

# WILD, WIDE AND

Whether you're tracing ancient Puebloan footsteps, marvelling at soaring sand dunes or channelling your inner cowboy on a ranch, Colorado's lesser-known wilderness areas offer a front-row seat to nature writ large, discovers Dan Avila. Photography by Dan and Zora Avila.

# WONDERFUL

“As I stand here now, talking with you, I can hear their ancient voices. I can hear them calling in the distance.” Speaking in a quiet voice to my wife, Zora, Navajo man and proud Native American combat veteran Ben Benally pauses for a few seconds, listening. Zora, also of Native American heritage from the Cherokee and Comanche nations, asks: “What do you hear?” “It’s like they are singing,” Ben replies. “In a far-away voice. And the closer I get to the ancient palace, the louder it gets.” It’s a moving exchange, one made even more spiritual by the setting: cliffside above the ruins in Colorado’s Mesa Verde National Park.

These Puebloan ruins sit ornately under a rock ledge, and are one of thousands of archaeological sites within the UNESCO World Heritage area, which also includes

600 cliff dwellings. Like the Mayan cities of Belize and the Nabataean structures of Petra in southern Jordan, the relics are grand in scale – even more impressive are the details, advanced architecture and design, which are evident when exploring the site, inhabited for 600 years until 1300 AD. At sunset, we take an elevated position for unbroken views across the valley, spotting even more dwellings carved into the sheer rock walls, and watching the largest (the Cliff Palace) disappear into darkness.

## In Puebloan footsteps

Following the Puebloan trail, Chimney Rock is an archaeological site located at the southern edge of Colorado’s San Juan Mountains. Our Native American guide, Gloria, leads our hike here at a brisk pace. Given





the elevation of around 2,100 metres, plus our heavy packs, I expect a rapid decline in stamina as we ascend to the ruins. The opposite occurs. I feel strangely energised, as if I could run up the trail without fading. I asked Gloria if this place has a similar effect on other visitors.

“It definitely has a very special energy,” she says with a knowing smile. “You can feel it, right?”

Dating back more than 1,000 years, the ancient homes and structures here sit in proximity to stone towers that dominate the landscape. From the top, we’re rewarded with commanding views across Colorado and New Mexico.

### Into the Wild West

One of the closest towns to these spiritual and ancient sites is Durango, offering a modern twist on American heritage. The stuff of postcards, it’s steeped in Western and gold-mining history, with a passionately preserved steam engine that draws enthusiasts from around the world.

Despite its Wild West past, Durango is now replete with artisan microbreweries, culinary collective-style eateries and cool speakeasy bars, preserved since Prohibition. The town enjoys 300 days of sunshine each year, and is the perfect base to explore the ‘Million Dollar Highway’, which, on its northern leg, terminates in the mountain town of Ouray. This is one of the world’s great drives, with hairpin turns and sheer cliff drops through mountainous, forested terrain.

Arguably the best way to experience the route is by motorcycle, as we do with a group of willing locals. For those wanting less of a white-knuckle drive, the steam train forges a path through this breathtaking scenery, hugging the mountainside as it passes through forest and past deep ravines and rivers. The train’s terminus is in Silverton, just 40 minutes south of Ouray.

### Natural wonders

Great Sand Dunes is not a secret, but as one of the least visited national parks in America, opportunities abound for moving and personal connections with the landscape, enhanced by this degree of isolation. Like other natural wonders, the national park amply rewards early risers, as the pre-dawn glow illuminates its stacked peaks with a blush of purple and magenta before the sun breaks the horizon, revealing the artistic depth and dimension of the tallest sand dunes on the continent.

We find that the best place to experience both the dramatic sunrise and sunset is from the side of the road past the first sweeping ‘S-bend’ before entering the park. From here, the dunes sit in stark relief at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, delineating the edge of the sweeping plains of the San Luis Valley, once teeming with bison and deer-like pronghorn, the lifeblood of nomadic tribes. As we quietly enjoy the view and silence, we are rewarded with a group of impressive bull mule deer, strolling and grazing the plains.

### Where bison roam

Once early morning photos are complete, it’s a 15-minute drive to Zapata Ranch, where the first order of the day is an outstanding breakfast that redefines rustic elegance. This place is the embodiment of cowboy fantasies writ large, located within sight of the Great Sand Dunes and home to thriving herd of genetically pure American bison.

Our time here coincides with a visit by Duke Phillips III, Zapata’s head rancher. Duke is everything that cowboy culture symbolises, with a grit that is required for working the land, yet a quiet and humble demeanour. Our priority is to find and photograph the main bison herd.

“There’s no guarantee we’ll see them today,” explains Duke. “But I think I know where they might be.” In short order, he places us within the herd to enjoy close contact with these once almost-extinct relics of the Pleistocene period, now thriving on the plains they formerly dominated.

Free from madding crowds, this slice of Colorado offers a true, and revealing, flavour of remote America. ♦



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01 A herd of American Bison, grazing on the plains of Zapata Lodge 02 Exploring Great Sand Dunes National Park by horseback 03 The peaks of Chimney Rock are unmistakable 04 Native American guide, Gloria Bissmayer 05 One of 600 ancient Puebloan dwellings scattered around Mesa Verde National Park



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### Travel file

Accommodation  
[ranchlands.com](http://ranchlands.com)  
 Information  
[colorado.com](http://colorado.com)