

# The Best of Colorado

The old and the new, the rustic and the sophisticated, the wild and the refined—all of these experiences exist practically side by side in Colorado, amid what is arguably the most breathtaking mountain scenery in America.

Colorado's booming cities—Boulder, Colorado Springs, and Denver—and its admittedly somewhat glitzy resorts—especially Vail and Aspen—offer much of the comfort and culture of New York or Los Angeles but at a slower, more relaxed pace. Throughout the state, you'll also find testaments to another time, when life was simpler but rougher and only the strong survived: historic Victorian mansions, working turn-of-the-20th-century steam trains, thousand-year-old adobe-and-stone villages, and authentic Old West towns complete with false-fronted saloons and dusty streets.

Enos Mills, an early-20th-century environmentalist and one of the driving forces behind the creation of Rocky Mountain National Park, said that knowledge of nature is the basis of wisdom. So climb on a horse or mountain bike, take a hike or a raft trip—or simply sit back and gaze at the mountains. (Atop Pikes Peak, you'll see what inspired Katharine Lee Bates to pen the lyrics to "America the Beautiful.") Whatever you do, though, don't stay indoors. Colorado truly comes alive for those who venture outdoors—to the towering Rocky Mountains, the western canyons, or the broad eastern plains.

The following are what I consider Colorado's best experiences—highlights that will help you begin planning your trip.

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## 1 THE BEST SKI RESORTS

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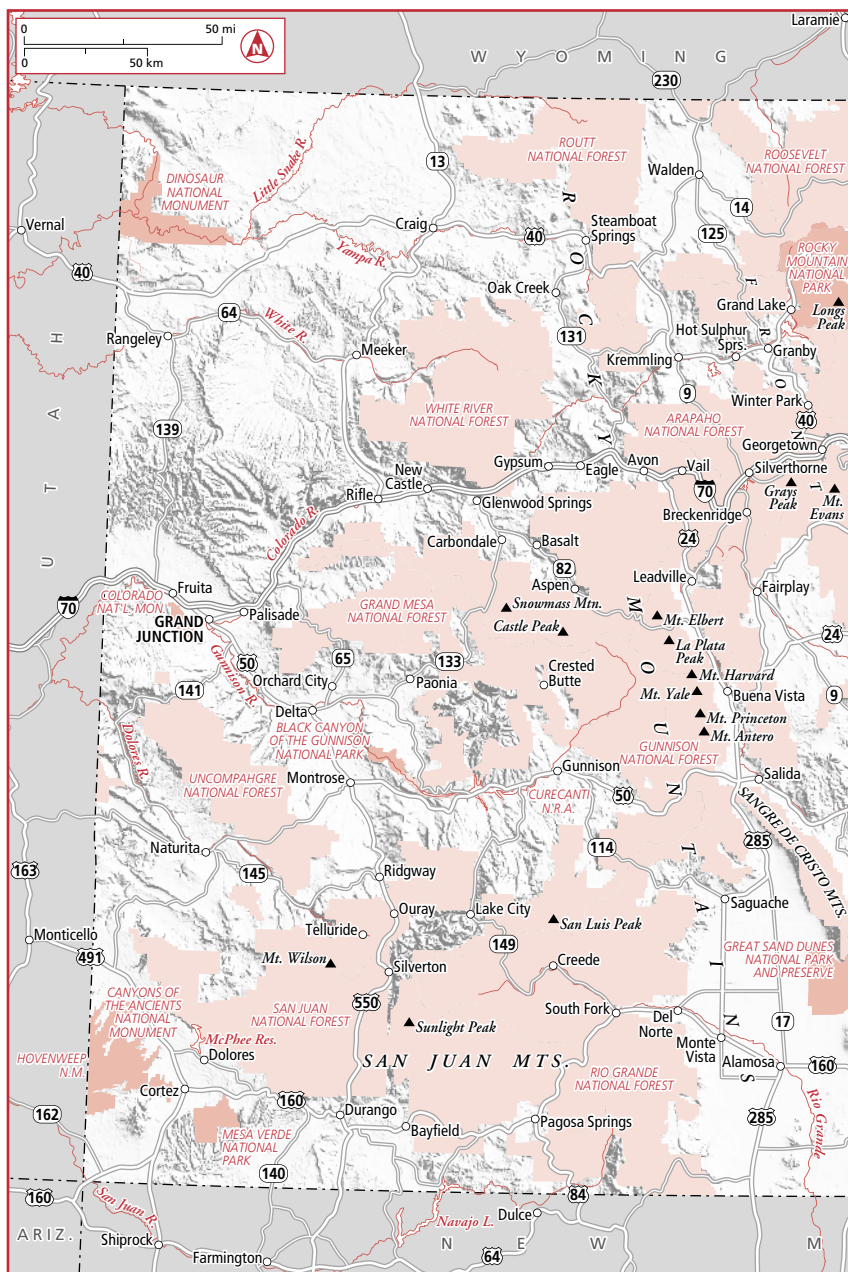
- **Aspen:** Not only does Aspen have predictably superior ski terrain ranging from some of the most expert runs in Colorado to what *Ski* magazine has called the best mountain in America for beginners (Buttermilk), but it's also one of the most fun, genuinely historic ski towns in Colorado. Although it might come off at first as somewhat glitzy and certainly expensive, Aspen is a real town, with longtime, year-round residents and a history that goes beyond the slopes. See chapter 11.
- **Breckenridge:** The lure of Breckenridge lies in its fabulous trails for skiers of all abilities, its location in an old gold-prospecting settlement, and its abundance of ski-in/ski-out lodging. It's also less expensive than Aspen and Vail, more rustic in feel, and appealing to families for its variety of après-ski activities. See chapter 11.
- **Telluride:** The funky historic town of Telluride at the bottom of the slopes and the posh Mountain Village at the mountain base offer the best of both worlds, as does the resort's diverse terrain, with plenty of snow for skiers of all levels. See chapter 13.
- **Vail:** This is it, the big one, America's flagship ski resort, as well as one of its largest, with 5,289 acres of skiable terrain, 193 trails, and 34 lifts. Every serious skier needs to ski Vail at least once. Its free bus system makes it easy to get around, but be prepared for steep prices, and don't look for Victorian charm—all you'll find are rows of condominiums. See chapter 11.

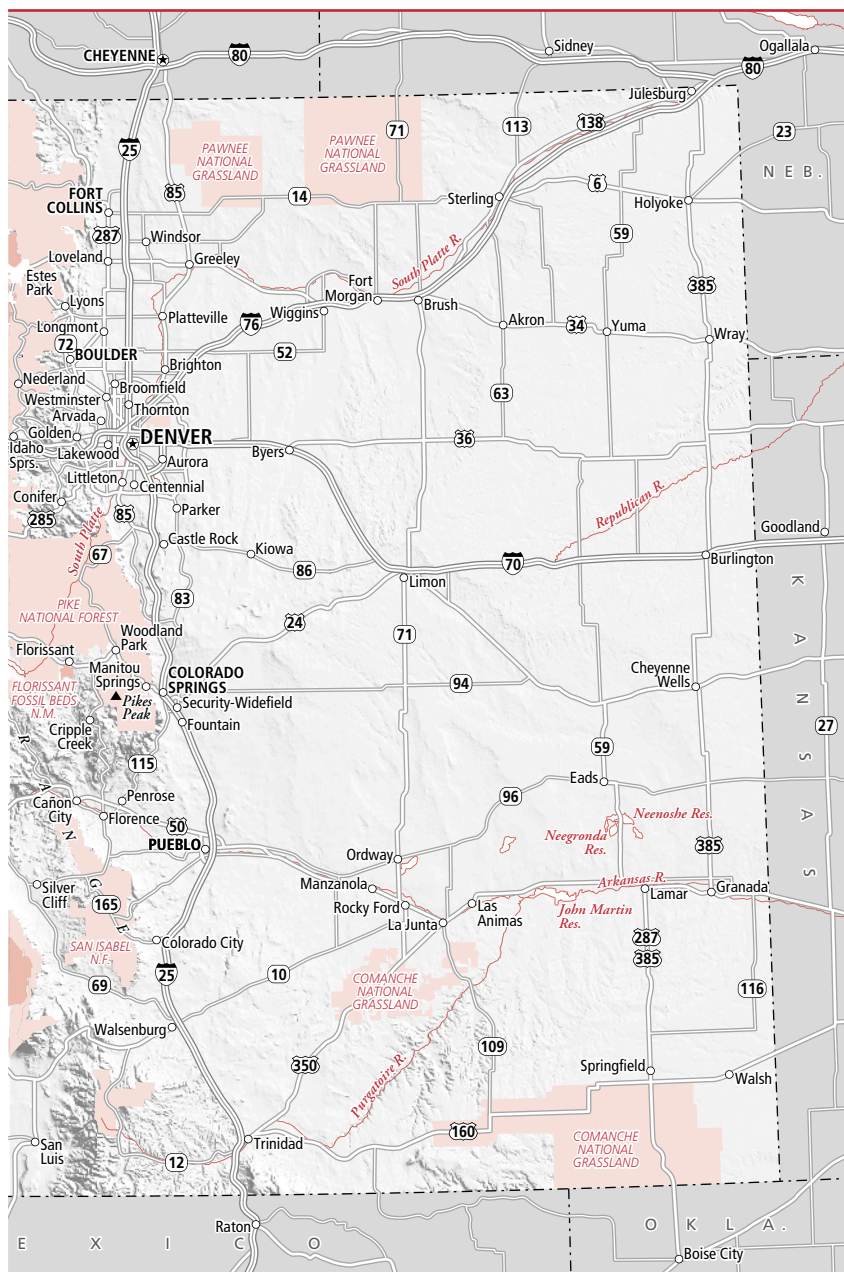
## 2 THE BEST ACTIVE VACATIONS

- **Hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park:** There's something for everyone here, from short hikes around a lovely mountain lake to the difficult 8-mile trek to the top of 14,259-foot Longs Peak. Trail heads can be accessed with the park's shuttle bus, from campgrounds, and from stops along Trail Ridge Road. However you do it, getting into the wilds is a treat in this beautiful setting. See chapter 11.
- **Cowpunching on a Cattle Drive:** To really step back into the West of the 1800s, join working cowboys on a genuine cattle drive. The **Saddleback Ranch** near Steamboat Springs (☎ 970/871-4697) is a working cattle ranch, where you'll become just another cowpuncher, moving stock from one pasture to another and performing other ranch duties. See p. 267.
- **Skiing the San Juan Hut System:** Ambitious cross-country skiers who want to put a few miles behind them, as well as take in the 14,000-foot alpine peaks, love the San Juan Hut System's trail and series of shelters between Telluride and Moab, Utah. Designed for intermediate skiers, the trail can be tackled in small sections or its entirety, with overnight stays in the well-equipped huts. See chapter 13.
- **Soaring in the Treetops:** A network of 25 zip lines up to 1,400 feet long that crisscross the Animas River, **Soaring Tree Top Adventures** near Durango (☎ 970/769-2357) allows visitors to get a bird's-eye view of an old-growth forest, sometimes from 100 feet above the ground. The attraction is accessible only via the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. See p. 375.

## 3 THE BEST HIKING TRAILS

- **The Buttes Trail at Pawnee Buttes:** This easy day hike exposes you to some of the "other" Colorado: the prairie on the state's eastern plains. A 1.5-mile trail leads to Pawnee Buttes, the Rattlesnake Buttes made famous in James Michener's *Centennial*. Keep your eyes open for coyotes, a variety of birds, and other wildlife, and colorful wildflowers in the spring. See p. 231.
- **The Emerald Lake Trail at Rocky Mountain National Park:** If you like mountain lakes, this is the trail for you. Starting at Bear Lake, it's an easy .5-mile walk to Nymph Lake, then a moderate .5-mile climb to Dream Lake, and the last .8 mile brings you to Emerald Lake. Total elevation change is 605 feet over a little less than 2 miles, with spectacular scenery all along the way. See p. 259.
- **The Colorado Trail at Kenosha Pass:** This easy section of the Colorado Trail near Breckenridge is a fun day's walk or can be the starting point for a serious backpacking trip. Pick up the trail off U.S. 285 where the highway crosses 10,001-foot Kenosha Pass. This access point provides opportunities for short or long hikes through the aspen and bristlecone forest. See p. 291.
- **Hiking the Dunes in Great Sand Dunes National Monument & Preserve:** This isn't a trail at all, but an opportunity to don your best French foreign legion hat and set out into the shifting sands in search of dramatic views from the top of a 750-foot dune. See p. 422.





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## 4 THE BEST MOUNTAIN BIKING

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- **Tipperary Creek Trail:** Considered by many to be Colorado's very best mountain-biking trail, this 30-mile ride from Fraser to Winter Park runs through dense forest and wildflower-covered meadows, offering views of rugged snowcapped peaks. It's also strenuous, rising from an 8,600-foot elevation to more than 10,000 feet. See p. 282.
- **Crested Butte:** Crested Butte vies with Marin County, California, as the birthplace of mountain biking. Check out the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame for a primer on the sport's history; then serious bikers should try Trail 401, a strenuous single-track loop that combines scenic beauty with steep grades and rough terrain. See p. 413.

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## 5 THE BEST WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES

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- **Hiking the Colorado Trail:** For some 500 miles, this trail winds from Denver to Durango, through some of the state's most spectacular and rugged terrain, crossing the Continental Divide, eight mountain ranges, and six wilderness areas. Just to the west of Leadville, the trail passes through the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness with a view of some of Colorado's most prominent "fourteeners" (mountains at least 14,000 ft. high) and fields of wildflowers. The harder might take a side trip up Mount Elbert, the state's tallest peak, at 14,433 feet. See chapters 5, 7, 11, and 13.
- **Hiking in the Maroon Bells National Wilderness Area:** With a number of fourteeners, including the namesake Maroon Bells, this is one of the most scenic mountainscapes in the West. A vision of glaciated rock and lush greenery, the trails here are popular with backpackers, but there are plenty of good day hikes; if you're feeling energetic, you can hike from Aspen to Crested Butte. See p. 413.
- **Rafting Glenwood Canyon or the Arkansas River:** Running the rapids on the Colorado and Arkansas rivers is one of the best and surely most exciting ways to see one of the most beautiful canyons in the West. Although a bit too popular to provide a genuine wilderness experience, these stretches of river both have sections rated for experts during the high spring runoff, as well as quieter areas appropriate for everyone. See chapters 12 and 14.

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## 6 THE BEST OF AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE

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- **Ute Indian Museum (Montrose):** One of Colorado's few museums dedicated to an existing Indian tribe, this excellent collection, run by the Colorado Historical Society, shows how Utes lived in the 19th century, as they were being forced to reconcile their way of life with that of the invading white pioneers. There's a particularly good exhibit of Ute ceremonial items. See p. 358.
- **Mesa Verde National Park:** Home to the most impressive prehistoric cliff dwellings in the Southwest, Mesa Verde (Spanish for "green table") overwhelms you with its size and complexity. The first national park set aside to preserve

works created by humans, it covers some 52,000 acres just outside Cortez. Among the most compelling sites are Spruce Tree House, Square Tower House, and Cliff Palace, a four-story apartment-style dwelling. See p. 386.

- **Ute Mountain Tribal Park:** These ruins differ from others in Colorado

because they're located on the Ute Mountain Indian Reservation, and the only way to see them is on a guided tour conducted by members of the Ute tribe. You'll see ruins and petroglyphs similar to those in Mesa Verde, but with an informed personal guide and without the crowds. See p. 389.

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## 7 THE BEST OF THE OLD WEST

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- **Old Town (Burlington):** On Colorado's eastern plains, right next door to Kansas, is this living-history museum, containing two dozen buildings (many from the 1880s). Watch a cancan, melodrama, or gunfight in a setting more reminiscent of Dodge City than Colorado's Victorian mountain towns. See chapter 10.
- **Creede, Lake City, and Leadville:** With extensive historic districts and false-fronted buildings, these mountain

towns take you back to the time when Butch Cassidy, Doc Holliday, and other infamous dudes stalked the saloons in search of the next card game. See chapters 11 and 14.

- **Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site (La Junta):** Reconstructed to the way it appeared in the 1830s and 1840s, this adobe fort shows life as it really was, when pioneers spent their time either trading peaceably with or fighting off plains warriors. See p. 444.

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## 8 THE MOST SCENIC VIEWS

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- **Garden of the Gods:** There's nothing like sunrise at Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs, with its fantastic and sometimes fanciful red-sandstone formations sculpted by wind and water over hundreds of thousands of years. It's worth spending some foot power to get away from the crowds on one of the park's many trails, to listen to the wind and imagine the gods cavorting among the formations. See p. 162.
- **Trail Ridge Road:** Transversing Rocky Mountain National Park, Trail Ridge affords expansive and sometimes dizzying views in all directions. There are a dozen stops where you can take a short hike, possibly glimpse the unofficial mascots of the park (bighorn sheep), and get a close-up look at tundra. The

drive rises above 12,000 feet and crosses the Continental Divide. See p. 255.

- **The Black Canyon of the Gunnison:** Among the steepest and most narrow canyons in North America, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, near Montrose, offers breathtaking and sometimes eerie views into the darkness below or, for ambitious hikers, from the canyon depths to daylight above. The sheerness of its 2,500-foot-high walls, the narrowness of its 40-foot-wide base, and the resulting darkness at its core evoke a somber, almost religious mood. See p. 360.
- **Colorado National Monument:** Just west of Grand Junction are stunning vistas of red-rock canyons and sandstone monoliths. The monument's



23-mile Rim Rock Drive offers incredible views, and short walks and back-country trails afford more solitude. You'll get the best light in the early morning or late afternoon, when the rocks glow red and shadows dance among the stone sculptures. See p. 334.

- **The San Juan Skyway:** This 233-mile circle drive that goes through Durango, Telluride, and Ouray is among the most beautiful scenic drives in America,

passing through five mountain passes, historic mining camps, fields of wildflowers, stately forests, snowcapped peaks, and cascading waterfalls. It's not advisable for those who have difficulty with high elevation (Red Mountain Pass has an 11,008-ft. elevation) or steep, winding roads. Except in summer, it's wise to be sure the passes are open before heading out. See p. 382.

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## 9 THE BEST FAMILY VACATIONS

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- **Playing Cowboy at the Home Ranch and Devil's Thumb Ranch:** Nestled in the mountains near Steamboat Springs and Winter Park, respectively, these are two of the state's standout guest ranches, with luxurious perks. At the Home Ranch, expect food from an expertly trained French chef and adventurous horseback rides; at Devil's Thumb, there are all sorts of outdoor activities and geothermally heated lodge rooms and cabins. See chapter 11.
- **Riding an 1880s Narrow Gauge Steam Train:** There are two: The Durango & Silverton follows the Animas River from Durango up through the San Juan Mountains to historic Silverton; the Cumbres & Toltec chugs out of Anton-

ito, Colorado; through the Toltec Gorge of the Los Piños River; over Cumbres Pass into Chama, New Mexico. Scenery is stupendous over both lines, and each fulfills every train buff's greatest dream of smoke in your eyes and cinders in your hair. See chapters 13 and 14.

- **Exploring Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve:** About 40 miles northeast of Alamosa, this huge pile of sand is a great place to explore, camp, hike, or just play in the 750-foot-tall dunes. Rangers provide guided nature walks and campfire programs in the summer, and a hiking/off-road-vehicle trail leads out the back of the monument into the national forest. See chapter 14.

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## 10 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

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- **Brown Palace Hotel** (Denver; ☎ 800/321-2599 or 303/297-3111): Denver's finest hotel, the Brown Palace has been open continuously since 1892, serving high society and celebrities—from President Dwight Eisenhower to the Beatles—with elegance and charm. Although most of the rooms are Victorian in decor, with Tiffany lamps and other accoutrements, my favorites are the Art

Deco rooms, which have an undeniable feel of the 1920s and 1930s. See p. 79.

- **The Broadmoor** (Colorado Springs; ☎ 800/634-7711 or 719/634-7711): Colorado's top-rated resort hotel has it all—excellent dining, golf courses, pools, tennis courts, a state-of-the-art fitness center, full-service spa, and shopping, plus extraordinary service—in a magnificently restored historic building set in

immaculate grounds. Although extremely impressive, the Broadmoor is never pretentious, and it certainly knows how to pamper its guests. See p. 165.

- **The St. Regis Aspen** (Aspen; ☎ 888/454-9005 or 970/920-3300): At the base of Ajax Mountain, the St. Regis offers great views of the mountains or town, impeccable service, luxurious rooms, and all the services and amenities you'd expect in a fine hotel. Although a bit pricey, especially at Christmas, the

hotel is supremely elegant in a comfortable, cozy way. See p. 328.

- **Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch** (Avon; ☎ 800/241-3333 or 970/748-6200): A stunning structure modeled after the grand national park lodges, the rock-and-log "parkitecture" exterior sheaths one of the most luxurious hotels in the West. The rooms are also studies in "New West" glitz, complete with mountain and earth tones, decor inspired by wildlife and forests, and jaw-dropping views. See p. 308.

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## 11 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED LODGINGS

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- **Alpine Trail Ridge Inn** (Estes Park; ☎ 800/233-5023 or 970/586-4585): This is a top-notch independent motel, right next to the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. Proprietors Jay and Fran Grooters are also great sources for hiking advice. See p. 248.
- **Boulder Outlook** (Boulder; ☎ 800/542-0304 or 303/443-3322): The Outlook is fun, fresh, and definitively Boulder, with two bouldering rocks, a huge dog run, and discounts on bike rentals and other activities. The rooms

are larger than average and the indoor pool is superb, complete with a waterfall and a mural of a cloud-speckled sky. See p. 192.

- **Siesta Motel** (Durango; ☎ 877/314-0741 or 970/247-0741): A vintage 1950s-era roadside motel owned and operated by the same family since 1975, the Siesta Motel is the best value in Durango, featuring clean, well-kept motel rooms with a king bed or two queens or doubles and a hot tub in the courtyard gazebo. See p. 378.

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## 12 THE BEST BED & BREAKFASTS

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- **Two Sisters Inn** (Manitou Springs; ☎ 800/274-7466 or 719/685-9684): Built by two sisters in 1919 as a boarding house, this splendid bed-and-breakfast has been owned and operated by Wendy Goldstein and Sharon Smith, sisters in spirit if not in blood. The four bedrooms and separate honeymoon cottage are furnished with family heirlooms and photographs, in a style best described as informal elegance. See p. 153.
- **The Leland House Bed & Breakfast Suites** (Durango; ☎ 800/664-1920 or 970/385-1920): Built as an apartment house in 1927 and handsomely restored in 1993, the Leland House offers an intriguing mix of lodging types in a comfortable inn with early-20th-century decor. Breakfast is served in the historic Rochester Hotel across the street, another restored gem under the same ownership. See p. 377.



- 12 • **The Bradley** (Boulder; ☎ **800/858-5811** or 303/545-5200): Built as an upscale inn in 1994, the Bradley nicely blends into the surrounding historic neighborhood, just northeast of the

Pearl Street Mall. The striking Great Room and uniquely decorated guest rooms are all adorned with bold contemporary art from local galleries. See p. 191.