum. The building is open only by appointment from fall through spring, but the walk took us into lush wetlands, along Castle Creek, and past the once-grand ranch house itself.

Back in town, Aspen's current riches are easy to find—just go window-shopping along Galena Street. The shops serve Aspen royalty—Jill St. John, RJ (as Robert Wagner's buds call him), Oprah—and wannabes. At Christian Dior, pause to ogle \$6,000 handbags before heading to Susie's Ltd. Consignments, where you can happily poke through gorgeous castoffs of the rich and famous. Voracious readers should head to Explore Booksellers and Bistro, a Victorian house stacked floor-to-ceiling with 50,000 literary must-haves—for good company during this quiet moment in Aspen.

For refreshment, head to the historic Hotel Jerome and plant yourself at the J-Bar. It's been a famed people-watching spot since the 1940s, when stars like Hedy Lamarr and Gary Cooper held down barstools. You might not rub elbows with celebrities during this quiet season, but you can whet your appetite

with their signature burger, topped with cheese, caramelized onions, mushrooms and applewood-smoked Or, move on to a late dinner at another Mother Lode of local lore, Little Annie's Eating House. Its ambience is old Aspen: red-checked tablecloths, wood walls, and patrons in cowboy boots.

Day two: Walk on the wild side

Cashing in on the area's natural wealth is a surefire bet. Ride the free bus along Main Street to Mill Street and walk to the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies. This park-like center is a nature refuge, ringed by cottonwoods and Colorado blue spruce and home to ducks and beavers. In fall, you can have the trails all to yourself.

If you crave more activity, head to Aspen Velo Bicycles, rent a bike, and hit the nearby Rio Grande Trail: a mostly level, paved path through a tunnel of yellowing aspen above the foamy Roaring Fork River.

The ride is undoubtedly a real appetite builder, so fuel up on a monster burrito at the aptly named Big. If it doesn't leave you craving a nap, follow it up on Ute Trail, a killer hike that's nearly straight up.

By now you're likely exhausted—so refresh at happy hour at Mc Storie's Pub, and then float down the street for an affordable, elegant meal of small plates at Rustique Bistro, with options like white wine-and-chili mussels and an assortment of charcuterie.

Day three: Birds and bells

Return to the Marolt Open Space to bird-watch. Oregon juncos sing in the cottonwoods, while flickers, chickadees, and magpies flit overhead. Ready for a splurge? Follow your nose to the Main Street Bakery & Cafe for a cherry pastry and a tall, foamy latte, over which you can plan the day's wilderness trek.

Aspen is surrounded by forestlands, and the nearby White River National Forest contains the Maroon Bells-Snowmass



All-terrain autumn hike

The 11-mile trek from Aspen to Crested Butte is one of the most popular in Colorado's White River National Forest, but you've got less than a mile to go and have yet to see anyone outside your small group. (Unless you count that family of rabbits hopping about just below your lofty lunch spot.) At the start of the trail, you had the alpine mirror known as Maroon Lake all to yourself—how many people can say that? And how many people can say they've done this hike alongside a guide armed with several pairs of snowshoes "just in case" there's a significant early-season storm? It's always an October possibility up around 12,490-foot West Maroon Pass, but that's part of the adventure. *From \$490 per couple, including lunch; aspenexpeditions.com or 877/790-2777.*



At J-Bar **ABOVE** Seasonal hike in White River National Forest **LEFT** A demo at Aspen Center for Environmental Studies

Wilderness. Wild, yes, but it's accessible—a bus leaves from Aspen Highlands Village, a shuttle hop away from town. At the village, stop in at Thunderbowl Market Café to buy picnic fixings: chips, pickles, and a turkey sandwich as big as a Volkswagen.

After the scenic bus ride, set out on the easy, 3-mile round-trip Maroon Lake Scenic Trail. Where the path curves past the lake, get knocked out by the view: the dark red Maroon Bells edged by golden aspens, the peaks dusted with snow.

Shopping

Galena St., Hopkins Ave., and Mill St. have all the heavy hitters of power-shopping.

Explore Booksellers and Bistro. 221 E. Main; 970/925-5336.

Susie's Ltd. Consignments. High style at bargain prices. 623 E. Hopkins; 970/920-2376.

Hiking & biking

Aspen Center for Environmental Studies. 9–5 Mon–Sat; free. 100 Puppy Smith St.; aspennature.org or 970/925-5756.

Aspen Velo Bicycles. From \$20 for two hours. 465 N. Mill; aspenvelo.com or 970/925-1495.

Holden/Marolt Mining & Ranching Museum (Marolt Open Space). Trails, marsh, and old buildings; off the paved Marolt Trail leading east off Castle Creek Rd. near State 82. \$6; 40180 Hwy. 82; heritageaspen.org

Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

At Rubey Park Transit Center, take Castle/Maroon shuttle to get to the Maroon Bells tour bus (\$6 round trip). Check schedule at rfta.com or 970/925-8484. Maroon Lake Scenic Trail starts at 9,580 feet. 970/925-3445.

Ute Trail. Ute Ave. from Original St. to trail is an easy 1/2 mile; trail is a steep 1-mile climb. 970/925-3445.

Dining

The Big Wrap. \$; 520 E. Durant, Ste. 101; 970/544-1700.

J-Bar. Legendary burgers. \$\$; 330 E. Main St.; 800/331-7213.

Little Annie's Eating House. \$\$; 517 E. Hyman; 970/925-1098.

Main Street Bakery & Cafe. \$\$; 201 E. Main; 970/925-6446.

Rustique Bistro. \$\$\$; 216 S. Monarch St.; 970/920-2555.

Lodging

Aspen Meadows Resort. Bauhaus-chic rooms. From \$129; aspenmeadowsresort.dolce.com

Chalet Lisl. Cozy studios near town. From \$85; chaletlisl.com

Hotel Jerome. Posh rooms at lodge. From \$255; hoteljerome.com

St. Moritz Lodge & Condominiums. Well located and comfortable, with daily continental breakfast. From \$79; stmoritzlodge.com



Sonnenalp Resort

Alpine escape

Get a taste of the Alps in Vail beyond ski season

A small village with cobblestone streets, a tall white clock tower, mountain lodges, and gasthofs: Vail, Colorado, may sit in the heart of the Rockies, but it was built to evoke a ski town in the Alps. Indeed, city founders drew architectural inspiration from throughout the Alps. Cynics call the style “Shake-and-Bake Bavaria,” but over the years, this mix has taken on its own charm.

Though Vail has grown (sprawled, some say) beyond that original concept, it returns to its Alpine roots each fall with Oktoberfest. For two weekends in September, the city’s core streets fill with brats, beer drinkers, dancers, and oompah-pah bands. It’s one sure time of year when you can freely yodel, slosh beer in stein-clinking toasts, or stroll the streets in lederhosen without drawing a stare. But even if you miss Oktoberfest, the weather is great in early fall, the aspens are turning, and you can still tap into a touch of the Tirol here.

Vail on foot

The city invites walking, since, like many Alps ski towns, its heart is a pedestrian-only village that’s well worth exploring. Park in the village lot off North Frontage Road, then stroll west across the covered bridge. To check out the shopping, head up Bridge Street to Gore Creek Drive. One good stop is Gorsuch, but skip the store’s swanky resort clothing. Instead, head downstairs to browse the classic German-style housewares, like antique cuckoo clocks, pewter candlesticks, and staghorn-handled knives.

When you’re ready for lunch, grab a sidewalk table under an umbrella at Pepi’s. It’s part of the Hotel Gasthof Gramshammer, a Vail mainstay since 1964 and one of the first hotels in town. If you want a taste of Austria, this is the place, with jägerschnitzel and sauerbraten on the menu. Pepi’s Bar is a lively nightspot, and you might bump into the hotel’s Austrian-born owners, Pepi and

Sheika Gramshammer.

Spend the afternoon wandering on up through the village—but watch your footing if you find yourself on one of the cobblestone byways. Or emulate the fitness-minded Swiss and take a longer walk: Head back to the covered bridge, where you pick up the Gore Creek Trail. A short walk east brings you to the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, edged with turning aspens, rock gardens, and waterfalls. Take the trail back to East Meadow Drive, passing burbling Gore Creek along the way.

Time your walk along East Meadow right and you can watch and listen to the glockenspiel on the tower of the Village Center D Building. Its 19 bells, cast in Germany, play music daily, and a dirndl-clad figurine strikes the biggest bell hourly.

If you’ve worked up an appetite, head over to the Sonnenalp Resort—a spectacular setting in Bavaria inspired the theme of the hotel and its name, which means sun on the mountains—for a luxurious dinner at Ludwig’s Restaurant. The decor is Bavarian, but the menu is contemporary American with French influences; don’t miss seasonal desserts like the warm macadamia-nut chocolate cake. Then, as the sun sinks behind Vail Mountain, move over to the Sonnenalp’s King’s Club for after-dinner drinks in front of the roaring fire.

Bavarian basics

Vail is about 95 miles west of Denver, off I-70.

Oktoberfest runs for two weekends in mid-to-late September. *Free; outdoors on main streets; gohighline.com/oktoberfest or 970/476-6797.*

ATTRACTIONS Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.

Dawn–dusk; free. 530 S. Frontage Rd. (in Ford Park).

Glockenspiel. *Chimes every half-hour (9 a.m.–10 p.m.); plays music at 9, noon, and 3 daily. 122 E. Meadow Dr.*

Gore Creek Trail. *It’s 1/4 mile from the covered bridge (Bridge St. at E. Meadow) to the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.*

Gorsuch. *10–6 daily. 263 E. Gore Creek Dr.; 970/476-2294.*

DINING Ludwig’s Restaurant. *\$\$\$\$; closed for dinner Mon-Tue spring through mid-December. In Sonnenalp Resort, 20 Vail Rd.; 970/479-5429.*

Pepi’s. *\$\$\$.* *In Hotel Gasthof Gramshammer, 231 E. Gore Creek; 970/476-4671.*

LODGING Hotel Gasthof Gramshammer. *From \$115; pepis.com*

Sonnenalp Resort of Vail. *From \$160; sonnenalp.com*

A cheerful town with a stunning backdrop



Crested Butte

Two wheels are the way to go in this beloved outdoor paradise

Crested Butte, a resurrected mining village turned adventure-sports destination (population 1,600), sits in a wide, sunny, dead-end valley at the edge of Colorado's West Elk Mountains, about 25 miles as the crow flies southwest of Aspen. Unpretentious and personable, CB is a locals' town, buzzing with young families, powder hounds drawn to Crested Butte Ski Resort, elite athletes, and big-city refugees.

Everybody rides bikes here. This, arguably, is the place where mountain biking was born 30 years ago, and two-wheelers are everywhere: vintage cruisers, circa 1970, adorned with glittery handlebar streamers and bells, left unlocked in tidy, trusting rows outside Camp 4 Coffee; rusty Schwinn's propped up on kickstands in front of Izzy's deli; mud-splattered, full-suspension steeds rolling up Elk Avenue after a blissful beating

on the infamous 401 single-track.

A recent proposal to begin mining molybdenum (a key element in steelmaking) just outside town on Mt. Emmons has drawn the ire of many residents, who came here for the scenery and wilderness access, if not the jobs.

There's plenty to do besides free-wheeling. Cast for brown trout on the fast-flowing Taylor River, explore nearby Strand Hill on horseback, or scope out downtown's cheerfully redone Victorians and sweet local boutiques like Beyond and Casa Bella (CB prides itself on having only two chain stores and zero stoplights). But the ultimate souvenir is your own refurbished cruiser bike, complete with a miniature Colorado vanity plate that reads, "Eat my dust."

If you have a bias for bicycles, a pilgrimage to Crested Butte is a must.

Spin cycle

Crested Butte sits at the end of a paved road at 8,885 feet in central Colorado. Hop on a bike and wheel through the historic downtown, past sleepy streets fronted by vintage Victorians. Then head off into the mountains for a quick spin on the Lower Loop, a 10-mile network of single- and double-track trails and dirt roads. During your ride, you'll be treated to the area's natural wonders: an elk crossing the creek, a dense stand of aspens as skinny as toothpicks.

Wheeling through town

Camp 4 Coffee—a lopsided little mining shack with a dozen bikes parked out front—is a great spot for breakfast. They even drizzle the outline of a bicycle into the milky froth of their lattes.

After fueling up, ride the paved bike path toward Crested Butte Mountain Resort—the local ski hill—and jump on the Upper Loop, a rolling tire-wide track through leafy aspens on a ridge east of town. Below you, Crested Butte resembles a model village, with its tidy streets and peaked roofs.

Roll back into town to window-shop (by bike of course). To preserve the homegrown charm of Elk Avenue, the town has tried to keep chain stores out of downtown; scope out a bottle of Colorado's own Plum Creek wine (we love the Cabernet Sauvignon) in the window of Mountain Spirits, and then head to Eidolon Press, a one-woman printshop and bindery. Owner C.L. Ingalls (a distant relation to that Ingalls) shows us books of letterpress stationery she's hand-set.



Trail riding with Fantasy Ranch outfitters **ABOVE** The town's #1 sport
LEFT A must-stop spot for coffee

Back in the saddle

The next day, feeling virtuous for going nearly 48 hours without getting in a car, take another kind of ride: a 11/2-hour horseback tour of Snodgrass Mountain at Fantasy Ranch, a few miles north of town. Ride nose-to-tail through wildflower meadows and aspen groves, mesmerized by the views of Mt. Crested Butte and, to the north, Gothic Mountain.

From there, it's easy to justify a quick drive to the Judd Falls Trail, a mostly wooded, mile-long footpath that climbs to a cascade. When you get back to the car, you might notice a couple of mountain bikers screaming by, whooping and hollering down the final

stretch of Crested Butte's famous 401 trail. As you stand there, happily eating their dust, you're sure to vow to take the town's free-wheeling spirit home with you—and come back soon to ride again.

48 hours in Crested Butte

FRIDAY Check into downtown's jewel-colored **Ruby of Crested Butte** (from \$149; therubyofcrestedbutte.com), a luxe yet low-key B&B with 1,000-thread-count sheets and Frette spa robes. In winter, the fresh-baked Ruby Cinnamon Rolls have been known to cause more than one skier to miss the first chair of the morning. Borrow a red townie bike from the inn to fit in with the 2-wheeled population.

Other seasons' specialties in C.B.

A CHARMER OF A SKI TOWN Mix boho with Victorian and you've got C.B.'s funky Historic District main street, from the ski-toting bike riders to the hand-painted town bus rolling by. Getting here isn't easy, but C.B.'s remoteness keeps the masses away. Three miles from downtown, the slopes of **Crested Butte Mountain Resort** (from \$59; skicb.com) nurture its reputation as steep and chute-packed—not for the faint of heart. But the more than 900 acres of beginner and intermediate terrain tell another tale. Take the advice of locals and hit the Gold Link and East River lifts for some confidence-building intermediate runs.

MUSE-SEE IN AUTUMN Crested Butte has the largest aspen forest on the planet. Hike the 8 steep and strenuous miles (one-way) along Mill Creek up to Storm Pass in the **West Elk Wilderness** (coloradowilderness.com/wildpages/westelk.html). Yellow aspens are everywhere, and you're rewarded with views of the Castles: 12,000-foot formations made of eroded volcanic tuff.

SATURDAY Swing by **Camp 4 Coffee** (\$; 4021/2 Elk Ave.; 970/349-2500) for fresh-roasted espresso before heading to the **Alpineer** (419 Sixth St.; 970/349-5210) for mountain bike rentals and maps of Crested Butte's best trails, including the 401 and the **Upper and Lower Loops**. Refuel at **Pitas in Paradise** (\$\$; 212 Elk; 970/349-0897). Cruise by the shops: **Mountain Spirits** (220 Elk; 970/349-5401) carries Colorado wines, and **Eidolon Press** (by appointment; 414 Elk; 800/773-6620) sells letterpress stationery. For dinner, hit **Ginger Cafe** (\$\$; 425 Elk; 970/349-7291) for Thai food or **Lobar** (\$\$; 303 Elk; 970/349-0480) for sushi.

SUNDAY **McGill's** (\$\$; 228 Elk; 970/349-5240) is the place for people-watching and pancakes before you hit the Sunday morning **Crested Butte Farmers Market** (10–2 Jun–Oct; 100 block of Elk; 970/901-0711). **Fantasy Ranch** (from \$55; fantasyranchoutfitters.com or 970/349-5425) leads rides on Snodgrass Mountain. Or take a quick hike on the **Judd Falls Trail**, about 6 miles north of town (970/641-0471).

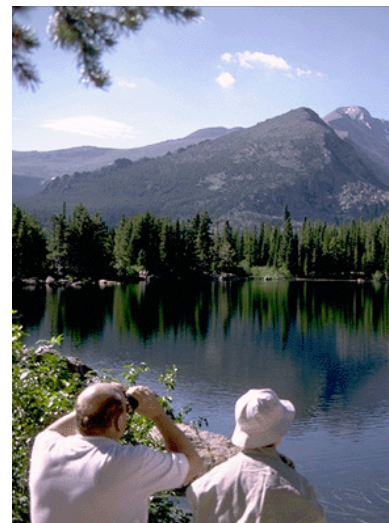


Mountain high

Explore Rocky Mountain National Park, the Lower 48's highest

Straddling the Continental Divide, **Rocky Mountain National Park** boasts 60 summits of 12,000 feet or taller. Iconic **Longs Peak** tops out at 14,259 feet. You'll enjoy hikes, trail rides, wildlife, gazing at heart-stopping mountain panoramas, and exploring two gateway towns, Estes Park on the east side and Grand Lake Village on the west. \$20 per vehicle (7-day pass); nps.gov/romo or 970/586-6777.

Hiking
Wild Basin area. We have President Obama to thank for saving our favorite summer hikes. In March 2010, Rocky Mountain National Park became a designated federal wilderness (which means there's no danger of logging or development ... ever). Celebrate by hiking in the Wild Basin area. From the Wild Basin Trailhead, take the 1.8-mile



Calypso Cascades Trail, where you'll see mariposa lilies and Indian paintbrush. About a mile past Calypso is **Ouzel Falls**, worth the extra effort for the spectacular scenery and the raspberries growing along the trail.

Chasm Lake. Leave early to hike the wide, well-used **Longs Peak Trail** (8 1/2 miles round trip), which snakes through the trees before breaking out into a broad, conifer-dotted basin. At 3 miles, the Chasm Lake Trail forks left past **Peacock Pool**, **Columbine Falls**, and the flanks of **Mt. Lady Washington** and **Mt. Meeker**. After one last short, steep section, **Chasm Lake**, which sits at 11,760 feet, suddenly comes into view, tucked below Longs Peak's imposing 2,000-foot east face. *From Estes Park, take State 7 south 9 miles and turn right on Longs Peak Campground Rd. Go 1 mile to the trailhead parking area, which can fill by dawn on weekends.*

Camping

Moraine Park Campground. Elk, mule deer, and coyotes often wander through the meadow near this campground, which has a backcountry feel despite its proximity to the road. The 2.3-mile Cub Lake Trail leads to a lily pad-covered pond. Insider tip: Leave your car behind; starting on Memorial Day, summer park shuttles provide easy access to trails. With nearly 250 spaces for RVs, trailers, and tents, this east-side campground is the park's largest. *245 sites year-round; \$14-\$20; recreation.gov*

Timber Creek. Most sites are tucked into the trees, some with views of the Never Summer Mountains. *98 sites year-round; \$14-\$20; 970/586-1206.*

Winding River Resort Village (outside the park). Family-friendly, with playgrounds, hayrides, pony rides, horseback trail rides, an animal farm, ice cream socials, and chuck-wagon breakfasts. *150 reservable sites*



Elk in autumn
RIGHT A snowy
scene



mid-May–early Oct; \$29–\$50. windingriverresort.com, 970/627-3215, or 303/623-1121.

Wildlife

Beams of light slicing through the crisp morning air have barely touched the broad golden meadows of West Horseshoe Park, but two cars have already pulled over to watch a herd of elk. September, when the fall migration and mating season are in full swing, draws crowds of elk-watchers to Rocky Mountain National Park. But few people realize that this is also one of the best months to spot a variety of wildlife throughout the national park. The key is to start early, go slow, and bring binoculars. Budget five to seven hours for the 70-mile round-trip from the Fall River (north) entrance to Timber Creek campground.

Entering the park near dawn through the Fall River (north) entrance on the park's east

side, we immediately spot elk in **West Horseshoe Park** near **Sheep Lakes**, and we spend an hour watching them and scanning the treeline for black bears. No luck, but we soon score big-eared mule deer browsing near the water while we're on a side trip to **Endovalley**, also a good spot for elk and bighorn sheep.

Heading up Trail Ridge Road, we stop at the **Beaver Ponds overlook** to check out the impressive beaver waterworks. Farther up the road, **Forest Canyon** is one of the best places to spot bighorn sheep nibbling the rich tundra on rocky slopes—prime time is typically between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. The Forest Canyon overlook has views 3,000 feet down to the Big Thompson River; we look for red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, and golden eagles riding midday thermals.

The **Alpine Visitor Center** sells snacks, but we brought lunch, so we can picnic at sites near beaver ponds along the Colorado River

north of Timber Creek Campground, where moose often spend the day munching willow twigs. Look for 3-month-old calves following their antlerless moms.

Driving back to the north entrance takes two hours (without stopping) and yields more wildlife toward dusk. We get to Estes Park in time for dinner on the deck at **Marys Lake Lodge** (\$\$\$; 2625 Marys Lake Rd.; 970/586-5958), where elk graze in a meadow.

Snow play & snowshoeing

Summer has always been considered prime time to visit Rocky Mountain National Park, but a bounty of winter programs are make the park accessible when the snow flies.

The popular **Hidden Valley snow play area** includes unobstructed space for kids to build snowmen or tow their sleds and saucers uphill, then slide back down with ear-to-ear grins on their faces. Snowshoers can explore short routes through the nearby woods. You may see gonzo backcountry types climbing high up the mountain to ski or snowboard the ghost trails, old ski runs that are no longer maintained.

In winter, the seasonal campground at **Glacier Basin** offers parking and access to miles of marked snowshoe and cross-country ski trails. Park rangers lead free interpretive snowshoe tours here through March: two-hour walks for beginners and four-hour ones for more experienced snowshoers (*reservations required*; 970/586-1223). On January 8, 2011, the campground will host the annual **Estes Park Winter Trails Day** (wintertrails.org), which offers a chance to try different brands of snowshoes.

The closest gear rental is at shops in **Estes Park** (estes-park.com), which is also the place to stop and warm up after a day in the snow. We like **Notchtop Bakery & Café Inc.** (\$; 459 E. Wonder View Ave.; 970/586-0272) for hot chocolate in a mug or a pint glass, topped with whipped cream and sprinkled with chocolate.

Leisurely springtime cycling



Fort Collins

Bikes, brews, and blooms enliven this riverfront town in spring

CLAIM TO FAME Old Town is said to be the inspiration for Disneyland's Main Street.

BETTER CLAIM TO FAME Most microbreweries per capita in Colorado.

NICKNAMES Fort Fun and FoCo

CHECK IT OUT Borrow a bike (for free!) for up to seven days from the **Fort Collins Bike Library** (fcgov.com)

BEST BREAKFAST RIDE **Brunch o' Bikes** meets outside Brave New Wheel bike shop (see

right) the first Sunday each month.

BEST POST-RIDE LUNCH **CooperSmith's Pub & Brewing** (\$\$; 5 Old Town Square; coopersmiths-pub.com) for bangers and mash, plus in-house brews. Try the Poudre Pale Ale.

BEST POST-RIDE COCKTAIL Margaritas at the **Rio Grande Mexican Restaurant** (\$\$; 143 W. Mountain Ave.; 970/224-5428).

WORTH THE TRIP A drive along State 14 to nearby **Cache la Poudre River Canyon** (970/295-

6700) in Roosevelt National Forest, for views of the spring runoff and wildflowers.

A RIVERFRONT RIDE In bike commuter-friendly Fort Collins, the scenic **Poudre River Trail** is a bit of a thoroughfare, cutting west to east through the city for 10 miles along the river. The paved trail meanders past white-tailed deer and springtime wildflowers, with turnoffs to downtown and the city's celebrated breweries. poudretrail.org

GET YOURSELF SOME WHEELS Fort Collins is crazy for bikes, and it has the shops to prove it. Check out the vintage cruisers at **Brave New Wheel** (closed Sun; 105 E. Myrtle St.; 970/416-0417). Or rent a ride from **Full Cycle** in Old Town, just a mile from the river trail (from \$10 for four hours; 230 S. College Ave.; 970/484-1800).

FUEL UP WITH A CUP The **Bean Cycle** is a bike- and eco-friendly coffeeshop staffed by adorable baristas who practice what they preach: biking to work and serving fair-trade, organic java. Try a cup of the nutty Costa Rican blend while browsing the in-house, nonprofit bookstore. 144 N. College Ave.; thebeancycle.com

FILL UP YOUR BASKET WITH BULBS

Downtown's **Perennial Gardener**, a garden-goodie and gift shop, teeters with birdhouses, lawn gnomes, paperwhite bulbs, potting vessels, and how-to books. Don't miss the courtyard out back with soothing fountains. A half-hour of browsing here, and you'll be ready to flex that green thumb. 154 N. College Ave.; 970/224-3987.

CRUISE TO A BREWERY Bikes are synonymous with **New Belgium Brewing Company**, well loved for its Fat Tire amber ale, and just a quick ride from downtown along the Poudre River Trail. Book a spot on one of the popular brew tours (Fri-Sat; free), and don't pass on the Blue Paddle, a pilsener-lager great for spring. Closed Sun; 500 Linden St.; newbelgium.com

Cruise up to the **Fort Collins Brewery** for brewery tours offered hourly (1-5 p.m.) on Saturdays. The tasting room stays open until 7 p.m. for both samples and pints. Don't miss the Rocky Mountain IPA and the Retro Red ale. Closed Sun; free; 1900 E. Lincoln Ave., Ste. B; fortcollinsbrewery.com

About a half-mile from New Belgium, **Odell Brewing Company** is another Fort Collins classic with tours (1, 2, and 3 p.m.). Show up a half-hour early since they don't take reservations. Or swing by the taproom for a taste of 90 Shilling, Easy Street Wheat, or the summer-season brew, St. Lupulin Extra Pale Ale. Closed Sun; free; 800 E. Lincoln Ave.; odellbrewing.com

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Young urbanites and the post-work happy-hour crowd congregate in this trendy neighborhood to enjoy rooftop bars, alfresco restaurants, great shops, a scenic park, and downtown skyline views.

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