DENVER TO SIX OF COLORADO’S NATIONAL PARK SITES AND BACK

BEST OF COLORADO

Natural hot springs, high peaks and national park sites dominate this 1,130-mile tour through Colorado.
Few road trips take you past spectacular 14,000-foot peaks, soothing hot springs and fantastic historical towns like this Colorado loop.

Start in Denver to sample the city’s thriving art and food scene. Then head to the vibrant university city of Boulder and nearby Eldorado Canyon State Park. Next stops are Lyons, Estes Park and then Rocky Mountain National Park where wildlife and incredible hikes await.

From there head west to the charming town of Grand Lake, which sits at the park’s West Entrance, before heading to Glenwood Springs to soak in the town’s legendary hot springs. Continue west to the awe-inspiring red-rock landscapes of Colorado National Monument in Grand Junction. From there, experience incredible alpine scenery and swaths of agricultural land as you travel south through Montrose and the majestic Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

Farther south, you’ll discover ancient history in Mesa Verde National Park and authentic towns like Durango, South Fork and Alamosa along the way to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve.
On your way to Rocky Mountain National Park, take the path less traveled to Eldorado Canyon State Park, one of 41 stunning Colorado state parks. As you hike in the solitude-filled Eldorado Canyon, you may find it hard to believe you’re minutes from Boulder, a thriving university town.

A magnet for climbers from around the world, Eldorado features jaw-dropping cliffs that soar into the blue sky. As you gaze at the walls above you, you’ll spot tiny, bright-colored figures climbing the park’s 500-plus climbing routes.

Stop in the visitor center to pick up your complimentary state parks passport and get a stamp. You can also buy a fishing license to fish in South Boulder Creek and get hiking information.

Bring a picnic here [two grocery stores are 10 minutes away, Lucky’s Market and King Soopers] and sit alongside South Boulder Creek to gaze up at the climbers. Then explore the trails. Fowler Trail is an easy hike while the more moderate Rattlesnake Gulch Trail starts in the canyon before climbing 1.4 miles up 800 feet to give you spectacular views.

On weekends, arrive early as the park reaches capacity often during summer months. When you get hot, jump off the diving board at Eldorado Swimming Pool literally right outside the park. It opened in 1905 and is fed by an artesian spring.

Learn more at cpw.state.co.us.

Walden of the West
Looking to escape the crowds after you visit Rocky Mountain National Park? Head to State Forest State Park in Walden, Colo., an hour and 30 minutes from Grand Lake. Alpine lakes, magnificent peaks and a mixture of yurt and cabin rentals await. Hike less than a mile to Lake Agnes, an alpine lake filled with stunning turquoise waters. There’s actually an island in the middle of it.

Along the way, keep your eyes peeled for moose. The North Park area is considered Colorado’s “moose capital” with more than 600 of the large animals living here. Stop at the Moose Visitor Center for maps, information and to view interpretive displays.

Learn more about the parks at cpw.state.co.us.
GREAT GETAWAY

Looking for a small historic town near Rocky Mountain National Park but far from crowds? Head to Lyons, a charming 2,000-resident artsy town with great cuisine.

1. **WEECASÁ TINY HOUSE RESORT**
   WHY GO: Sleep at the world’s largest tiny house resort along the St. Vrain River and a stone’s throw from downtown Lyons. Enjoy downtime playing bocce, volleyball and corn hole.
   TIP: High-end and hip houses accommodate a variety of guests. Stay in The Rusty Aspen for two or The Solaire, a modern abode for four. The Empty Nester fits six.

2. **MOJO TAQUERIA**
   WHY GO: A short walk east of historic downtown, this Mexican restaurant is a favorite of locals and travelers alike. It features creative, savory salsas, tacos and burritos in a vibrant setting.
   TIP: Start with the chips and homemade salsa trio as you dine on Mojo’s outdoor patio.

3. **OSKAR BLUES**
   WHY GO: Opened in 1997, this casual, family-friendly local brewery with food and live music became one of the first in the nation to can its craft brews in November 2002.
   TIP: Order Dale’s Pale Ale for a refreshing drink. It finished 2016 as the nation’s top-selling craft can six-pack at U.S. supermarkets.

4. **ST VRAIN MARKET**
   WHY GO: Head here for delicious baked goods, baguettes and sandwiches to go, so you can hit the road to Rocky Mountain National Park and picnic in the park. The market is a small locally-owned grocery with a great selection of gourmet cheeses, housemade sausage and fresh-baked pies.
   TIP: Several doors down from the market is newcomer Bella La Crema, a butter bar with a menu that changes daily. References to artists appear on its menu and walls, making it a unique and delicious stop.

5. **ART GALLERIES**
   WHY GO: Lyons is a magnet for artists, many of whom showcase their work in galleries like Red Canyon Art and Western Stars Gallery & Studio, both on Main Street.
   TIP: If you are crafty, head to Lyons Quilting, one of Colorado’s largest quilt shops with more than 6,500 bolts of fabric and 2,000 batiks for sale.

6. **LYONS CLASSIC PINBALL**
   WHY GO: This Lyons landmark in the heart of downtown has been around for 15 years, offering people the chance to play 35 pinball games from vintage 1960s machines to contemporary ones, plus six classic video games.
   TIP: Tournaments are held every third Thursday at 7:30 p.m. with a $5 entry fee.

7. **LAVERN JOHNSON PARK**
   WHY GO: Lyons has a big recreational river scene from tubing and kayaking the Whitewater Park to fly fishing, and you can do them all from here. Buy flies or order a hand-crafted custom bamboo fly rod from South Creek Ltd. in Lyons. There’s also 15 RV sites and 17 tented sites here.
   TIP: Plan to be in Lyons for one of its amazing internationally-recognized music festivals held at the Planet Bluegrass Ranch along the banks of the St. Vrain River and bordered by red sandstone cliffs. Get tickets for RockyGrass, which takes place July 26-28, 2019, or Rocky Mountain Folks Festival, Aug.16-18, 2019.

Learn more at lyonscolorado.com.
F U N  F O R  A L L

Choose between the YMCA of the Rockies Estes Park Center on the park’s east side or YMCA of the Rockies Snow Mountain Ranch on the west side for great activities and lodging options.

1. GET ACTIVE
WHY GO: New in April 2018, the Boone Family Mountain Center at the Estes Park location houses all adventure activities, including an indoor climbing wall and bouldering wall.
TIP: At Snow Mountain Ranch, hike the 2-mile round-trip Waterfall Trail, which after undergoing construction, is wider than before and enables you to reach the top of the waterfall.

2. FLY THROUGH THE AIR
WHY GO: The Estes Park location debuted its new zipline in fall 2017. Built to accommodate kids and adults who weigh between 50-270 pounds, it takes you 35 feet above the ground for a 370-foot ride through the sky.
FOR KIDS: At Snow Mountain Ranch, younger kids can swing on the new mini-zipline built for children to ride it unassisted with a soft landing the whole stretch. It’s part of the Spruce Saddle Adventure Zone that opened in 2017.

3. GO TO THE CRAFT STUDIO
WHY GO: Whether you are a Pinterest fanatic who is constantly creating or have not picked up a paintbrush since high school art class, you’ll lose track of time making leather, jewelry and wood pieces, painting ceramics and making sand designs at the craft studio.
TIP: Crafts always take longer than you think, so avoid going at the end of the day just before the studio closes.

4. SADDLE UP
WHY GO: From the Estes Park location, you can go on a trail ride right into Rocky Mountain National Park. At Snow Mountain, you’ll ride through the forest, passing the historic Rowley homestead.

5. STAY AWHILE
WHY GO: Both YMCA locations have lodges and cabins for overnight stays.
TIP: Spend the night and get a Stay Pass wristband, giving you free access to most activities.

Learn more at ymcarockies.org and snowmountainranch.org.
TOP 5 SOAKING SPOTS

Colorado is dotted with incredible hot springs. Dip into some of the state’s best on your trip.

HOT SULPHUR SPRINGS RESORT & SPA
Hot Sulphur Springs, Colo.
This quiet facility west of Grand Lake features a series of small, soothing pools, some blazing hot, and four for kids. A spa offers massages, herbal wraps and mud masks; hotsulphursprings.com.

OURAY HOT SPRINGS
Ouray, Colo.
Nestled in a tight valley overshadowed by 13,000-foot peaks, this large sulfur-free mineral pool on Main Street has three slides and is open year round; ourayhotsprings.com.

STRAWBERRY PARK HOT SPRINGS
Steamboat Springs, Colo.
Head north of Steamboat Springs to find this series of beautiful pools surrounded by evergreens. Massages are available. At night, it’s adults only at the hot springs; strawberryhotsprings.com.

THE SPRINGS RESORT & SPA
Pagosa Springs, Colo.
Home to the world’s deepest geothermal hot spring, this 79-room resort offers a variety of pools with temperatures ranging from 66 to 110°F; pagosahotsprings.com.

GLENWOOD SPRINGS POOL
Glenwood Springs, Colo.
Take a break at this historic resort at the intersection of the Colorado and Roaring Fork rivers. It’s home to the world’s largest hot springs pool with water slides, a kids pool, a spa and 107-room lodge; hotspringspool.com.

Visit the Hip Little Town Everybody Loves

LyonsColorado.com
John Otto arrived in the Grand Junction area in 1906 to help construct a waterline. But when he explored the stunning canyons and rock formations of what would later become Colorado National Monument, he decided to stay.

It “felt like the heart of the world to me,” he said, devoting his efforts to protecting it. His goal was realized in 1911 when the landscape he fell in love with became the Colorado National Monument.

Today, drive or bike along the monument’s 23-mile Rim Rock Drive and see the monument for yourself. The striking road snakes along the upper level of a collection of canyons, passing 19 signed viewpoints and 14 hiking trails. You’ll get fantastic views of the valley and the monument’s beautiful rock formations. Don’t miss the Saddlehorn Visitor Center, which has two 12-minute movies, Spirit of Colorado National Monument and The Geologic History of Colorado National Monument.

Below the monument, you can horseback ride, go rafting or rent a raft at Rimrock Adventures. Animal lovers will be happy to learn you can buy treats on site to feed the resident donkeys.

Learn more at nps.gov/colm.

Sip and Sleep Well

Few know there’s a wine scene in Grand Junction and nearby Palisade, and while there are a number of national chain hotels to choose from here, the Holiday Inn Grand Junction can arrange wine tasting opportunities provided by Two Rivers Winery. Started in 1999, Two Rivers Winery is owned by locals Bob and Billie Witham who grow grapes on 15 acres in the Redlands area of Grand Junction. It’s one of more than 20 wineries and tasting rooms in the area.

At the Holiday Inn, you’ll also discover free WiFi and complimentary self-serve laundry facilities, which means you can pack fewer clothes. There’s an indoor pool for families to enjoy, as well as those wanting to do some laps. And if you didn’t get enough exercise out on the trails, you can work out at the Holiday Inn’s fitness center.

Holiday Inn Grand Junction is located at 2751 Crossroads Blvd., in Grand Junction. Learn more at marshotelmanagement.com.
BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park evolved from a monument established in 1933 to a national park in 1999. Its narrow walls stretch 2,700 feet high from the canyon bottom toward the sky. Just 20 minutes from downtown Montrose, Colo., this national park features easy-to-strenuous trails.
MESA VERDE’S TOP 5

Only have 48 hours to explore Mesa Verde National Park? Stick to our detailed itinerary to hit all the most important stops.

BY MIKAELA RULAND

1. GO ON A RANGER TOUR

Buy tickets in advance at recreation.gov for the Balcony House Sunrise or Earlybird Tour. You’ll climb with a ranger up ladders and through narrow tunnels to explore Balcony House, an Ancestral Puebloan cliffside compound. Or go for a more moderate tour of Cliff Palace. Buy same-day tickets at the Mesa Verde Visitor and Research Center when it opens at 7:30 a.m.

2. DINE AT THE METATE ROOM

This award-winning Southwestern-inspired park restaurant features dishes with steelhead trout, chicken and blue corn waffles and ancient grain “risotto.” Make reservations for dinner at visitmesaverde.com.

3. HEAD TO THE CHAPIN MESA ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Head here to learn about the Ancestral Puebloans who lived in the area during the 1200s. The museum has impressive dioramas, artifacts, a gift shop and an informative movie.

4. DRIVE MESA TOP LOOP ROAD

You’ll pass 12 archaeological sites on this six-mile loop and catch views of the park’s famed Cliff Palace.

5. SEE PETROGLYPHS

Hike the 2.4-mile Petroglyph Trail to see the park’s only petroglyphs. Start early to avoid the heat and try to spot coyotes, black bears, turkey vultures, jackrabbits and wild horses along the way.

Learn more at MyColoradoParks.com.
named one of Budget Travel’s 10 Coolest Small Towns in America for 2018, Durango really lives up to its stellar reputation. Perched at 6,512 feet, this charming historic town has an awesome craft beverage and foodie scene, with six breweries, two distilleries, one winery and a plethora of award-winning restaurants. It also has fantastic mountain biking and hiking trails.

But at its heart is its Southwestern culture and Western roots. Founded by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Co. in 1880, the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad operates year-round, carrying passengers on a breathtaking ride through scenery only accessible by train. In the summer, you can take the nine-hour round-trip train excursion from Durango to the tiny, historic mining town of Silverton. Or if you have limited time, opt for the Skyway Tour, in which you ride the train one way and take a bus the other way.

Don’t miss nearby Mesa Verde National Park to view some of the country’s most well-preserved cliff dwellings. There are more than 600 known cliff dwellings amid 5,000 known archaeological sites. You can purchase your ranger-led tour tickets ahead of time at the Durango Welcome Center. It’s the only place outside the park to buy these tickets. And ranger-led tours are the only way to get up-close to Mesa Verde’s outstanding ancient ruins.

Stop by The Durango Welcome Center at 802 Main Ave., or go to durango.org to learn more.
SUNSET AT GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

STONES THAT HOLD SECRETS

Discovered in the sands of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, oddly shaped stones play rock music.

BY TORI PEGLAR
When Jack Williams was riding his horse through the west side of Great Sand Dunes National Monument in 1938, his hazel-colored eyes fell on a granite rock shaped like a slender baguette sticking six inches out of the sand.

He dismounted his horse and kicked the stone, expecting it to fall over. It didn't move. His toes ached inside his boot from striking the heavy object. So, he stood there, digging and pulling on the 25-inch-long stone until all 10 pounds of it fell into his hands. Williams had no idea what the long, narrow polished stone was. But he knew someone had taken great care to sculpt it. He loaded it in his bag, made a mental note that he found it near Big Spring Creek and trotted away.

The national monument was young then, only six years old. But its shifting sands and the surrounding San Luis Valley that spans 8,000 square miles had been home to people for more than 10,000 years. Through the years, people had left traces of their lives like drawings on rocks, spear points in the sand and a number of polished and oblong granite stones like the one Williams found.

It would take 62 more years before the monument became a "national park," and during that time, Williams, who later became a National Park Service employee, donated the artifacts he found, such as the curious stone, to the park's collection. Others uncovered similar stones in the park, and they, too, ended up in drawers in the park's collection.

One day, in 1976, Marilyn Martorano, a recent graduate of Alamosa State University and park service volunteer, opened one of the drawers. She was struck by the strangeness of the stones. They were like pestles—a tool used to crush and grind corn and other materials like seeds, nuts, berries and pigment—but heavy and unnecessarily large compared to other pestles. She asked about them.

As it turned out, a handful of theories had been traded around. Maybe they were agricultural tools used to plant corn or chiles. Or giant pestles fashioned to grind food. Perhaps ancient people used the heavy polished stones to smash bison bones. After all, thousands of bison has been roaming the valley for hundreds of years. They were common even as late as the 1800s.

But park officials knew that the oddly shaped stones were predominately discovered in wetlands or former wetlands. And that made things even more puzzling. The stones' proximity to water gave rise to the theory that ancient people tied nets to them to try to catch ducks.

The theories, while intriguing, didn't seem to add up. The stones were awfully heavy to be casting hanging nets in the hope of capturing a duck. And if they were used to grind pinon nuts, which are the size of appleseeds, a two-foot-long stone seemed like overkill. Plus, there were no grinding marks where you'd typically find them.

Further complicating things was many of the stones were found by collectors who didn't document where they found them nor what they found with them. And for archaeologists trying to piece together ancient history, knowing where an artifact was discovered and what was found with it is key. The more pieces of a puzzle you have, the easier it is to see the big picture.

As researchers over the years pulled the stones out of the museum's drawer and examined them, there was one thing they neglected to do.

They didn't tap on them.

Forty years passed and Martorano, now a professional archaeologist, returned and opened the drawers in the Great Sand Dunes collection. For years, she remained stumped as to what they found with them. She borrowed some to study at her office in Longmont, Colo. But the closer she examined them, the more mystified she became.

She needed a crystal ball of sorts to see back into the past. And these days, the closest we have to that might be YouTube, the source of seemingly infinite, instantaneous cross-cultural sharing. On the night before she had to return the stones to the park, a friend sent her a link to a YouTube video.

It changed everything.

French paleo-musicologist Erik Gonthier, a former jeweler and stone-cutter, appeared on her computer screen. He had examined curiously shaped stones brought back to France by French soldiers from the colonies of Algeria and Sudan in the early 1900s. When he tapped on them, he discovered they actually made musical sounds. It was a phenomenally exciting breakthrough.

To showcase ancient peoples' musical instruments, the French National Orchestra did three concerts in Paris in 2014, playing 24 of the musical stones, also known as "lithophones."

"That will be their last concert together," Gonthier of the Natural History Museum in Paris told Agence France-Presse before the shows. "We will never repeat it for ethical reasons—to avoid damaging our cultural heritage. We don't want to add to the wear of these instruments."

The video clip ended. Martorano skeptically eyed the stones in her living room. Could they be musical instruments? Her daughter, a percussionist, had a mallet. She picked it up and tapped a stone. A musical sound rang out, shattering the silence blanketing her living room. It was as if the notes had raced through thousands of years to fill the air.

"I was by myself, and it was nighttime," Martorano recalls. "It made the hair on my arms stand up. I thought, 'What if no one has heard this sound for thousands of years?'

She tapped on the other stones. Time seemed to shrink and...
stretch simultaneously as ancient sounds filled the room. An A sharp note rang out, then a D and an F sharp and G sharp. Each stone produced at least two different sounds. When arranged side-by-side, they resembled a modern marimba, a percussion instrument made from sets of wooden bars. The longer pieces play low notes and the shorter pieces play high notes.

“The 22 artifacts played a minimum of 57 notes, and more than half fit into the pentatonic scale,” she says, noting it’s a scale used by many cultures and notably in the U.S. in country music and jazz. “It’s interesting to me that these rocks have a tonal structure that is used throughout the world.”

Martorano returned the stones the next day, sharing her discovery with Fred Bunch, chief of resource management at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. His jaw dropped.

“Marilyn thought to tap on them,” Bunch says. “She’s a great researcher and asked the right questions and saw that lithophones were used in other parts of the world.”

Across the globe, ancient lithophones have been discovered in India, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and beyond. And it’s important to note that not every mysterious shaped rock found is considered a “lithophone.” Anyone who’s ever played with rocks as a kid knows not all rocks make noise. Go for a walk and try tapping on rocks along the sidewalk or trail. Martorano pulls out a piece of sandstone and taps it. It makes a noise, but it’s not a musical note.

“It has to have the right material, shape and density,” she says.

While no one knows for sure if these stones were used to make music or had additional uses, the lithophone theory may be one of the more promising.

Bunch says the park is working with tribes whose ancestors lived or traveled through the San Luis Valley to find out if their oral tradition contains information about the stones.

“It’s premature to say anything,” Bunch says. “We need to learn more. We are in a constant state of discovery. The beauty of this expansive park is that we are learning every day. The more we know, the better managers we can be.”

The stones seem to raise more questions than answers, serving almost as Zen koans, Buddhist riddles that stun you into thinking but have no answer. Try, for instance, this one: “When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping.”

What’s for certain is the stones meant something to the people who spent hours sculpting them.

“If you look at these two artifacts here,” Martorano says pointing to two of the stones, “they were supposedly used for cutting and chopping, but I borrowed them and found they made beautiful sounds. We need to open our minds that sound may have been really important to past peoples. How many times do we hear music every day? Perhaps music was just as important in the distant past as it is today.”

She pauses. And then offers a different story than the classic survivalist narratives we’ve all heard about ancient hunter gatherers.

“That ancient people were making music is important because it means ancient people were not just living to survive,” she says. “They wanted meaning in their lives just like we do today, and they were willing to create music in their culture.”