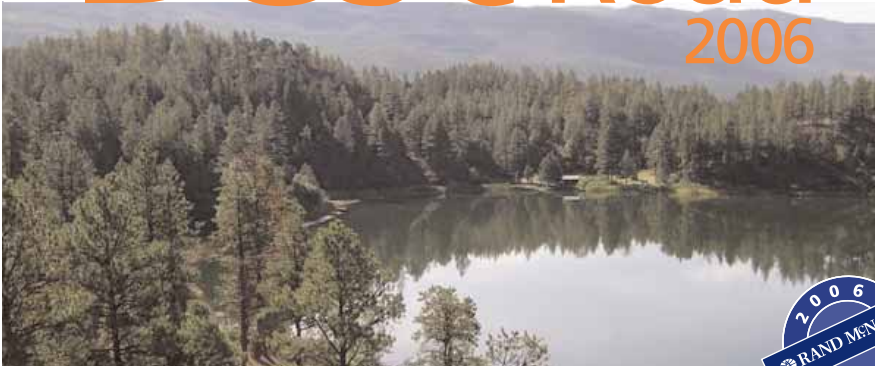


Best of the Road[®] 2006



High in the San Juans, trees surround a placid mountain lake.

Even city slickers relax on this drive through Wild West country. The journey begins at massive Mesa Verde, continuing east and north on quiet roads past undulating hills, fields of tiny wildflowers, and the occasional brown-velvet deer. Ice climbing, mountain jeep tours, and hiking introduce travelers to the lush but demanding landscape, while lazy soaks in the area's natural hot springs soothe sore muscles.



The sites and sights of Mesa Verde reveal the world of the Ancestral Puebloans.

In 1888, two cowboys in search of stray cattle stumbled on an unexpected sight: an elaborate structure carved out of the cliffs of Mesa Verde and looking, they said, like a "magnificent city." They called it Cliff Palace. More than 100 years later, it and the dozens of other accessible archaeological sites on the mesa continue to inspire and challenge visitors. On tours of the cliff dwellings — built in the late 1200s by the people now known as Ancestral Puebloans — you'll scramble up and down ladders, hike

steep slopes, and even clamber through a narrow passage on hands and knees. The beautiful, well-maintained sites are worth the effort, however; some visitors find themselves choked up at the stark grandeur. For a much less physically demanding experience, drive the Mesa Top Loop Road to see the pit houses and pueblos where the Ancestral Puebloans lived for hundreds of years before building the cliff dwellings. The road also features a number of overlooks for viewing the dwellings from afar. In the mood for an end-of-day splurge? Stop for dinner at the park's **Metate Room**, an upscale restaurant offering exotic dishes such as barbecued quail and hickory-smoked buffalo ribeye. On clear nights, starry skies sparkle above the rooftop bar.

A short drive from the mesa lies the Cortez Cultural Center, which offers a host of free programs year-round. Six nights a week during the summer, visitors can enjoy Native American

dance, music, and drama in the outdoor performance space while munching on freshly made fry bread (a local treat) drenched in honey. Past offerings have included "Black Shawl," a one-woman play about Sarah Mara-



Native American dancers awe visitors to the cultural center in Cortez.

Boots, a Navajo woman who married a Mormon pioneer. Don't forget to check out the side of the building itself; it's painted with three-dimensional effects to resemble a cliff dwelling like the ones nearby.

In nearby Mancos, **Bartels' Mancos Valley Stage Line** shows a different side of the Old West. In the 1800s, passengers paid \$200 to ride a stagecoach 18 hours a day, 24 days straight. These days the ride costs a lot less, lunch or dinner is available, and there aren't



Mancos Valley Stage's shiny red coach sets the mood for a trip to the Old West.

any bandits lurking. The seat up top affords the best view, and owner Eric Bartels, who has appeared with his horses in the movie *The Missing*, might even let you hold the reins.

It's a short but scenic drive from Mancos to Durango, where dining and shopping await on bustling Main Avenue. For something more offbeat than the usual t-shirts-and-postcards souvenirs, check out Dancing Willow

Colorado's Southwest Corner



For a full map of Colorado, see pp. 19-21 of the Rand McNally 2006 Road Atlas.



Both dried flowers and more medicinal offerings await at Dancing Willow Herbs in Durango.

Herbs, a small, aromatic shop offering its own line of medicinal teas, essential oils, salves, and body care products. The staff can advise customers on herbal tinctures for nearly any ailment, from bleeding gums to insomnia. Down the street, Carver Brewing Company makes its own microbrews along with an excellent dark root beer. The pub also offers hearty food of the chicken-stew-and-mashed-potatoes ilk. An easy 15-minute drive out of town leads to the Bar D, where a



Even non-drinkers value this Durango brew pub for its rich, dark root beer.

singing cowboy show follows a chuck wagon dinner of barbecue, homemade biscuits, and baked beans. Between songs, the Bar D Wranglers tell “Western fairy tales” — instead of “Once upon a time,” they start with “Y’all ain’t never gonna believe this!” An after-dinner option: the **Diamond Circle Melodrama and Vaudeville**.



The Bar D Wranglers have entertained visitors to Durango since 1969.

The Diamond Circle troupe has revived the melodrama tradition by staging performances of shows written in the 1800s. Sing along with the piano player! Boo the villain! Cheer the hero! It’s all enjoyably implausible, over-the-top campy, and a whole lot of fun.

Passengers board the first train at 7:45 a.m. for the town’s most famous attraction, the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. Completed in 1882, the railroad originally



Brakeman John Hillier of the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad leans out to check the tracks ahead.

hauled gold and silver ore along with passengers; it received new life in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s with appearances in movies such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Now it carries train buffs and other tourists on a three-and-a-half-hour ride through the mountains from Durango to Silverton. The open-air gondolas offer the best views. Once in Silverton, the train pauses for about two hours.

Just a couple blocks away from the station is Weathertop Wovens, where weavers Gary and Linda Davis make and sell Celtic-inspired jackets, wraps, scarves, and ruanas (a type of Irish shawl). Passengers return to Durango via train or a one-and-a-half-hour bus ride.



Customers at Weathertop Wovens in Silverton can watch scarves-in-progress on the looms of owners Gary and Linda Davis.

Visitors with more time to spend in Silverton can opt for an outdoor jaunt with **San Juan Backcountry Tours**, which offers guided jeep rides in the surrounding mountains. The guides are happy to stop for photographs of wildflowers, the often snow-capped mountains, and the nearby rushing Animas River.

Even locals admit that the drive from Silverton to Ouray is lovely but treacherous. The winding, steep mountain road, known as the “Million Dollar Highway” for the gold and silver ore once transported on it, makes caution a must, especially in the



Handmade truffles are drizzled with ribbons of lemon at Mouse’s Chocolates in Ouray.

winter. Ouray is most famous for its ice park, where climbers gather each winter to scale the frozen waterfalls that tumble over the park’s mile-long gorge. The town has plenty of quaint shops and good dining. Mouse’s Chocolates offers wi-fi internet access along with handmade chocolates. Hazelnut, lemon, pecan, raspberry, and other truffles come swathed in white, milk, or dark chocolate. They’re made right in the shop, along with “scrap cookies” made with whatever leftover ingredients are lying around, from coconut to toffee. Down the street at **Ouray Glassworks and Pottery Company**, owner Sam Rushing blows glass in his studio out back. With a 2,500-degree open furnace blazing in the background, he swirls glowing liquid glass onto a metal rod with one hand and roots through a pile of colored glass shards with the other. He cheerfully admits it’s a hazardous business: “I got a real high tolerance for pain.” The shop sells his vases, tumblers, limited-edition glass angels, and ornaments, along with his wife Di’s handmade pottery.



Asymmetrical bottle-green tumblers are made on site at Ouray Glassworks by owner Sam Rushing.

Just a couple blocks away lies the Buen Tiempo, a Mexican restaurant favored by locals for its authentic Southwestern dishes and many varieties of margaritas. The cheapest entertainment in town is right here: give the waitress a dollar and watch her fold it, stick a thumbtack through it, tuck a quarter inside for heft, and heave it at the ceiling. The quarter falls back out, but the dollar sticks to the ceiling alongside a few hundred fluttering companions.

On the short (and mercifully flat) drive from Ouray to Ridgway, Orvis Hot Springs tempts the weary with a soak in the natural steaming lithium pools. The springs are clothing-optional, and while some guests don swimsuits, most wear nothing but an air of assumed nonchalance. (The outdoor pools aren’t visible from the nearby road, and the staff stays on alert for staring or other inappropriate behavior.) More soothing awaits at the Chipeta Sun Lodge and



The Chipeta Sun Lodge and Spa in Ridgway smooths away the rigors of the road with a massage.

Spa in town. Spa amenities include a solar-heated pool, body wraps, facials, and yoga classes. All that luxury works up an appetite; fortunately, the True Grit Café is just across the street. This culinary tribute to John Wayne is decorated with photographs and posters depicting the Duke in nearly every stage of his career. The entrees here are hearty enough to fill up any cowboy, including half-pound buffalo burgers, chicken-fried steak, and eggplant parmesan.

The next stop, a slight backtrack, is Telluride, a small community with a wealth of attractions. During the winter, the town becomes a haven for skiers, snowboarders, and other cold-weather enthusiasts. But it has plenty to offer no matter the season. Peek into its past at the Telluride Historical Museum, originally built as a hospital for the miners in the area. The “Hardship and Healthcare” room is especially poignant. The large coffin-shaped wicker basket on display was once used to carry the injured or ailing to the hospital. **Dave’s Mountain Tours** takes riders on 4x4 excursions to the remains of the once-thriving Tomboy Mine (among other destinations). In good weather, the driver folds the windshield down so no one misses a glimpse of the ghost towns and other ruins that stud the landscape.



A weathered sign at Telluride Historical Museum recalls the town’s days as a mining community.

Back in town, treats line the wall o’ pastries at Baked in Telluride — a banana streusel muffin, maybe, or a thickly frosted chocolate cupcake. Diners with not-so-sweet-teeth can order from the café’s extensive menu, which offers everything from pizza to potato knishes. Afterwards, shoppers can stroll to Hell Bent Leather and Silver. This shop’s graceful bracelets, necklaces, and other baubles prove that Southwestern jewelry isn’t all



Self-serve breads and pastries line the wall at Baked in Telluride.

coyote pins and eagle belt buckles. The prices range from souvenir-cheap to special-occasion-splurge. A simple silver bracelet with a pleasing asymmetrical curve costs about \$35.



Sunlight seldom reaches the depths of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison outside Montrose.

Drive back to Ridgway, then north to Montrose to take in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Not for the acrophobic, it showcases a stunning combination of depth, steepness, and narrowness. Several overlooks on the especially scenic South Rim drive offer sweeping views of the canyon's bottom, part of which always lies in partial shadow. Hiking here ranges

from easy rim trails to extremely difficult inner-canyon routes. The Ute Indian Museum educates visitors about the area's Native American heritage. The museum stands on the former homestead site of Ouray, chief of the Uncompaghre Ute tribe, and his wife, Chipeta, whose grave lies on the grounds. One highlight is the authentic wickiup, a Ute summer or temporary dwelling made of sticks.

The museum's gift shop brims with boxes of "Warrior's Brew" herbal tea, Ute-made pottery, and traditionally dressed Native American dolls. After browsing, visitors can enjoy an al fresco lunch at one of the picnic tables or make use of the walking and bike trail that runs behind the museum. It's a quiet place to enjoy some end-of-trip serenity on this drive through the ancient West.

For additional information:

Baked in Telluride

127 S. Fir, Telluride, CO 81435
(970) 728-4775
www.toski.com/bakedintel

Bar D Chuckwagon Suppers

8080 County Rd. 250, Durango, CO 81301
(970) 247-5753 or (888) 800-5753
www.bardchuckwagon.com

Bartels' Mancos Valley Stage Line

4550 County Rd. 41, Mancos, CO 81328
(970) 533-9857 or (800) 365-3530
www.thestagecoach.com

Black Canyon of the Gunnison Nat'l. Park

102 Elk Creek, Gunnison, CO 81230
(970) 641-2337
www.nps.gov/blca

Buen Tiempo Mexican Restaurant

515 Main St., Ouray, CO 81427
(970) 325-4544

Carver Brewing Company

1022 Main Ave., Durango, CO 81301
(970) 259-2545
www.carverbrewing.com

Chipeta Sun Lodge and Spa

304 S. Lena, Ridgway, CO 81432
(970) 626-3737 or (800) 633-5868
www.chipeta.com

Cortez Cultural Center

25 North Market, Cortez, CO 81321
(970) 565-1151
www.cortezculturalcenter.org

Dancing Willow Herbs

1018 Main Ave., Durango, CO 81301
(970) 247-1654
www.dancingwillowherbs.com

Dave's Mountain Tours

P.O. Box 2736, Telluride, CO 81435
(970) 728-9749
www.telluridetours.com

Diamond Circle Melodrama and Vaudeville

802 E. 2nd Ave., Durango, CO 81302
(970) 247-3400
www.diamondcirclemelodrama.com

Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad

479 Main Ave., Durango, CO 81301
(970) 247-2733
www.durangotrains.com

Hell Bent Leather and Silver

209 E. Colorado Ave., Telluride, CO 81435
(970) 728-6246
www.hellbentleather.com

Mesa Verde National Park

P.O. Box 8, Mesa Verde, CO 81330
(970) 529-4465
www.nps.gov/meve

Orvis Hot Springs

1585 County Rd. 3, Ridgway, CO 81432
(970) 626-5324
www.orvishotspings.com

Ouray Glassworks and Pottery Company

619 Main St., Ouray, CO 81427
(800) 748-9421
www.ourayglassworks.com

San Juan Backcountry Tours

1119 Greene St., Silverton, CO 81433
(970) 387-5565 or (800) 494-8687
www.sanjuanbackcountry.com

Telluride Historical Museum

201 W. Gregory Ave., Telluride, CO 81435
(970) 728-3344
www.telluridemuseum.com

True Grit Café

123 N. Lena, Ridgway, CO 81432
(970) 626-5739
www.truegritcafe.com

Ute Indian Museum

17253 Chipeta Dr., Montrose, CO 81402
(970) 249-3098
www.friendsofutemuseum.org

Weathertop Wovens

1335 Greene St., Silverton, CO 81433
(970) 387-5257