

Durango, Colorado— Land for All Reasons

DURANGO MEMORIES ARE STRONG,
DRAWING YOU BACK TO THIS MOUNTAIN OASIS.

Story by David M. Brown

AT THE GLACIER CLUB community north of Durango, Colo., we sit on the second-floor porch of our cliffside cabin. Above us, midsummer stars ignite, and the lights of luxury residences peek from 7,800-foot-high ridgelines. Tomorrow morning, a half-mile or so down in the valley below, we will hear the whistle—and see the steam plumes—of the day’s first train as it climbs to Silverton, the once booming mining town.

In downtown Durango, we stay at the 93-room Strater Hotel, the meticulously restored red-brick American Victorian built in 1887 and owned for eight decades by the Barker family. Admiring the hotel’s chandeliers, coffered ceilings and columns, we are in Room 222, where Louis L’Amour wrote some of his western novels.

Durango is aspens, pines and alpine lakes.

About two hours from Four Corners, where New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado meet, the city rests at a summer-cool elevation of 6,512 feet. Late summer temperatures average in the upper 80’s. During the winter, daytime temperatures hover in the 50’s, and snow is welcomed by residents and outdoor recreation enthusiasts alike.

One of the West’s last free-flowing rivers, the Animas, runs through Durango. El Río de las Animas Perdidas, “The River of Lost Souls,” remembers Spanish explorers whose bodies were never found; under Catholic doctrine, they could not enter heaven, only purgatory—the name of the area’s well-known ski resort.

The lost men might have been caught in the currents, which are kayaker- but not conquistador-friendly. Peak flows of the Animas, a white-water rafter’s paradise, average about 5,000 cubic feet per second; during annual runoff, that volume reaches 7,000 cubic feet per second.

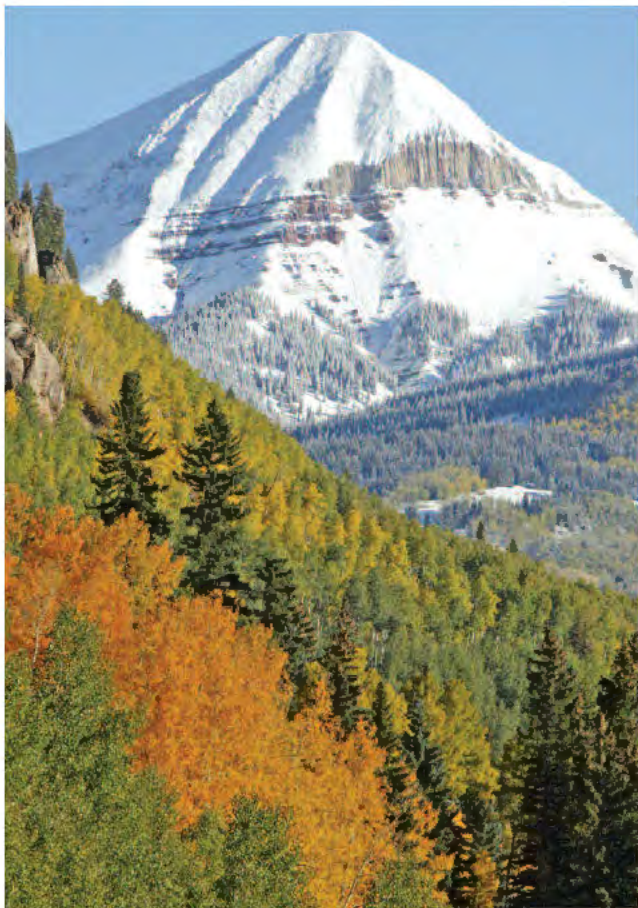
Perhaps the men ditched exploring new lands for fishing new rivers: A two-mile stretch is “gold medal” water—the highest quality for large-trout fishing, with only lures and flies allowed.

Other notable local waters are found in nearby Trimble Hot Springs, which boasts healthful doses of zinc, potassium, nitrogen, iron, chloride, calcium and other minerals.

North of town you’ll see the San Juan mountain range and Needles Mountain, rising to an average 10,500 feet, with landmark “fourteener” peaks in the distance. Not surprisingly, hikers and bikers worldwide make this “Mountain Bike Mecca” a destination. Every Memorial Day weekend, the area hosts the annual Iron Horse Bicycle Classic, a demanding all-uphill race against the steam train to 9,318-foot-high Silverton; it’s the longest continuously run cycling event in the United States.

By vehicle, the paved 236-mile San Juan Skyway is a National Forest Scenic Byway, a Colorado Scenic & Historical Byway and an All-American Road—the highest designation by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

Just 25 miles north of downtown, Purgatory at Durango Mountain Resort, with more than 40 miles of groomed terrain and 260 inches of annual snowfall, is one of the finest ski resorts in the West.



High Expectations Met

Many Durango visitors decide to stay, or at least to make this mountain getaway a second home. For those who can choose the best, the community of choice is **THE GLACIER CLUB**, located 18 miles north of historic downtown Durango.

Cradled by the spectacular San Juan Mountains, the 750-acre master-planned private residential community offers residents three nine-hole mountain courses featuring wetlands and regularly visiting wildlife like elk, deer, hawks and golden eagles.

In addition, residents enjoy one of the Rocky Mountains' finest practice-golf facilities not to mention a 20,000-sq.-ft. clubhouse on a cliff 200 feet above the first fairway of the Glacier nine complete with amenities like fine dining, a wine cellar, a golf shop and an adjacent heated pool and spa.

About 20 percent of the club's members are full-time residents, while the rest maintain primary homes in near-by states. Owners purchase a full-equity membership, affording full-use privileges of all facilities and amenities; they also pay monthly dues. Custom homesites, town homes, cabins, cottages and retreat homes are available.

The Glacier Club 888.382.7888, www.theglacierclub.com.



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Dog-sledding and cross-country skiing are likewise popular regional winter diversions.

From the Basque word for "water town," Durango was named by Colorado Governor A.G. Hunt after the state in Mexico. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Company founded Durango in 1880 and used it as a hub for hauling \$300 million in silver and other precious metals from Silverton. Now, the railroad is used for conducting scenic tours.

Today, the descendant company, the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, is vintage Americana as it steams along 45 miles of wonder through the Animas River Valley. Carrying more than 200,000 passengers annually through the San Juan Forest, coal-powered steam engines deliver white-water views down sheer gorges and up through the San Juan National Forest and Mountains.

Midway through, at the Tall Timber Resort, you and your family can enjoy the new sport of soaring, which is a guided, eco-friendly journey swinging along cables between old-growth Ponderosa pines. Stay here, too, in luxury accommodations and enjoy gourmet meals. At the terminus of the rail tour, travelers enjoy Silverton's downtown replete with shops, restaurants, hotels and historic sites.

Durango is also history, culture, events and culinary excellence. Apparently first here were the Anasazi (now, correctly, Ancestral Puebloans), who left around 1300 A.D. About 35 miles west of Durango, one of their largest communities, the 52,000-acre Mesa Verde National Park, comprises mesas, canyons and cliff dwellings. It has been a national park since 1906 and was designated a United Nations World Heritage Cultural Site in 1978.

Making more recent history is downtown Durango, recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation for its Victorian homes, vintage storefronts, cafes and restaurants, art galleries, museums and historic hotels.

Throughout the year, the city celebrates its flair and flavor with a number of events, including Snowdown (January/ February); Durango Independent Film Festival (February/March); The Durango Wine Experience (May); the Durango Cowboy Gathering (Oct. 2-5, 2008); Music in the Mountains (July 11 through Aug. 3, 2008); and the Durango Heritage Celebration (Oct. 9-12, 2008).

One festival, Taste of Durango (May), celebrates the town's culinary achievements. Recently, a food writer calculated that for the small town of 16,000 year-round residents, Durango has more restaurants per capita than restaurant-saturated San Francisco. In addition, most of these are independent, so you can enjoy a remarkable blend of hand-crafted cuisines.

Among many choices are Ken & Sue's, New American but with an Asian accent; Diamond Belle Saloon, with a honky-tonk piano player; chef-proprietor Chad Scothorn's Cosmopolitan, with his unique French-influenced flavor combinations; and fine dining at Mahogany Grill in the Strater Hotel. ■

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DURANGO AREA TOURISM OFFICE 800.525.8855, www.durango.org.