

Colorado

WITHOUT SKIS

Winter visitors find plenty to do off famed slopes



By Mary Margaret Green
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WOURAY, Colo. ell, this is different. I'm 10 feet up a 70-foot frozen waterfall, wearing a helmet, with spiky crampons attached to my mountaineering boots and a step-in harness around my thighs and waist keeping me fastened to a belaying rope.

To advance upward — do I really want to do this? — I must find a “pocket” in the uneven wall of ice and insert my hooklike ice tool into it for a good handhold, then remove one cramponed foot from the ice and kick it in again slightly higher up. Right arm, left foot; left arm, right foot. My heart pounds with each unsure move.

How does a sixtysomething grandmother who has grown lax about exercise

get into a situation like this?

That's easy. I get an invitation from Colorado tourism officials to spend a few days sampling what the state has to offer in winter besides skiing, which everyone knows is excellent, and I jump at the chance.

Ice climbing intrigues me. It sounds exotic, daring and, OK, scary, but if I don't go, won't I always wonder what I missed? The itinerary also includes snowmobiling and snowshoeing. I've never tried either, and Colorado is a prime place to learn. Dog-sledding almost makes it onto the itinerary but is dropped because of time constraints.

If something can be done in snow or on ice, it can be done in the alpine environs we'll be visiting — the Rockies' San Juan Mountains in the southwestern part of the state.

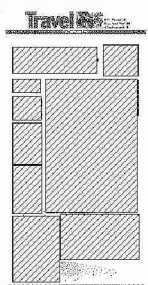
We'll stay in two cities that still bear the stamp of their late-1880s origins as a mining town (Ouray) and a rail hub (Durango) and gape at magnificent scenery on a historic train ride and a drive along the so-called Million Dollar Highway.

Why wouldn't I go?

see COLORADO, page D2

Ouray — elevation 7,792 feet, population fewer than 900 — is where we're introduced to ice climbing, at Ouray Ice Park on the southern edge of town.

There, water pumped from a local reservoir is sprayed over the sheer 70- to 140-foot walls of a one-mile stretch of the narrow Uncompahgre Gorge, where it freezes to fill in and thicken the ice provided by natural waterfalls and seeps. A volunteer-run nonprofit organization op-



erates the park, and climbing without a guide is free.

To me, watching from an observation area as climbers rappel down walls of ice and then scale them like real-life Spider-Men in helmets and bright parkas, the ice looks like drippings down a giant's candle, full of uneven bulges, crevices, smooth slides and pocked outcroppings.

Mother Nature is being indecisive this day, not sure whether she wants mist, snow or sun, a damp chill or balmy warmth, but the gorge is awe-inspiring in all its variations. When the light is right, the ice has a bluish cast.

We novices take a grated walkway and metal ladder partway down into the gorge, put on our crampons at the ladder's base and then use them and a guiding rope to descend a short snow-and-ice-packed slope to the canyon floor. Our teachers, Ryan Cook of San Juan Mountain Guides and park Executive Director Erin Eddy, stay barely an arm's length away from us, assessing each crampon thrust and offering constant reassurance.

At our beginners climbing location, Ms. Cook climbs about 15 feet up a sloped section to demonstrate how it's done, then descends to accompany us, one at a time, on our own brief climbs. Mr. Eddy keeps the belaying rope taut.

Because our goal is just to get an introduction to the sport, we each stop at about 12 feet and return to the bottom. Beginners who sign up for the guide company's two-day basic course not only aim for the top, but take on more difficult routes as their skills progress. The company also has courses for intermediate through advanced climbers and provides private guides.

Mr. Eddy says proper technique, not strength, is the secret to success, so climbing is accessible to a wider range of people than might be expected. As if to prove his point, he stays behind to climb with his 4-year-old daughter, a frequent, enthusiastic climber.

As for our group of four female travel writers, we're ready for a soak in the Ouray Hot Springs Pool, a 250-by-150-foot public outdoor pool fed by sulfur-free natural hot springs. Ignoring the lap-swimming area, we drift among several soaking sections where the water temperature ranges from 96 to 106 degrees, then stand still to absorb the scene: vapor rising into the cool air from the pool's hot surface, snow flurries sifting down as the sky briefly turns gray, and snowcapped mountains all around. Ahhh.

The riches in the mountains brought prospectors to Ouray, which was incorporated in 1876, and many buildings from

the turn of the last century have been preserved and restored. Two of them, the Beaumont Hotel and Spa from 1886 and the St. Elmo Hotel from 1898, bring back the boom years, but in different ways. The 12-room Beaumont exudes the elegance expected of a hotel built to impress investors from the East. The St. Elmo has been transformed from a serviceable 20-room hostelry into a cozy nine-room country inn with boldly patterned flowered wallpapers evocative of the era.

The Ouray Historical Society's walking tour describes 24 preserved buildings in 34 square blocks, which is pretty much the entire city, as the mountains limit outward expansion. It's not hard to understand why Ouray was named a National Historic District in 1983 or why my first impression of its eight-block Main Street, despite its art galleries, restaurants and upscale shops, is of a Wild West movie set.

At the Ouray County Historical Museum and Research Center in the former St. Joseph's Miner's Hospital (1887-1964), I find a Washington connection: Evalyn Walsh McLean, owner of the reputedly cursed Hope Diamond and wife of Edward Beale McLean, owner and publisher of The Washington Post from 1916 to 1933.

The real link is her Irish-immigrant father, Thomas F. Walsh, whose incredibly lucrative Camp Bird Mine six miles south of Ouray paid for his world travels, a palatial home on Massachusetts Avenue in the nation's capital and his daughter's extravagant lifestyle. Sue Hillhouse, a museum volunteer whose husband, Tom, is the society's board president, greets us dressed as Evalyn McLean, whose book "Father Struck It Rich" is sold at the museum and at Buckskin Books on Main Street.

The museum is full of stories of local people who worked the mines, railroads and farms that were the main sources of income for the area. Among its exhibits are an operating room, a railroad office, an assay office, a hobbyist's intricate hand-made models of mines and mills, a beautiful display of mostly locally mined minerals and a fascinating mine replica.

We stick with history as we head south on the San Juan Skyway, a 236-mile highway loop that connects Ouray, Silverton, Durango, Mesa Verde National Park and Telluride. The high, twisting 25-mile Ouray-to-Silverton portion, known as the Million Dollar Highway, follows the seemingly impossible route built along the edge of Uncompahgre Gorge and through the mountains by Russian immigrant Otto Mears in the 1880s.

Mears' one-time toll road connecting mining camps and towns was rebuilt from

1921 through '24. Some say the skyway's name refers to the per-mile cost of the project, but others claim that was the value of gold and silver in the road's fill dirt. No matter; the views as the two-lane road hugs rocky ledges and winds deep into the alpine wilderness are priceless. An elk herd of about 50 calls this fabulous area home.

Silverton, founded in 1874 at an elevation of 9,319 feet, is another former mining town that has gained recognition as a National Historic District. We're not headed for the city of about 550, though; we're going snowmobiling in Molas Pass with Jim Lokey, owner of Red Mountain Snowmobile Tours.

After a brief explanation of how the vehicles work — acceleration is controlled by twisting the right handlebar grip, and it's best not to rely too heavily on the brakes, which could burn out the motor — we're off. It takes me a while to get comfortable with the power beneath me, so I slow too much when approaching curves, which makes the vehicle feel as difficult to steer as an old car without power steering.

Finally, I start to relax, feel more confident in the seat and enjoy the expansive beauty all around me. No longer the slowpoke in the group, I get a sense of exhilaration from the small bumps and brief downhill.

We ride to an elevation of 12,000 feet before heading back to our starting point, but peaks still loom above us, some as high as 14,000 feet. Except for one couple pulling a child on a sled, we have the spectacular countryside to ourselves for about two hours.

Next stop: Durango, established in 1880 at an elevation of 6,512 feet. Unlike surrounding communities, it was never a mining town but instead grew into a transportation hub after the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad built a depot there for its San Juan extension, intended to bring ore from Silverton to smelters and refiners in Durango.

Like other cities in the region, Durango retains a Wild West appearance with its low Victorian-era buildings and mountain backdrop. However, with a year-round population of 16,000 and the presence of 3,900-student Fort Lewis College on a mesa overlooking the city, it has a young, active feeling.

Seventy-three miles south of Ouray and that much closer to the New Mexican border, it also has a distinctly Southwestern feeling, especially foodwise.

We stay at the 93-room Strater Hotel, where walnut antiques and hand-screened, historically accurate Bradbury

& Bradbury wallpapers maintain the ambience of its 1887 beginnings. When I express amazement at the heavy carved furniture in my room, I learn that the half-dozen pieces, purchased for about \$10,000 from the Lyson chicken products family, were assessed recently at \$250,000. The owners visited estate sales throughout the South to furnish the hotel.

The Strater's Diamond Belle Saloon, an original ragtime piano bar, is a fun re-creation of the boomtown era. The entertainment on the night we visit is cowboy-Western rather than the ragtime frequently heard there. Our waitress is dressed as a dance-hall girl, complete with a garter convenient for holding tips. The hotel says novelist Louis L'Amour stayed in a room above the Diamond Belle while writing his popular Old West novels because the honky-tonk music helped set the mood.

Durango offers many of the outdoors adventures found in Ouray, plus water sports on the snow-fed Animus River, which runs through the city, but we have come for a ride on the famous Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, the same line that gave the city its start. Its right of way was declared a National Historic District in 1966, and significant portions of the city also have been designated.

I have been on several scenic rail rides where the trip and the countryside were pleasant, but not spectacular. This one is incredible, providing an eagle's perspective from as much as 200 feet above the Animus River as the steam locomotive chugs along on a ledge carved into a canyon wall, then presenting an elk's-eye view where it rolls along the snowy, rock-strewn riverbank.

The shortened winter ride, from late November to early May, goes to Cascade Canyon, two hours each way, with an hour in between to explore the countryside. The warm-weather trip to Silverton takes 3½ hours each way, plus about two hours to enjoy the city. Two-day options with a Silverton overnight are available, and so are bus-train combinations.

We have one last adventure: snowshoeing at Durango Mountain Resort, 25 miles north of town in the San Juan National Forest. Elevations at the resort, which gets an average of 260 inches of snow a year, range from 8,793 at its base to 10,822 at the summit. Besides the expected downhill skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing, it provides a 600-foot-long tubing track and areas for snow biking — riding downhill on a bikelike contraption with a seat and handlebars but skis rather than wheels. A Nordic Center across from the entrance provides

groomed cross-country trails.

We ride a chairlift to our starting point and get acquainted with the feeling of our rental snowshoes by trekking along a flat forested area into a woodland-enclosed meadow — where we discover that making “angels” in the snow is near impossible when wearing snowshoes.

Our descent takes us down the lift's steeply terraced slope. I'm the slowpoke in the group once again, but who cares? Like walking, but more strenuous, this is a sport I can enjoy at my own pace — which also is the best way to discover the outdoors in southwestern Colorado, from not-so-hard to extreme.



Much of the countryside traveled by the historic Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad is accessible only by rail. Handlers (top left) care for sled dogs after a run in Molas Pass near Silverton. The furniture in one room of the 1887 Strater Hotel in Durango, including the bed (right), was assessed recently at \$250,000.

Photographs by Mary Margaret Green/The Washington Times



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A climber at Ouray Ice Park in southwestern Colorado rappels down a 70- to 80-foot wall of ice to the bottom of Uncompahgre Gorge so he can climb back to the top, but there are less challenging ways to get to the gorge floor. The city of Ouray (top), where the park is located, is a former mining town that is a good base for many outdoor activities. The private car (above left) belonging to Allen C. and Carol Harper, owners of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, usually is on display in the railroad's roundhouse-museum in Durango. The Harpers take it out on the rails several times a year to host meetings and entertain. Snowmobilers in Molas Pass near Silverton take a short break.