

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Colorado

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding adventures in the Old and New West
 - ▶ Choosing the finest hotels and restaurants
 - ▶ Hitting the best slopes
 - ▶ Singing the praises of little towns
 - ▶ Appreciating Mother Nature
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Colorado's vertical landscape — the mountains, and their location between the High Plains and the Great Basin desert — gives the state an incredible range of environments. Lush pine forests, stark alpine tundra, arid plateaus, and the cycle between gentle summers and snowy winters make for a dizzying array of activities. Add in a major metropolitan area, smaller towns ranging from the comfortably urban to the downright tiny, and you'll find that Colorado has quite a lot to keep you busy, whether you're seeking urbane luxury, a real back-country adventure, or something in between.

This chapter outlines a few key categories of things to do in the state, and shows you the possibilities for finding the best of each. Throughout the book, you'll see the “best of the best” icon next to these features and activities. Stick with these, folks, and you won't go wrong.

The Best Outdoor Adventures

Whether on rock, on water, or on snow, Colorado positively brims with opportunities for you to enjoy its great outdoors. This section details the best of the best outdoors that doesn't involve downhill skiing — for that, refer to “The Best Ski Areas,” later in this chapter.

- ✓ For **rock climbing**, Boulder (see Chapter 13) and its granite canyons (and indoor climbing gyms) are world-renowned. If you're an expert looking for a classic climb, go for the **Diamond** on Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park.

- ✔ **Whitewater rafting** is at its finest on the **Upper Arkansas River near Buena Vista and Salida** (Chapter 18). This is premier rafting territory for beginner and expert alike.
- ✔ **Fly fishing for trout** doesn't get any better than the Gold Medal Waters of the **Roaring Fork and Frying Pan** rivers (Chapter 20). Anglers should head to the **Taylor Creek Fly Shop in Basalt** for everything from flies and gear to tips or guided trips.
- ✔ **Crested Butte** (Chapter 22) and **Fruita** (Chapter 23) offer the best **mountain biking**. The Western Slope in general has great desert and mountain terrain, but these two towns have the best trail systems and fat-tire scenes for serious enthusiasts and novices alike.
- ✔ **Cross-country skiers and snowshoers** will be happy anywhere in the state, but **Middle Park** (Chapter 16) has the best terrain, and the area, except for Winter Park and Fraser, is largely undiscovered.

The Best Old (And New) West Experiences

From prospectors to ranchers and so much in between, Colorado has drawn the best and the brightest (as well as its share of the not-so-bright) citizens looking to prosper from the promise of the West. Much that remains from this era is available for viewing and exploring today.

- ✔ The whole town of **Leadville** (Chapter 18) is a gold mine — literally — for mining history and lore. A visit to the **Matchless Mine** tour is a must, and the **National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum** is a fascinating trip into the past of this incredible industry.
- ✔ The **Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad** (Chapter 24) is the most fun way to experience the most spectacular part of the state, and to visit the great small towns of Durango and Silverton to boot.
- ✔ For a working ranch experience, don't miss **Saddleback Ranch in Steamboat Springs** (Chapter 21). Ride with the cowboys and eat ranch-style dinners in the beautiful high-range country of the Yampa Valley.
- ✔ The New West lives on (and parties hard) at the **National Western Stock Show & Rodeo in Denver** (Chapter 11). Check out the national-circuit pro rodeo, exotic livestock exhibits, a ranch equipment exposition, and great music as cowboys and ranchers descend to Denver every January for this trade show and winter party.

The Best Ski Areas

Skiing is what most people think of when they think of Colorado, though as this chapter alone shows, there's way more going on here than just

skiing. But for those of you who really want the champagne powder experience, here are the areas I recommend:

- ✔ **The best all-around skiing is in Aspen** and the surrounding areas (Chapter 20). **Aspen Highlands** and **Aspen Mountain** are great for experts, while **Snowmass** is ideal for intermediate skiers, and **Buttermilk** is perfect for beginners (even the Swiss rave about this place!). And the town itself is a Colorado classic. The downside, of course, is that it's expensive. But a ski vacation in Aspen is one you'll never forget.
- ✔ **For more moderate budgets, head for Winter Park** (Chapter 16). Winter Park offers great skiing for a moderate price; the snow is great until late in the season, and the adjacent **Mary Jane** area offers more challenging slopes for the mogul-hungry. Skiing Winter Park is easily doable as a day trip from Denver, especially if you ride the Ski Train — another classic Colorado experience.
- ✔ **Families will love Keystone** (Chapter 17) for its great instructional slopes and family-friendly atmosphere. This is where I and most of my friends learned to ski, and it's perfect. You can do it as a day trip from Denver, but the resort also has all-inclusive options for accommodations and dining that make it a no-brainer for a family trip. And since transportation in Summit County is so good, more experienced skiers can make easy excursions to **Copper Mountain** or **Arapahoe Basin**.
- ✔ **Extreme skiers** can head straight for **Crested Butte** (Chapter 22) or **Silverton** (Chapter 24). These high-mountain towns are harder to get to, but if you dream of super-steep terrain, these areas are a dream come true.

The Best Luxury Hotels

To treat yourself to the most luxurious of luxury accommodations during your Colorado vacation, these four choices are a good place to start:

- ✔ **The Broadmoor** in Colorado Springs (Chapter 14) has it all, from a grand tradition as a luxury destination to world-class golf on any of three 18-hole courses. The enormous property features hiking, a spa, and easy access to Pikes Peak and the rest of the Rampart Range.
- ✔ Denver's **Brown Palace** (Chapter 11) is where the Beatles stayed, don't you know — also presidents, movie stars, and visiting royalty. The hotel serves an English high tea in the afternoon, and the downtown location puts you near everything that's great about Denver — restaurants, entertainment, museums, and parks.

- ✔ **The Little Nell** in Aspen (Chapter 20) offers an intimate experience with all the lavish amenities of a world-class ski town such as Aspen. This is where Hollywood moguls come to crash in style.
- ✔ You'll think you're in Europe at **Sonnenalp** in Vail (Chapter 19). This classy but low-key place is the best place to pamper yourself in this, Colorado's *other* world-class resort town.

The Best Restaurants

Colorado has gone a long way towards forging a culinary identity for itself; the local cuisine focuses on buffalo and game, with a strong Southwestern influence and some international flair. But you find all the great styles here, from Tuscan to Cuban to Szechuan. And with fish flown in daily from the coasts, the sushi ain't half bad, either.

- ✔ If you're staying in Denver, a trip to **The Fort** or the **Buckhorn Exchange** (Chapter 11) is a must. These excellent restaurants are the best places to experience buffalo in all its glory, as well as appetizers such as rattlesnake and Rocky Mountain oysters. The Fort is definitely a fine-dining experience, while the Buckhorn is a little more laid-back. Both function as Old West museums as much as restaurants; either one will satisfy you.
- ✔ In Aspen, **Cache Cache** (Chapter 20) has been serving up fine French cuisine with a Rocky Mountain attitude for years. The preparations are outstanding, the presentations are gorgeous, and the portions are hearty. You won't be disappointed. The bar menu offers many of the same dishes for folks on a budget. Don't miss it if you're in Glitter Gulch.
- ✔ **The Shed** in Winter Park (Chapter 16) offers wonderful food in a great après-ski atmosphere. The menu changes often, and it's very popular with the locals.
- ✔ **Beau Jo's** in Idaho Springs (Chapter 12) is the all-time classic après-ski pizza joint for Front Range residents. The huge pizzas and original recipes are just the ticket after a long day on the slopes (or hiking, snowshoeing, rafting, rock climbing, shopping, or even just sitting around!).

The Best Small Towns

Colorado is more than metropolises and ski resorts. Check out one (or more) of these quaint little towns for a taste of small-town Colorado:

- ✔ If you're not on a budget, **Telluride** (Chapter 24) is a fantastic place, winter or summer, for an exciting small-town sojourn. The restaurants are outstanding, the nightlife is spectacular, and local

festivals appeal to every interest and temperament — the biggest being the **Telluride Bluegrass Festival**, which is held each year in June.

- ✔ **Grand Lake**, in Middle Park but very close to Rocky Mountain National Park (Chapter 15), is a very relaxed little place with comfortable lodging, good restaurants, and a number of activities. The town is ideal as a base for excursions into the park, and boating, hiking, fishing, and snowshoeing or cross-country skiing are also within easy reach.
- ✔ **Salida** (Chapter 18) offers great opportunities for rafting on the Arkansas, as well as a vibrant art scene and access to great skiing, hiking, and even the Great Sand Dunes (Chapter 25).

The Best Accommodations for Families

Traveling with the family shouldn't be a chore. For some hotels that "get it," consider the following:

- ✔ The **Embassy Suites Downtown Denver** (Chapter 11) is clean, friendly, and casual, and the kids will dig the in-room Nintendo games. All the rooms are suites, too, so *you* won't have to hear all that digital chaos.
- ✔ Families wanting an all-inclusive resort, winter or summer, that's both affordable and top-notch, will love **Snow Mountain Ranch** in Middle Park (Chapter 16). It's a YMCA facility that's expertly run and offers numerous options for outdoor adventures, including excellent skiing at Winter Park and Mary Jane.
- ✔ For a hotel that's practically a history lesson in itself (in a spectacular part of the state), check out the **Strater Hotel** in Durango (Chapter 24). The staff dresses in high silver-boom fashion, and the building itself is meticulously preserved. The proximity to the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad and Mesa Verde National Park make this a great family opportunity.

The Best Natural Wonders for Kids of All Ages

If your idea of a good, outdoor vacation is looking at stuff that makes you grab your head and go, "gee *whiz!*" here are a few can't-miss parts of the state that will definitely do the trick:

- ✔ The **Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve** in the San Luis Valley (Chapter 25) is one of my all-time favorite places in the state. The visitor center is very informative, kids will be entertained playing in the creek next to the dunes, and the dunes themselves, nestled

up against the towering Sangre de Cristo range, are truly awesome. Unless you're from southern Saudi Arabia, you'll be impressed.

- ✔ **The Black Canyon of the Gunnison** (Chapter 22) is a ponderous gap in the Earth that will knock your socks off. The powerful Gunnison River, aided only by gravity, has carved such a deep, narrow channel through the sandstone that sunlight rarely reaches the bottom — hence the darkness implied by the name.
- ✔ Okay, it's not a geological feature, but **Mesa Verde National Park** (Chapter 24) is certainly one of the wonders of *human* nature. These ruins of the ingenious Puebloan civilization are one of the state's top draws, and for good reason. The fascinating artifacts and the history they represent are a great testament to the human spirit and a vital link to Colorado's past — with lessons for its future as well.
- ✔ **The Rockies**, of course, are the main draw. For the most spectacular views of peaks, check out at least one of these sights: the drive over Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park (Chapter 15); the Collegiate Peaks near Buena Vista, and the drive over Independence Pass to Aspen (Chapters 18 and 20); or the drive to the top of Pikes Peak or Mt. Evans. A great one-hour diversion in Vail is the Gondola ride to the incredible view of the Mount of the Holy Cross.