



COLORADO,

BEYOND THE SLOPES

Mention Colorado and you probably think of zipping down snowy slopes on skis. But there's much more to this easy-on-the-eyes Rocky Mountain state than winter sports, as Dan Avila discovers. Photography by Dan and Zora Avila.

The sun has just set across the seemingly endless plains extending from the foot of the highest sand dune in North America, the evening alpenglow painting the entire scene pink. We are in prime position to catch the spectacle in Great Sand Dunes National Park, and aside from a group of doe-eyed mule deer, we are completely alone. Colorado offers the perfect cross-section of iconic North American landscapes, like this very one we're enjoying. It also delivers surprising moments of quiet solitude, and plenty of opportunities to escape thronging crowds.

City-based silence

While my Great Sand Dunes experience was enhanced by contemplation in a place of jaw-dropping natural beauty, settling the mind and recharging in Colorado does not necessarily require an escape to the wilderness. Sunrise yoga at Red Rocks Amphitheatre is a concert-scale event, cradled within towering Palaeozoic rocks, just a 30-minute drive from the state's capital, Denver.

The amphitheatre fills to capacity in the pre-dawn light, before hundreds of enthusiasts work their poses with a poetic singularity to the encouraging guidance of Big Booty Yoga's instructors backed by gentle new-age music. This is a truly Zen, if somewhat surreal, experience.

Landscapes of the Gods

Heading south from Denver to the foot of the Rocky Mountains you'll find Colorado Springs, where the ancient landscape within the aptly named Garden of the Gods provides a slice of the state's prehistoric past. It's an easy drive through the park, with some sites holding spiritual significance for Native Americans. The rock structures are vibrant and transfixing, with walking paths providing even closer access to stark rock structures like the Kissing Camels.

Meanwhile, at neighbouring Manitou Springs you can amplify your calm from the inside. This town has eight constantly flowing mineral water fountains scattered throughout, each with a distinct flavour due to mineral composition. These springs were considered to have healing powers by the tribes of the Great Plains, and it's free to stroll up and take a sip.

Calm from above

Aside from the excitement of the launch and nervous anticipation of the landing, hot-air ballooning over the golden plains adjacent to the Garden of the Gods is a relaxed and tranquil affair. Before takeoff, the winds are carefully assessed to determine conditions and to predict a likely landing location.

Once airborne, the baskets are a quiet and remarkably stable platform for photography, or just to watch the sunrise illuminate the rocks as it washes over the prairie. The Kissing Camels, so impressive at ground level, appear almost insignificant against the glory of the Rocky Mountains from the air; yet in a state rightly famed for the beauty of its peaks, I can't help but feel that it's the expansive plains that steal the show from this lofty vantage point.

Hugging mountain curves

Back at ground level, the Million Dollar Highway, a 40-kilometre stretch of road between Ouray and Silverton in Colorado's southwest, is arguably one of the world's great drives, with the tight, winding section from the summit of Red Mountain Pass through Uncompahgre Gorge the scenic highlight. The mountainside road carves its way through forested and mineral-rich rock, with intense colours and textures that excite the senses.

The wild scenery and engaging drive has made this part of the state a mecca for motorcycle enthusiasts, but the countryside is equally captivating when glimpsed from the vantage of the historic single-gauge railway that links the towns of Durango and Silverton. Built to haul mineral ore from the mountains to town, the locomotives today retain much of their original charm, and jumping aboard is the perfect way to take in the towering landscapes.

More than a place to be seen

"Telluride is where famous people take real holidays, not a showy place where they come to be seen," remarks born-and-bred local Tom Watkinson with a casual smile.

The high-altitude ski town is cradled by mountains on three sides and has long been known as an unpretentious



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01 The 'Kissing Camels' of Colorado Springs
02 Pre-dawn moonlit mountain landscape from the Alta Mine ghost town near Telluride
03 Larimer Square in downtown Denver lit up
04 Yoga at Red Rock Amphitheatre

mountain getaway for A-listers like Tom Cruise, who owns a hideaway just out of town.

Famed for its festivals and fun, Telluride – like the rest of Colorado – is all about the great outdoors. The nearby mining ghost town of Alta is the perfect place for sunrise; other enviable views can be enjoyed from the off-road Bridal Veil Falls or the Via Ferrata's steel steps, which hug the cliffs surrounding town.

There is a feeling of finding something undiscovered in the beautiful landscapes of Colorado. The diversity of experiences on offer celebrate this wonderful, warmer side of the state and provide endless opportunities for quiet contemplation. ♦

Springs adventures

Whatever the season, and regardless of your preferred style of travel, the bounty of diversions on offer at Glenwood Springs is hard to beat. The town takes its name from the mineral springs that bubble across town, and a soak in the pools is practically obligatory. The region's canyons, rivers, lakes and national parkland attract adventure enthusiasts and nature lovers in equal measure – at the end of the day, return to restaurants that reflect the region, and luxury hotels where you can rest weary hiking, biking or kayaking limbs. visitglenwood.com

A four-hour drive to the southeast lies Colorado Springs, also a mecca for nature lovers. If you want an epic road trip, you've come to the right place – there are plenty of scenic stretches to explore on four wheels. On two feet, there are 560 kilometres of trails to explore, from relaxing strolls to heart-pounding challenges. Don't miss the Garden of the Gods Park, where your stroll takes you past towering rock formations, lush vegetation and wildlife. visitcos.com