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TRAVEL

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VACATION USA



Tribune photo by Phil Marty

ALL ABOARD: The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad has been running between those southwest Colorado towns for more than 125 years, in more modern times hauling tourists.

5 ways Colorado can stun

Hike [huge sand dunes](#) or bike [lung-bursting, white-knuckle trails](#). Kayak a [peaceful mountain lake](#). Drive [hair-raising mountain roads](#) with no guardrail between you and [dropoffs plunging hundreds of feet](#). Or even ride through [chilly mountain country](#) in an open-air car behind a [vintage steam locomotive](#) that dusts you with coal cinders.

TO SEE FIVE WAYS TO COLLECT YOUR OWN WOW MOMENTS, TURN TO PAGE 6.

Wowed by Colorado

Story and photos by Phil Marty | TRIBUNE STAFF REPORTER

The aspen trees' bright yellow leaves stood out among the dark green pines surrounding them. "Cool," I murmured to myself. Then the sun slid out from behind the fluffy clouds and *bang*, it was like someone had thrown a light switch. The bright yellow leaves exploded into an almost blinding burst of glowing gold.

1 Mountain bike

Wow moment: The Lower Loop Trail heading out of Crested Butte is ranked "easy," as mountain bike trails out here go. But then you're flying down or struggling up one of its hilly sections on a 12- to 18-inch wide single-track trail, dodging rocks in the path, and you notice that the outer edge of the trail drops off nearly straight down, promising a nasty 20- to 30-foot plunge if you slip up. It's not the time to be rubbernecking. Save that for when you stop to catch your breath and marvel at the aspen- and pine-covered mountains rising around you.

Where: Crested Butte, sitting at nearly 9,000 feet in the very mountainous west-central part of the state northwest of Gunnison, is considered by many to be the country's best mountain-biking destination. Trails of all skill levels form a web around the tiny, picturesque onetime mining town. And finding a trail often is as easy as just cruising the streets to the edge of town. But trail maps are readily available.

More wows: Given that so much of Colorado is mountainous and is public land, finding mountain biking trails is as easy as... well, falling off a bike. And finding rental bikes is just as easy. Road bikers are everywhere in Colorado, too, including some interstates that have bike lanes. Just be sure to pack an extra set of lungs. And, for the real gluttons for punishment, there's the **Iron Horse Bicycle Classic** (May 24 this year) where cyclists try (successfully) to beat the fastest train that runs from Durango (elevation 6,500 feet) to Silverton (9,300 feet). The nearly 60-mile route goes over two 10,000-foot passes and, with ups and downs, climbs 5,700 feet. Last year's winner clocked in at an amazing 2:19:52.

You should know: Try to allow a few days to acclimate to the higher altitudes. Your body will thank you. And don't head out without some basic gear (and the smarts to know how to use it): a spare tube, pump, tire levers, mini-bike water, nutrition bars and cell phone (though being able to get cell coverage isn't a given). Yeah, there can be a few bikers out there, but I was out for a couple of hours and saw only one person.

Information: Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, 970-349-6817, www.mountainbikeshallofame.com/crestedbutte.cfm; Iron Horse Bicycle Classic, 970-259-4821, www.ironhorsebicyclerace.com; Crested Butte Lodging, 970-412-7310, www.crestedbutte.org; Visit Crested Butte, www.visitcrestedbutte.com; Crested Butte Chamber of Commerce, 800-545-4505, www.crestedbuttechamber.com.

2 Kayak

Wow moment: Haviland Lake is not far off a busy highway, but sitting in a kayak out in this little gem, with pine trees decorating the shores and mountains nearly everywhere you look, it's like you've found a little piece of wilderness. The water's a cold but not frigid, as I walk my boat away from shore before slipping into it. And, it's a cliché, but it really is crystal clear. There's a campground here, but on a weekday in early October it's empty, and only a few fly fishermen quietly fog the water. A soft breeze; the glint of sun on the flat waters; puffy clouds in the robin's-egg-blue sky, and those mountains all around. It doesn't get much better than this.

Where: Haviland Lake is less than 20 miles north of Durango, off U.S. Highway 550, which stretches on up to Silverton and Ouray and is one of most spectacular drives around.

More wows: I just happened on the turnoff for Haviland Lake as I was driving to Silverton, and enough itty bitty lakes pockmark the state to guarantee more such serendipitous finds. For the



more structured kayaker, stop for a chat with the folks who work in the Forest Service offices in towns surrounded by national forests and ask their advice. Trout Lake, on Colorado Highway 145 south of Telluride, is another little gem surrounded by mountains, and Twin Lakes, on Colorado Highway 82, south of Leadville, though much larger, offer the same mountain scenery and look like a good place to dip a paddle. For the more adventurous, the state also has more than enough raging rivers to satisfy the white-water crowd.

You should know: Like bikes, kayak rentals shouldn't be all that hard to find in this state where outdoor gear stores are about as common as Starbucks in the big city. And, on another subject, of course you wouldn't kayak without your life jacket, right? If you dump your boat, that not-frigid-but-still-pretty-cold water isn't where you want to be without flotation. And, speaking of dumping your boat, if you don't already know how to escape your kayak if it tips (it's not something you'd know intuitively, especially when you're hanging upside down in the water), take a lesson.

Information: U.S. Forest Service, www.fs.fed.us; Kayak Online, www.kayakonline.com/colorado.html.

3 Hike

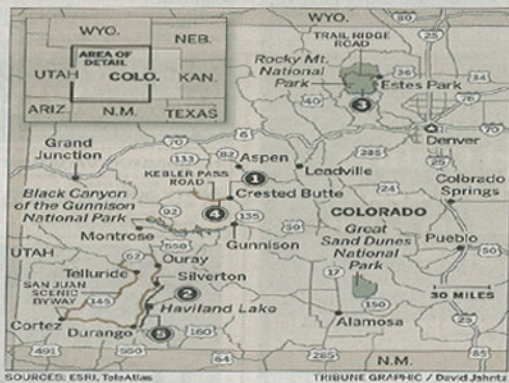
Wow moment: Though the early October temps were warm and the day sunny, the shaded parts of the rocky trail up to Lake Hayaha had their challenges thanks to a snowstorm earlier in the week whose remnants had turned to ice, inviting a spill for the carefree hiker. The trail, moderately steep in spots, is a spur off the popular trail that goes from the 9,476-foot elevation Bear Lake Trailhead to Nymph, Dream and Emerald Lakes. And though they're rated as "easy," these trails, which total almost 6 miles round trip, will still have flatlanders (like me) sucking air. But the payoff is pretty little lakes with water clear enough to see the rainbow trout cruising around, pine-scented breezes and views of crazy mountains.

Where: The trail is in the east-central part of Rocky Mountain National Park, northwest of Denver. During the peak summer season, park officials recommend taking the shuttle bus to the Bear Lake Trailhead because of the trails' popularity

"Wow!" I said, almost shouting.

It wasn't the first—or last—time I used that word during almost two weeks traveling around Colorado last fall. That's the kind of place it is. Whether it's fall color time, winter, summer or spring, the wow moments keep stopping you in your tracks.

Check out these five ways to collect your own wow moments.



WOWS: 1. The Lower Loop Trail is rated "easy" for mountain bikers. 2. The view from the kayak in Haviland Lake. 3. Hikers tackle a dune at Great Sand Dunes National Park. 4. The view through the moonroof while driving the Kebler Pass Road. 5. Getting the shot aboard the Durango & Silverton.

ity and the limited parking. Park visitor centers can provide information on the more than 350 miles of trails for hikers of all skill levels.

More wows: It's pretty hard to find a hiking trail in much of Colorado. Great Sand Dunes National Park, north of Alamosa in the south-central part of the state, can get your heart pumping as you slog up 650-foot-high High Dune or 750-foot Star Dune. At Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, north of Montrose in the west-central part of the state, you can take the high road and hike along the rim. Or the adventurers out there can explore the inner canyon, but you'll need a wilderness-use permit.

You should know: Carry a camera with you, regardless of whether you have a memory card (or film) in it. That way you can stop often, act like you're taking a photo and instead catch your breath without looking like a wimp. And don't underestimate the mountains. Even if you plan to hike for just a couple of hours, take plenty of water; something to snack on; and a jacket. Those snow-covered peaks are a reminder that the weather can go south real fast at high elevations, and you don't

want to be caught by a snowstorm with just your T-shirt and shorts. Be alert, too, for summer afternoon thunderstorms. Getting fried by lightning can put a real crimp in your vacation. But have fun out there.

Information: Rocky Mountain National Park, www.nps.gov/romo; Colorado Tourism, www.colorado.com.

4 Drive

Wow moment: This is a tough one. It seems like every time I thought I'd seen the best drive, I saw a new best one. But I'm going to cast my vote for the Kebler Pass Road, an unpaved two-lane that heads west from Crested Butte. This road isn't a nail-biter like some, but for sheer beauty, it's spectacular, meandering through mile after mile of aspen groves. With their quaking leaves and eye-catching white bark, the aspens seem to go on forever. And for a backdrop there's always those snow-capped peaks. I'd figured on a leisurely hour's drive but was in and out of the car so much it stretched to three. And I could have lingered much longer.

Where: Crested Butte, northwest of Gunnison in

the west-central part of the state, is pretty hard to get to much of the year. Colorado Highway 135 from Gunnison is paved, but that's about it, and other roads leaving town are apt to be closed in the winter. Among those is the Kebler Pass Road, which goes up over the almost-10,000-foot pass to Colorado Highway 133.

More wows: The Million Dollar Highway—U.S. Highway 550 between Ouray and Silverton—might be named for the million-dollar views. Though I like to think it's because when you're driving it, you're going to wish you'd bought a million-dollar life insurance policy. If you're bothered the least little bit by heights but revel in sheer terror, this is your highway. Heading south out of Ouray, the two-lane road zigzags toward 11,000-foot Red Mountain Pass with no shoulder, no guardrail and a drop-off of hundreds of feet. I had to pry my fingers from the steering wheel at the top, but, man, is it great. Also notable: Highway 550 south of Silverton, much of Colorado Highway 145 from Telluride south, Colorado Highway 82 east of Aspen, the road to 14,000-foot Mt. Evans (top closed after Labor Day) west of Denver, the Old Fall River Road and Trail Ridge Road (12,183 feet at its highest point) in Rocky Mountain National Park and... oh, it's hard to go wrong in much of the western part of the state.

You should know: Don't drink and drive. Don't drink (too much) and drive. Don't be afraid to drive. Really.

Information: Colorado Scenic Byways, www.coloradobyways.org; Colorado Department of Transportation, www.cdot.gov; www.cotrip.org.

5 Vintage train

Wow moment: When you're riding in an open rail car, you can hear that trains really do go clickety-clack as they scoot down the tracks. Also, on this train you occasionally inhale a big whiff of the coal smoke blowing back from the steam engine, and your eyes might tear up when a smidge of coal ash blows in. But who cares? That's all part of the fun. The fall color in the country is a little crisp, and the sun is reflecting off the river that's rushing by one direction while we rush the other, chugging into the past. We're all aboard the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, which is celebrating after more than 125 years.

Where: The Durango & Silverton runs—surprise—between Durango and Silverton in southwest Colorado.

More wows: Colorado may have more scenic trains than anywhere else in the country. Other lines, some vintage and some not, include the Pikes Peak Railway, the Royal Gorge Route Railroad, the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, Georgetown Loop Railroad, the Ski Train, Leadville & Silverton Railroad, Cripple Creek & Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad, Rio Grande Scenic Railway.

You should know: The Durango & Silverton offers lots of options—open car, closed car, one-way, round-trip, start in Durango, start in Silverton... **Information:** Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, 877-872-4607, www.durangotrain.com; Pikes Peak Railway, 970-745-3773, www.cograilway.com; Royal Gorge Route Railroad, 970-724-5749, www.royalgorgeroute.com; Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, 888-286-2737, www.cumbrestoltec.com; Georgetown Loop Railroad, 888-456-6777, www.georgetownloop.com; Ski Train, 877-296-8944, www.skitrain.com; Leadville & Silverton Railroad, 866-386-3536, www.leadvilletrain.com; Cripple Creek & Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad, 719-689-2640, www.cripplercreeknarrowgauge.com; Rio Grande Scenic Railway, 877-724-5749, www.rgrandescenicrailroad.com.

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