



Southwestern Colorado

Mountains, a Train Ride and Mesa Verde

This issue, for your enjoyment, we offer a four-day guided tour of scenic, historic and wonderfully laid-back southwestern Colorado, which includes:

- a circular drive through some of the most beautiful mountains in the world
- an exciting and picturesque ride up a mountain canyon on a narrow-gauge railroad
- visits to three authentic mining towns
- a jeep tour above treeline to see high-country scenery and gold mines
- a peek over the edge of a narrow 2,000-foot-deep canyon
- a gondola ride up a mountain and a hike back down
- a visit to one of the best American Indian museums in the country, and
- a tour of prehistoric American Indian cliff-dwellings.

The best times to enjoy these activities are the last three weeks in July, when the mountain flowers are at their peak, and during the last week in September and first week in October, when the aspen leaves change to a breathtaking gold.

Pathfinder Newsletter

Winter 2009

Guided Tours of Cities, Towns, and National Parks in the American West

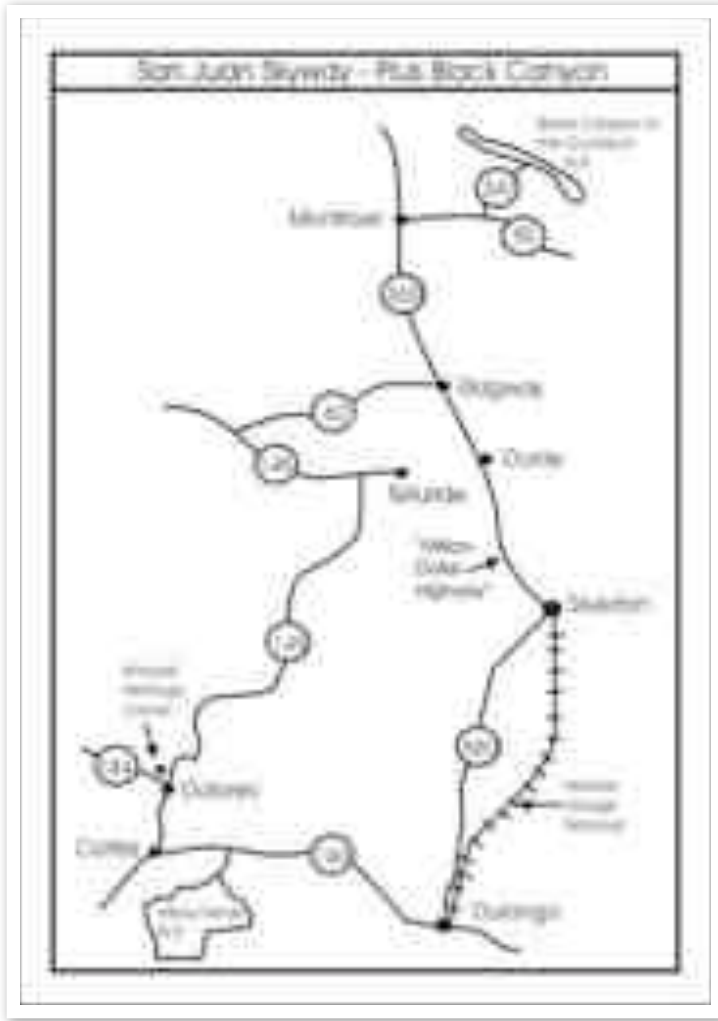
by the Authors of *Seven Perfect Days in Northern California* and *Seven Perfect Days in Colorado*

Whether you fly or drive into the area, doing so the afternoon before your tour begins will give you an opportunity to take a stroll down **Durango's** comely Main Avenue and to soak up the ambiance of the historic **Strater Hotel** (699 Main Ave. 970-247-4431, www.strater.com).

Most of the buildings that you'll see are original to the town, which was founded in 1880; so you'll feel like you've stepped back in time. Once exclusively a railroad and ore-processing town, Durango's economy has diversified to include agriculture, ranching, timber processing, and, of course, tourism. The town's population is about 14,000.

We also recommend that you pick up your ticket at the train depot the same afternoon to avoid the crush before departure the following morning (the depot is two blocks from the Strater Hotel at 479 Main Avenue, 970-247-2733, www.durangotrain.com). That would also be a good time to visit the railroad's wonderful museum, which is located in the south end of the roundhouse, a few feet down the tracks from the train depot. Admission to the museum is included in the price of the train ticket.

See the end of this issue for places to eat and sleep in Durango.



Day One

This morning and early afternoon, we encourage you to ride the **Durango & Silverton Narrow-Gauge Railroad (D&SNGRR)** to Silverton and then return to Durango by bus. That will give you enough time to drive to Ouray to see a unique waterfall, and for dinner and an overnight stay.

Since you'll have your ticket and seat assignment, you can go directly to your rail car and start enjoying the railroad ambiance. Or, you can go to the front of the train and admire the locomotive that will be calmly puffing smoke from its stack...But, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Here is some background on the D&SNGRR that will help set the stage for your enjoyment of the experience:

What is a narrow-gauge railroad? In this case, it's a railroad built to carry equipment and supplies to the gold and silver mines in the mountains, and to transport crushed ore to Durango for processing in the town's smelter (where ore was melted to extract pure metals).

The words “narrow gauge” have to do with how far apart the rails are placed: on flat land, trains travel on standard gauge rails which are 4 feet 8-1/2 inches (1.5 m) apart; in the mountains, where the negotiation of tight curves is required, narrow-gauge rails are placed 3 feet (0.9 m) apart.

The 45 miles (72 kilometers) of rails between Durango and Silverton were laid in 1881-82 (127 years ago!) and were part of a much larger network of tracks that was built by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad throughout Colorado and Utah. It was originally called the “Silverton Branch” and was designated a National Historic Landmark by the federal government in 1967. Another honor followed in 2000, when the Society of American Travel Writers named the line “One of the top 10 most exciting train journeys in the world.”

Tourist travel began on the railroad in 1947 and became increasingly popular as the railroad was featured in such movies as “A Ticket to Tomahawk,” “Viva Zapata,” “Around the World in Eighty Days,” “How the West Was Won,” and “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”

The trains are pulled by historic coal-fired, steam-powered locomotives—which means that coal is burned in a firebox to heat water in a boiler, which then turns to steam and drives the locomotive. The train carries enough coal for the trip, but must stop at two tanks along the way to take on more water. Since your locomotive will spew tiny cinders from its smokestack, the wearing of eyeglasses will help screen your eyes from the cinders.

The train runs year-round, but during the winter months (November-April) the trip is shortened from 90 miles (145 km) to 52 miles (84 km) round trip. Heated coaches are used during the winter.

Tickets may be purchased in advance by telephone (970-247-2733) or online (www.durangotrain.com). We suggest that you do your fact-finding online, because you can see photographs of the coaches and read descriptions of the four classes of service that range in cost from \$75 to \$159 per adult. And you can see the seat selection opportunities. We also suggest that you select the Bus/Train Combo, because the return by train to Durango gets a bit tiresome, and the return by bus is two hours shorter. That will give you additional time to drive to, and to enjoy, Ouray.

We strongly recommend the first class/Silver Vista coach. You’ll pay more, but the perks are many: it’s the only glass-topped observation car and will give you excellent views of the mountains above; an attendant rides along to point out the sites and the photo opportunities, and to serve included coffee, soft drinks, donuts and a large gourmet chocolate bar; the coach has oversized seats, extra legroom and a private outdoor viewing platform; and you’ll be given a Silver Vista/D&SNGRR memento hat. This is an open-air coach that allows for maximum enjoyment of the ride and enables easy picture taking, but you’ll need to be dressed for potentially cool weather. Blankets are available.

So, what will you see during your ride on this vintage, late-1800’s railroad trip?

The one constant, the entire trip, is the Animas River, which has its headwaters at 14,000 feet (4,267 m) elevation in the mountains north of Silverton. Because the train crosses the river a couple of times, the river views will be good on both the left and right sides.

The first 11 miles (18 km) of the ride will parallel both the Animas River and U.S. Highway 550. It will take you due north through the 6,500-foot-high (1,980 m) Animas Valley, which was carved by a glacier about 10,000 years ago. You’ll see the red sandstone cliffs of Missionary

Ridge on your right; in 2002 this was the site of a major fire that burned 70,000 acres (28,330 hectares) of forest land.

At milepost 462.5, the train will leave the valley floor and climb steadily, at 2.5% to 4% grade, through Animas Canyon (except for one short downhill stretch) until it reaches Silverton, which sits at 9,300-feet above sea level. As you climb from the Foothills Life Zone and travel through the Montane Life Zone, you'll notice that the types of vegetation will change—most notably from cottonwoods and willows to aspens and evergreens. You may also spot some of the plentiful wildlife that frequents this Canyon: marmots, mule deer, bighorn sheep, beaver, mountain goats and many others.

The most noteworthy points of interests in the canyon (and their milepost numbers) are: Baker's Bridge, near which the jump scene was filmed for "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (it can be seen near the Pinkerton Siding at 465.7); picturesque Shalona Lake (468.2); the very narrow Rockwood Cut (469.2); the High Line where the tracks sit on a ledge 400 feet/122 meters above the river (469.5; see the photo on page 1); the 130-foot-long/40 meter High Bridge (471.2); the first water stop at Tank Creek (474.6); Cascade Canyon Wye, where trains are turned around to head back to Durango during the winter months (477.5); and the second water stop at Needleton Tank (484.4). Between mileposts 478 and 490, you will be in the heart of the Needle Mountains, which boast eight 13,000-foot-plus summits.

When you arrive in **Silverton**, you'll see the rugged town that was a primary focal point of mining for the San Juan Mountains from 1871 (the first mineral strike) to 1991 (the last mine closing). Independent miners and large mining companies brought their silver, gold and other ores to town from outlying areas for stamping (crushing) and for shipment to Durango. During its peak from 1900 to 1912, Silverton had 5,000 residents. Most of the original buildings remain today. The town's population is about 700 and is primarily focused on tourism and recreation. The entire downtown of Silverton has been designated as a National Historic Landmark District.

You'll have about an hour and a half in Silverton before the returning train or bus departs. We suggest lunch first, then a look around town or a visit to the D&SNGRR's freight yard museum, which is located next to the train depot. We loved the **Handlebars Saloon** for its western ambiance and excellent food (117 E. 13th St., 970-387-5395). A second good choice is **The Pickle Barrel** (1304 Greene St., 970-387-5713).

In addition to the time you'll save, another advantage of taking the bus back to Durango is that the driver also serves as a guide, pointing out the things of interest along the way, such as the two passes that you'll ascend: 10,910-foot-high (3,325 m) Molas Pass and 10,640-foot-high (3,243 m) Coal Bank Pass. That information will help you to better appreciate the trip as you drive the 50 miles (80 km) back to Silverton on U.S. Highway 550.

[For car renters: We would have suggested you start your rental in Silverton, but there are no car rental offices there.]

The Durango to Silverton stretch of U.S. 550 is the first section of the **San Juan Skyway**, a 236-mile (380 km) circular drive that will take you to Ouray, Telluride, Mesa Verde National Park and return you to Durango. The Skyway is one of the scenic byways in the Colorado Scenic and Historic Byway System. It is also a National Scenic Byway—for a very good reason, as you'll see. Your total travel time from Durango to Ouray will be a little under two hours.

By the way, the San Juan Mountains have 100 peaks that are more than 13,000 feet (3,962 m) above sea level and 14 of Colorado's 54 "fourteeners"—mountains over 14,000 feet (4,267 m).

From Silverton, it's just 23 miles (37 km) north on Highway 550 to Ouray (pronounced "you-RAY"). This stretch of road is called "The Million Dollar Highway." There are two primary explanations for this nickname: 1) the highway cost a million dollars a mile to build in the 1920's; and 2) the roadbed was made of tailings (ore residue) from nearby mines, which—it was discovered later—contained a million dollars worth of gold. Regardless, the roadway and its numerous hairpin curves alongside steep cliffs offer dramatic and spectacular—"million-dollar"—scenery. About 10 miles (16 km) from Silverton, you'll cross over Red Mountain Pass at 11,018 feet (3,358 m) elevation. There are actually three mountains in the area that carry the name "Red Mountain"; they are numbered 1, 2 and 3. The mountains are red because they have a high concentration of iron oxide.

And, speaking of millions, here's an astounding fact: between 1875 and 1959, the mining district that encompasses the areas around Red Mountain Pass, Ouray and Telluride produced 6.8 million ounces (193 million grams) of gold—plus considerable silver, lead, copper and zinc. Since the average price of gold was \$28.28 per ounce during that period, it means that this one district in Colorado produced more than \$192 million in gold alone! At the current price of about \$780 per ounce, the 6.8 million ounces of gold would be worth \$5.3 billion today.

As you approach Ouray, here's a bit of interesting history: The town is named for the Ute Indian chief who became famous as "The White Man's Friend" when most of his tribe's lands in the San Juan Mountains were taken over by the U.S. government in 1863 without a fight. In 1875, silver was discovered in the Ouray area, and within four years the town had grown to 2,600 residents. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its Ouray Branch in 1886 and mining flourished. In 1893, a crash in the price of silver caused the closing of many of the 30 mines in the area, but the Camp Bird mine (six miles southwest of town; we'll see it tomorrow) produced large amounts of gold and kept the area in active mining until 1990. Today, it's tourism that keeps Ouray humming. The entire town has been designated a National Historic District and most buildings date from the late 1800s.

Just before entering **Ouray**, you'll see the entrance to **Box Canyon Falls**, on your left. This is only a 30- to 45-minute activity, so will not delay your check-in and dinner for very long. Open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., mid-May through mid-October; closed in winter, but trails and falls will be open if conditions are safe; www.ouraycolorado.com/Box+Canon+Falls+Park.

After a very short distance on a metal walkway built along one side of the canyon, you'll find an 285-foot (87 m) waterfall that roars between vertical limestone rocks and crashes noisily into Canyon Creek below. After seeing (and hearing) the waterfall, you may want to follow the short, adjoining Native Plant Loop trail where 10 species of local trees and shrubs are identified for educational purposes. Then, if you're energetic and in good physical condition, you could climb the High Bridge Trail, which is a ½-mile (0.8 km) roundtrip and has a gain of 200 feet (61 meters). Part way up the trail's initial stairway, you'll find an observation deck where you can see and photograph the town of Ouray and its beautiful valley (after you stop puffing).

An alternative to Box Canyon Falls is the **Ouray Hot Springs Pool**. On the north end of town, the 250 X 150-foot (76 X 46 m) million-gallon sulfur-free outdoor natural hot springs pool

is normally open to the public from 10- 8:45, year round (1220 Main St., 970- 325-7073, <http://ouraycolorado.com/Hot+Springs+Pool>). The temperatures of soaking sections vary from 96 to 106 degrees Fahrenheit (35.5 to 41.1 Celsius). Also, for your information, there are three lodgings that have outdoor hot springs tubs on-property: Best Western Twin Peaks, Box Canyon Lodge, and Wiesbaden Hot Springs Spa Lodgings. Our choice for an overnight stay is the Spangler House Bed & Breakfast, which we heartily recommend. After entering Ouray on US 550/ Main St., turn left on 5th Ave. and proceed one block to 2nd St. where you'll find the Spangler House at 520.

Day Two

Are you ready for a jeep ride into the high country, followed by a visit to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and a drive to Telluride? After reading about them, we expect you will be.

Alternatively, you can hang out in Ouray, take a dip in the hot springs pool, explore one of the area's hiking trails, and/or visit the Ouray County Museum which has a nice collection of artifacts, photographs and displays featuring mining, ranching and railroading (420 6th Ave., 970-325-4576, www.ouraycountyhistoricalsociety.org.) During wintertime, Ouray is famous for its January Ice Festival, when climbers from around the world convene here to scale the sheer, iced-over walls of the 80-foot (24 meters) deep Uncompahgre Gorge near Box Canyon Falls. (Uncompahgre is pronounced "oon-kum-pa-grey.")

We recommend **Switzerland of America** for your high-country jeep tour (226 7th Ave., 866-990-5337, 970-325-4484, www.soajeep.com). While it's possible to rent a jeep from them and drive yourself, we found their half-day guided tour to Yankee Boy Basin to be well worth the \$60 per adult cost. We also recommend that you carry rain protection with you, as brief rain showers are common in the mountains, especially during the summer months.

Why Yankee Boy Basin? The photo on this page will give you a taste of what you'll experience when you get to the basin area. From Ouray, which is located at 7,706-foot (2,349 m) in elevation, you'll travel 9.5 miles (15.3 km) in a southwesterly direction up to 12,000 feet (3,658 m). There, you'll find a small valley of about 6,000 acres (2,400 h) completely surrounded by 13,000-foot-plus mountains (3,962+ m). It's high-country Rocky Mountains at the very best, and it's one of the premier places in Colorado where professional photographers go to shoot spring wildflowers, such as columbine, Indian paintbrush, asters and mountain bluebells. When the aspen trees are at their peak in the fall, the drive to the



basin is equally spectacular. (In Colorado, aspens normally grow at an elevation of 7,000 to 9,000 feet/ 2,134 to 2,743 m.)

There are numerous treats during the drive to Yankee Boy Basin; your guide will point them out as you go:

First and foremost, the canyon leading to Yankee Boy Basin was a hotbed of mining during the late 1800s and early 1900s. So, you'll see a lot of evidence of mining activity, including: the Camp Bird, which was the second most-productive gold mine in Colorado; the huge Atlas Mine stamp mill which crushed many tons of ore; the site of the town of Sneffels which had a population of 2,000; and the site of the Virginius Mine, which employed 600 men and produced gold and silver that would be worth \$1 billion today.

Then there's the drive itself, from Ouray to Yankee Boy Basin. The route follows Yankee Creek and becomes ever narrower the higher you go, until it opens up just before the Basin. The roadbed is quite rough, starting out as gravel, changing to dirt, then becoming a rock shelf road that sports an overhang where the canyon is at its narrowest and the cliffs are at their sheerest.

Along the way, you'll also see a cirque, which is a bowl that was cut into a mountain's face by a glacier, and Twin Falls, which Coors has used in its advertising for 20 years.

Yes, there is a public toilet (which uses a biological waste conversion system), in a picturesque wooden structure, just before Yankee Boy Basin.

Finally, in the basin itself, you'll get a sense of how massive the Rocky Mountains are when you see Potosi Peak, Teakettle Mountain, Cirque Mountain, Stony Mountain and Gilpin Mountain all towering above you—even at this elevation. At the base of Potosi Peak you'll see a cluster of eroded hoodoos (originally volcanic ash), which seem eerily human-like.

Upon your return to Ouray, we suggest that you stop at **Timberline Deli** (803 Main St.) or **Maggies Kitchen** (520 Main St.) to get a quick sandwich.

The distance from Ouray to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison is 50 miles (80 km), and the drive will take you about one hour. To get there, follow the map on page 2 of this newsletter. During the drive, you'll descend from the San Juans to the agricultural Uncompahgre Valley and pass through the towns of Ridgway and Montrose, which sit at about 5,800 feet in elevation. This portion of our tour—Ridgway to the Black Canyon and back—is not on the San Juan Skyway.

Even if you've visited Grand Canyon National Park, **Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park** will impress you. Whereas the Grand Canyon averages about ten miles (16 km) across, one mile (1.6 km) deep, and features colorful soft rock, the Black Canyon averages 1,000 feet (1,600 m) across, ½-mile (0.8 km) deep and has hard, gray-colored walls. At one point, called "The Narrows," the canyon floor is only 40 feet (12 m) across. The sun penetrates to the bottom of this slit of a canyon for a very short time each day. Otherwise, the walls are mostly in shadow—hence the name "Black Canyon." The Gunnison River flows through the canyon, and carved it of course. This canyon stands alone as the narrowest, steepest and deepest in the United States. It's a *very* dramatic crack in the earth.

Here's a heads-up: If you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident 62 years of age or older, you're eligible for the Golden Age Pass. It costs only \$10.00 and gives you lifetime access to all U.S. National Parks and monuments. Passengers with you will be admitted free of charge.

After stopping at the visitor center to see the interesting 24-minute historical film, the thing to do here is drive the South Rim, enjoying the views along the way. Don't miss Chasm

View and Painted Wall View. At Chasm View, you'll be able to look downward the equivalent of 200 stories of a building into "The Narrows" and count eight sets of rapids in the Gunnison River. (Binoculars are very helpful here.) You might also be interested in one of the hikes that can be taken along the South Rim; ask at the visitor center or download the map at www.nps.gov/blca.

The visitor center is open every day of the year, except for the three major holidays, from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (summer) or 4:00 p.m. (winter). Be advised that the road beyond the visitor center is normally closed from late November through early April because of snow.

Next, backtrack to Ridgway, turn right (west) on Highway 62 then left (south) on Highway 145 and follow the signs to Telluride. This stretch of road between Ridgway and Telluride is part of the San Juan Skyway. The total distance from Black Canyon to Telluride is 80 miles and the drive will take about an hour and forty-five minutes.

Please see "Places to Eat and Sleep in Telluride" at the end of this issue, or the restaurant listing in the Telluride Official Visitor Guide (see the following paragraph). It's not fancy, but we like the Mexican food and margaritas at **La Cocina de Luz**, 123 E. Eldorado Ave. For lodging, we particularly like the **San Sophia Inn** (even though it's a bit pricey) for its location off the main street and near the gondola, for its free happy hour, and because the cost includes the best gourmet breakfast that we've ever eaten at a B&B. After entering Telluride on W. Colorado Ave., turn right on Aspen and drive one block to Pacific Ave., where you'll find the San Sophia Inn (300 W. Pacific).

Day Three

By this time, we recommend that you have looked at a copy of the "Telluride Official Visitor Guide." It can be requested in advance from the Telluride Visitor Center, 630 W. Colorado Ave., Telluride, CO 81435, 888-355-8743, or be read online and printed as a pdf at www.telluridevisitorguide.com. Or it can be picked up in person at the 630 address in Telluride or at 567 Mountain Village Blvd. in Mountain Village. It may also be available at the lodging where you're staying.

The 100-page visitor guide is filled with information about lodgings, restaurants, businesses, and the many things that you can do here. After looking it over, you may choose to spend your time in **Telluride** differently than we recommend—for example, hiking the Bear Creek or Bridal Veil Falls trails, or visiting the Telluride Historical Museum.

Telluride is world-renowned as a ski resort and as host to summer festivals featuring jazz, bluegrass, chamber music, wine and film.

After breakfast, we suggest that you spend the morning riding the gondola, hiking the Telluride Trail back to town, and taking the town's historic walking tour. Shopping is, of course, another option. This afternoon, you'll take another beautiful drive on the San Juan Skyway and visit the Anasazi Heritage Center in Dolores (read ahead about it). Again, we advise that you carry rain protection.

The **free gondola's** Station Telluride is located at Oak and San Juan Streets and sits at 8,750 feet (2,667 m) elevation. Because the gondola provides free public transportation for people who work in Telluride and live over the hill in Mountain Village—and vice-versa—it runs from 7 a.m. to midnight daily. It's also free to visitors. This is the only transportation system of

its kind in North America. The gondola is closed from mid-October to mid-November for annual maintenance. (Gondola information: 970-728-0588)

As your gondola moves smoothly, for about six minutes, to Station St. Sophia at the top of the hill, you'll enjoy looking back to a receding Telluride and its box-canyon valley that may be the prettiest setting for a town in all of the Rocky Mountains. Then, you'll need to walk across a short plaza and board another gondola that will take you down to Mountain Village Center (9,540 feet/2,908 m elevation) in another seven minutes. There is a third short gondola ride that connects the Center with the Mountain Village parking lot.

Mountain Village Center is an attractive, modern complex of condo rentals, shops and restaurants. Beyond it, to the west and south are more condos and homes. Altogether, Mountain Village is regarded by locals as a suburb of Telluride; they "go into town" from Mountain Village.

To hike back to Telluride, return to the top of the hill (10,540 feet/3,212 meters elevation), leave the station and take the path that goes by the left side of the nature center. There, you'll find the top of the Telluride Trail.

This trail is actually a dirt and gravel access road for service vehicles. It weaves back and forth under the gondola until it ends at the rear of Station Telluride. Some of the time, you'll be in the trees, and some of the time in open spaces where you'll get fine looks downward at the town and valley. It's 2.6 miles (4.2 km) one way, descends an 1,800-foot elevation drop (549 m), is easy walking and will take you from 45 minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes, depending upon your pace.

Now, take out your copy of the "Telluride Official Visitor Guide" and turn to the pages that show the map and descriptions for the **Historic Walking Tour**. To start the tour, simply walk two blocks north to the corner of Oak and Colorado.

What you'll see are historic houses, buildings and other points of interest that date back to the late 1800s during the height of Telluride's mining period. For example, you'll see: the classic Sheridan Hotel and Opera House; one of Telluride's oldest bars; Telluride's first school house; several residences; the red light district; the cemetery; the Old Town Jail; and the Butch Cassidy Robbery Site. As we think you'll agree, the town's fathers and mothers have done an excellent job of maintaining Telluride's ambiance, in keeping with its designation as a National Historical Landmark District.

Sometime during your walking tour you'll want to eat lunch. We like the extensive and eclectic menu at **Baked in Telluride**, 127 S. Fir, and the burgers at **Maggies Bakery and Café**, 217 E. Colorado. Other restaurants are listed in the "Telluride Official Visitor Guide."

Looking ahead to later this afternoon—if you'd like to spend a couple of hours at the Anasazi Heritage Center—you'll need to leave Telluride about 1:30 p.m. It's 66 miles (106 km) from Telluride to Dolores and the drive will take you about 1-1/2 hours. The Center closes at 5:00 p.m. (4:00 p.m. November-February), but you can walk to the outdoor Escalante Pueblo after that.

As you reverse the route that you took coming into Telluride, it's important that you watch for the Highway 145 sign about two miles (3.2 km) from the center of town. A turn left at this point will take you south toward Dolores through some more breathtaking scenery on the San Juan Skyway (see the photograph on page 1). After you top Lizard Head Pass at 10,222 feet

(3,116 m) in elevation, you'll descend gradually toward the flatlands of Montezuma Valley, passing through Rico and Stoner and ending up in **Dolores**. Shortly after crossing the McPhee Reservoir Bridge, turn right on Highway 184. You'll find the Anasazi Heritage Center on the right, within one mile.

If you've never visited a museum or interpretive center that features the culture and artifacts of American Indians, the **Anasazi Heritage Center** will be an eye-opener for you. This is a class operation; but before we describe what the Center does, we'd like to share the broad context within which it operates.

What follows is a distillation of what we learned on site, as well what we learned from prior and subsequent research. We found this background information to be truly fascinating—and we believe it also will be very useful as you visit Mesa Verde National Park tomorrow.

Fifty miles (80 km) southwest of the Center is a geographic anomaly: the only place in the United States where four states touch at the same point. The area surrounding that point in each of the four states—Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico—is known as the Four Corners Region.

More than 10,000 years ago, a nomadic people who lived by hunting animals and gathering edible plants arrived in the Four Corners area. Much later, about 500 BC, people who have been given the name Basketmakers began planting corn and squash, which required their staying in one place. They built pithouses for individual families, and later came together in social groups that resulted in pithouses being clustered and small hamlets being formed. (In pithouse construction, a large shallow hole was dug, a strong wooden framework was built overhead, and brush and dirt covered the framework.)

By about 750 AD, the Basketmakers had evolved into the people now known as the Ancestral Puebloans and the architecture of their residences had changed: groups were then living in larger villages of multi-roomed structures built of stone and earth with timber ceilings. These villages generally had plazas and kivas, which are round, stone-lined underground rooms that were apparently used for residential, religious and other communal purposes. One of the pueblos (Spanish for “village”) and a kiva from this period can be seen on the hill behind the Anasazi Heritage Center. By the way, early archeologists called the people of this period “Anasazi”; American Indians dislike that name and prefer the term “Ancestral Puebloans.”

Within the Colorado portion of the Four Corners Region, most of the Ancestral Puebloan villages were built in the Montezuma Valley surrounding Cortez (more than 1,600 sites have been documented there by archaeologists), in the canyonlands to the northwest of the Anasazi Heritage Center (another 8,000 sites), and on Mesa Verde about 30 miles (48 km) southeast of the Center (4,500 sites). Altogether, archeologists estimate that 20,000 to 30,000 people lived in those areas.

By about 1150 AD, the people who lived on Mesa Verde (Spanish for “green tableland”) were building their settlements in alcoves under cliff overhangs, which gave them protection from both enemies and the weather. By this time, methods had advanced so that multi-storied buildings and towers could be constructed in the tight spaces of the cliff alcoves. (You'll see this in spades, tomorrow, at Cliff Palace, Balcony House and Square Tower House.)

So, the Ancestral Puebloans in the Four Corners area lived in their villages and cliff dwellings on the mesa, primarily raising corn and turkeys, but also beans and squash...until the

soil became depleted, there were too many people for the land to sustain them, the climate changed causing extended droughts, and violence increased in the region. That's the latest thinking, anyway, about why they migrated from the Four Corners area by about 1,300 AD. It appears that many settled in pueblos along the Rio Grande River near Santa Fe, New Mexico and among the Hopi, Zuni and other tribes in Arizona and New Mexico. Some 24 pueblos and tribes in those two states claim ties to ancestors in the Mesa Verde region.

How can we know all this when the people who inhabited the Four Corners area had no written language? We learned it primarily from archeologists who performed excavations on historic sites, who dated pottery shards, and who counted rings in the trees that were used in pueblo construction. We also learned it from oral histories passed down to current puebloan people and tribal members.

OK. Back to what the family-friendly Anasazi Heritage Center does.

It's the Center's job to interpret the past history and culture of the Four Corners region and to educate the public about them. That's done through orientation films, through artifacts that are beautifully displayed (there are also 3.5 million artifacts curated and available for research behind the scenes), through hands-on activities such as corn-grinding and weaving on a loom, unique computer programs, microscope discovery, special events, and the Escalante Pueblo which is on the hill above the Center.

The ½-mile (0.8 km) trail to the pueblo is easy trekking and educational in itself, because the local plantlife is nicely explained on numerous signboards along the way. From the top, you'll be able to see much of the Four Corners region spread out before you. The trail and pueblo remain open after the Center closes. (Please reclose the gate when you leave.)

The Center is also the headquarters of the new Canyon of the Ancients National Monument, which covers about 164,000 acres (66,370 h) west and northwest of the Center. The Monument has the highest known archeological density in the United States, suggesting that more Ancestral Puebloans lived in that area than anywhere else in the Four Corners region.

Here's a thought: If you find all of this interesting and want to see more, come back another time and drive the 480-mile (772 km) Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway, which is a scenic route through Southwestern Colorado, Southeastern Utah and Northeastern Arizona that accesses archeological, cultural and historic sites in the broader Four Corners Region. Ask the Center staff about it. We also strongly recommend *The Mesa Verde World: Explorations in Ancestral Pueblo Archaeology*, edited by David Grant Noble; it's available at the Anasazi Heritage Center museum shop and via Amazon.com. (The Center has it available in soft cover for \$24.95.)

The Anasazi Heritage Center, run by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management, is located at 27501 Highway 184, Dolores, CO 81323, 970-882-4811, www.co.blm.gov/ahc. It's open 9-5 March through October, and 10-4 November through February. An exhibit on the Old Spanish Trail will run through November 2009.

See "Where to Eat and Sleep in Cortez and Dolores" at the end of this issue. Cortez is 10 miles south of Dolores, on Highway 145.

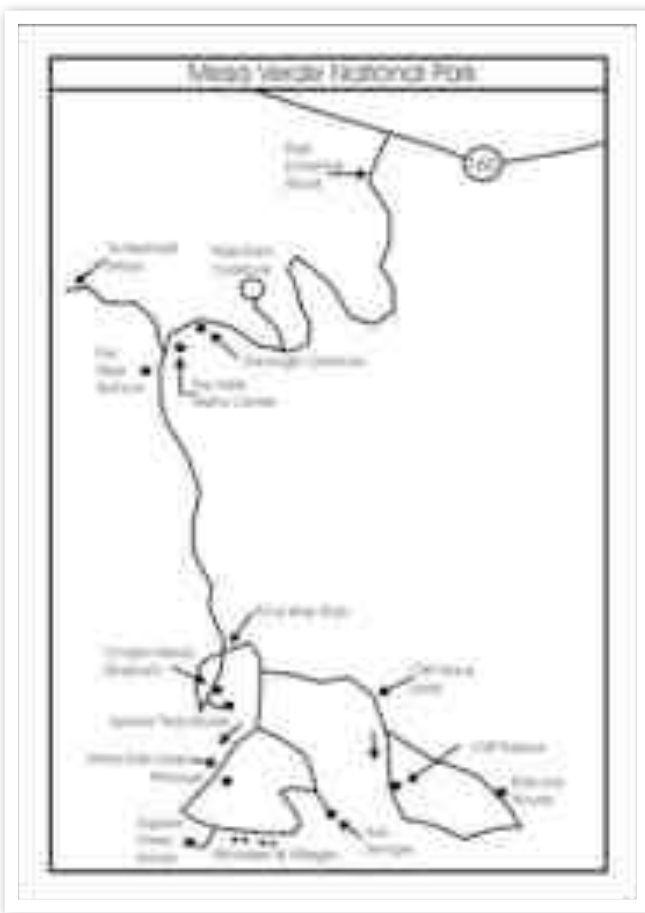
Day Four

This day is completely dedicated to the exploration of Mesa Verde, where you'll see many examples of the Anasazi/Ancestral Puebloan life and culture that we just described. The

highlight of your day will be the three tours of Mesa Verde's fascinating cliff dwellings, but you'll also see mesa-top pueblos, pithouses, a religious site and some interesting dioramas in the park's museum.

Mesa Verde National Park was established by Congress in 1906 as part of an effort to protect this unique historic site and to make its treasures accessible to the public. The tenth national park to be established, it's the first national park set aside "to preserve the works of man." Some 550,000 visitors come to the park each year to learn about the prehistoric agrarian society that lived here for more than 700 years. The park is designated a National Historic Landmark and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

To get to your first stop in Mesa Verde National Park, drive eight miles (13 km) west from Cortez on Highway 160, turn right at the park entrance, then drive 11 miles (18 km) to Park Point Overlook. From the turnoff to the overlook, you'll climb 1,600 feet (488 m) in elevation to the top of the park's North Rim.



Park Point Overlook is the highest point in the park at 8,427 feet (2,569 m). The short walk from the parking lot to the overlook is other-worldly, because the surrounding trees have been burned, and all that's left of them are their fire-resistant trunks and main branches. Gamble Oaks are now growing along the path. There is a fire lookout tower at the top and signboards that provide information about five major fires that burned about 45 percent of the park's 81.4 square miles/52,000 acres (211 sq km/21,044 h) between 1996 and 2004.

The next stop, about two miles (3.2 km) toward the Visitor Center, is **Geologic Overlook**. This is your opportunity to learn how Mesa Verde evolved over 90 million years from an inland sea to a 7,000-foot-plus (2,134 m) plateau of 15 mesas with deep canyons in between.

Another three miles (5 km) and you'll come to the **Far View Visitor Center**, which is a mandatory stop if you want to visit Cliff Palace and Balcony House on Chapin Mesa, or Long House on Wetherill Mesa (which we are not in-

cluding in this tour for lack of time). This is where tickets must be purchased, *in person*, for those three cliff dwellings. (You cannot make advance reservations.) The \$3.00 tickets are a bargain; the real reasons for the ticketing are: to control the number of visitors at each site at any one time, to organize the guided tours to start at certain times, and to minimize damage to sites by careless visitors. The visitor center also has a bookstore (look at *Mesa Verde: The Living Park*) and several displays. For more information, contact Mesa Verde National Park, P.O. Box 8,

Mesa Verde, CO 81330, 970-529-4465, www.nps.gov/meve. The visitor center is open 8-5, mid-April to mid-October; it's closed the rest of the year, but tickets to Cliff Palace can be purchased then at the Chapin Mesa Museum until early November.

If you have a fear of heights or tight spaces, or if you have physical limitations, it's important that you learn from the ticket seller whether it's wise for you to visit these sites, especially Balcony House.

Ideally, your tour times for Cliff Palace and Balcony House will be two hours apart at 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. If those times are not available, you'll need to adapt accordingly. (The Mesa Top Loop and the Spruce Tree House/Chapin Mesa Museum segments of this tour can be done in a different sequence.)

Less than one-half mile (0.8 km) past the visitor center, you'll see **Far View Terrace** on your right. This is one of only two places in the park that serves food. We suggest that you stop here to purchase ready-made sandwiches, which you can eat in the picnic area next to the parking lot at Cliff Palace. (There is another picnic area near the Chapin Mesa Museum.) Far View Terrace is open from late April through mid-October and serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The other food source in the park is Spruce Tree Terrace near the museum.

Five miles (8 km) farther on, you'll come to a four-way stop. Turn left and follow the signs to Cliff Palace. Balcony House is farther along this one-way loop, so driving from one to the other is an easy thing to do.

Cliff Palace and Balcony House are two of approximately 600 cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park. There are another 1,000 sites on the adjacent Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park. Most cliff dwellings on Chapin Mesa have not been restored, as have these two—and Square Tower House and Spruce Tree House, which you'll see later. (Long House and Step House on Wetherill Mesa have also been restored.)

If you've never seen a cliff dwelling in person, your first sight of **Cliff Palace** will be breathtaking. It's the largest of the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings, and, in our opinion, the most beautiful. Frederick Chapin, the first writer to describe Cliff Palace, had this to say about it: "There it was, occupying a great oval space under a grand cliff wonderful to behold, appearing like an immense ruined castle with dismantled towers."

Archeologists have determined, through tree-ring dating, that Cliff Palace was constructed of sandstone blocks between 1190 and 1279 AD.

Your Park Ranger Guide will tell you about the 150 separate rooms at this site that housed some 100 people and about the likelihood that this was a center of activities for the broader puebloan community. He or she will also point out the communal refuse pit, and the food storage rooms and kivas that played such an important part in the survival and spiritual nurturing of these ancient people.

The tour is one hour in length with a walking distance of ¼ mile (400 m). To exit Cliff Palace, you'll need to climb up a narrow, 100-foot (30.5 m) rocky crevice.

Next up is **Balcony House**, a more physically-demanding site to visit, because you'll enter by climbing a nearly vertical 32-foot-long (9.7 meter) ladder made of strong tree limbs and exit via a narrow, 12-foot-long by 18 inch (3.6 m long by 46 cm) tunnel and two additional 10-foot (3 m) ladders.

Built between 1240 and 1280 AD, Balcony House occupies an alcove that's 90 feet (27 meters) below the mesa and 600 feet (183 m) above the floor of Soda Canyon. It's here that you'll learn what seeps are and how they provided water for many of the cliff dwellings. If you look closely at the alcoves in the walls on the other side of Soda Canyon, you'll see two more cliff dwellings.

From Balcony House, it's a little over two miles (3.2 km) to a "T" in the road. Turn left and proceed around the six-mile (10 km) **Mesa Top Loop**. When you stop to explore the pithouses and villages in ten excavated sites, you'll learn about the various stages of puebloan life on the mesa beginning approximately 1,300 years ago. The size of **Square Tower House** from the overlook is deceiving; it stands an amazing 86 feet (26 meters) above the alcove floor. According to modern pueblo Indians, the massive **Sun Temple** (1250 AD) was a ceremonial structure. Some archeologists believe it was never finished. The nearby cross-canyon overlook of Cliff Palace provides a lovely view of that site and its surrounding environment.

To get to the last stop on your tour, drive the remainder of Mesa Top Loop to the four-way stop and follow the signs to the Chapin Mesa Museum and Spruce Tree House.

The two highlights of the **Chapin Mesa Museum**, the oldest in the national parks system, are the 25-minute movie about Ancestral Puebloan history and culture, shown on the hour and half hour, and the excellent dioramas depicting five periods of Native American history in the Mesa Verde region. There is also a nice collection of artifacts to see, and a bookstore. *We recommend that you purchase the "Spruce Tree House" self-guiding pamphlet for full appreciation of that site as you tour it.* The museum is open 8-6:30, early April to early October, and 8-5, early October to early April; 970-529-4465; www.nps.gov/meve/planyourvisit/museum.htm.

Just beyond the museum, you'll find the entrance to a quarter-mile (0.4 km) paved walkway that will take you to **Spruce Tree House**. The cliff dwelling is self-guided during spring, summer and fall, and ranger-led (free) during winter. This third-largest and best-preserved cliff dwelling in Mesa Verde was built between 1210 and 1278 AD. It has 130 rooms and was occupied by 60 to 80 people. (See the photograph on page 1.) You'll particularly enjoy climbing down into a kiva in the middle of the plaza.

To complete the San Juan Skyway circle to Durango, drive 20 miles (32 km) from the museum to Highway 160 and 35 miles (56 km) east—all the while reflecting on the beauty of the San Juan Mountains and the fascinating history of southwestern Colorado.

Use these links to see lodging and dining establishments. (If the link doesn't work, search the basic URL; for example, www.durango.org.)

Where to Eat and Sleep in Durango

For lodging: www.durango.org/lodging/index.asp. (We like the Strater Hotel, 699 Main Ave., 800-247-4431, 970-247-4431, www.strater.com.) For restaurants: www.durango.org/restaurants/index.asp. (We like Mama's Boy, Italian, 27th and Main Ave., 970-247-0600, www.mamasboydurango.com.)

Where to Eat and Sleep in Ouray

For lodging: www.ouraycolorado.com/Bed+%26+Breakfasts. (We like Spangler House B&B, 520 2nd St., 970-325-4944, www.spanglerhouse.com.) For restaurants: www.ouraycolorado.com/Dining. (We like Bon Ton restaurant, 426 Main St., Italian-plus, 970-325-4951, www.stelmohotel.com/ouray-co-restaurant-bonton.html.)

Where to Eat and Sleep in Telluride

For lodging: www.telluridevisitorguide.com/places/hotels-inns.asp. (We like San Sophia Inn, 300 W. Pacific Ave., 800-537-4781, 970-728-3001, www.sansophia.com.) For restaurants: www.telluridevisitorguide.com/food/telluride-restaurants.asp. (We like La Cocina de Luz, Mexican, 123 E. Colorado Ave., 970-728-9355, www.lacocinatelluride.com.)

Where to Eat and Sleep in Cortez

For lodging: www.cortezchamber.com/Lodging_Members.html and www.mesaverdecountry.com. For restaurants: www.cortezchamber.com/Restaurant_Members.html and www.mesaverdecountry.com.

Where to Eat and Sleep in Dolores

For lodging: www.doloreschamber.com/pages/lodging.html and www.mesaverdecountry.com. For restaurants: www.doloreschamber.com/pages/dining.html and www.mesaverdecountry.com.

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Next Issue – “Grand Canyon: More Than a Hole in the Ground”