

COLORADO

NATIONAL PARK TRIP PLANNER

Black Canyon
of the
Gunnison

Great Sand
Dunes

Mesa Verde

Rocky
Mountain



National Park Trips

4 Epic Road Trips

Here are four fabulous road trips to Colorado's national parks,
originating in cities like Denver and Salt Lake City.



ON THE COVER: Bear Lake Road in Rocky Mountain National Park (Grant Ordelheide)

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COLORADO'S BIG FOUR

In Colorado, four national parks showcase some of the country's most varied and scenic terrain from the nation's tallest sand dune to alpine lakes, ancient settlements and a sheer canyon.

By *Tori Peglar*

1 GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

The continent's tallest sand dunes join the rugged Sangre de Cristo mountains here in southern Colorado. Hike the striking High Dune on First Ridge, a 2-hour, 2.5-mile round trip walk up 699 feet of sand to the top. Then sled down with a sand sled rented at Kristi Mountain Sports in Alamosa, Colo., for extreme speed. Or beach it along Medano Creek, which flows April through June. Track the current and forecasted river flows on the park's website.

2 MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK

Described as the pyramids of North America, the ancient settlements at Mesa Verde National Park in southwestern Colorado hold the early stories of our nation. About 1,400 years ago, Ancestral Puebloans built more than 600 dwellings into the gorgeous sandstone cliffs. Tour these beautiful sites, glimpsing into our ancient history. Cliff settlements must be toured with a ranger, and you will need to buy tickets to go on the tours. Purchase your tickets online in advance at Recreation.gov.

3 BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL PARK

This impossibly sheer, narrow canyon in southwestern Colorado spans just 40 feet at the Gunnison River and 1,100 feet at the rim. Its rock walls plunge as deep as 2,722 feet. Intrepid hikers and rock climbers can venture into its depths on several very steep, unmaintained trails. Other visitors prefer to peer into the chasm from a network of trails lining the north and south rims. Anglers love the park for its fantastic and revered trout fishing.

4 ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

Founded in 1915, Rocky Mountain National Park spans 415 square miles and straddles the Continental Divide in the northern section of Colorado. It sits at the edge of Estes Park, Colo., a mountain town, on the east side and Grand Lake, a lakeside village, on the west. It's home to incredible wildlife, including moose and elk, as well as some of the nation's highest peaks. At press time, the park had not made a decision as to whether it will require visitors to purchase a timed entry pass, in addition to a park pass. Go to nps.gov/romo for updates.

PHOTOS: Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve (Courtesy NPS/Scott Hansen), Mesa Verde National Park (Grant Ordelheide), Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (Grant Ordelheide), Rocky Mountain National Park. (Adobe Photos)



ROCKY'S *Top Six*

Here are some of our favorite things to do
in Rocky Mountain National Park.

By Tori Peglar





1

WATCH THE SUN RISE

Wake up early to get to Bear Lake and hike 1.1 miles around the lake to catch the sun casting light over Hallett Peak and Flattop Mountain. Arrive 30 minutes before dawn.



2

HIKE TO OUZEL FALLS

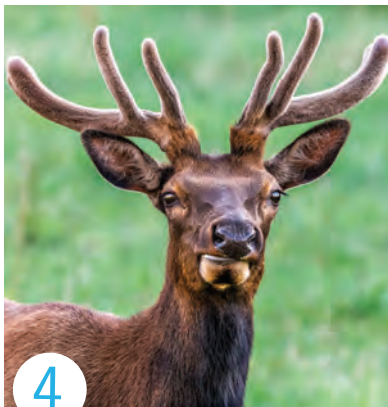
To see three waterfalls, head to the Wild Basin area of the park. Along the Wild Basin Trail, you'll see Copeland Falls, Calypso Cascades and Ouzel Falls. It's a 5.4-mile out-and-back moderately rated trail.



3

GO HORSEBACK RIDING

Saddle up at Glacier Creek stables, the only stables inside the park, which are run by Hi Country Stables.



4

WATCH WILDLIFE

Spot moose in the Kawuneeche Valley along the Colorado River and in the willows west of the Continental Divide. Note: this area will be recovering this year since parts of it burned in the fall 2020 East Troublesome Fire.



5

SEE THE SUNSET

Stop at the Alpine Visitor Center at the top of Trail Ridge Road and take a short hike up for an amazing Rocky Mountain sunset.



6

HIKE FROM GRAND LAKE

Adams Falls trail is a .3-mile hike along the East Inlet Trail. If you continue on the trail, you'll find yourself in a large valley with a river, small ponds and incredible views. You can walk for miles before turning back.

NOTE: At press time, the park had not made a decision on whether it will require everyone to have a special timed entry pass, in addition to a park entrance pass, in 2022. Check nps.gov/romo for updates. PHOTOS: Hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park (Grant Ordelheide), Sunrise near Hallett Peak (iStock), Ouzel Falls, Horseback riding, Elk, Trail Ridge Road sunset, Adams Falls (Grant Ordelheide)



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Four Ways

INTO ROCKY MOUNTAIN

Spanning the Continental Divide, Rocky Mountain National Park
has four entrances, three on the park's east side and one on the west.

By Tori Peglar

1 BEAVER MEADOWS ENTRANCE

On the park's east side lies the Beaver Meadows Entrance, the most direct entrance from Estes Park, a town that sits right outside Rocky Mountain National Park. An hour's drive from Boulder and two hours from Denver, the lively Estes Park is the closest town to the park on the east side.

Open year round, the Beaver Meadows Entrance is the most popular and is accessed by Hwy. 36. Stop by the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center to get information, books, maps and backcountry permits, as well as to catch the park shuttle.

2 FALL RIVER ENTRANCE

On the park's east side, Old Fall River Road, a mostly gravel road with a speed limit of 15 mph, allows you to take your time to admire the scenery. Like the Beaver Meadows Entrance, it's just a few minutes from Estes Park's downtown.

After 11 miles, you'll go over Fall River Pass at 11,796 feet and reach Trail Ridge Road, a 48-mile road that winds up the mountains to a high point of 12,183 feet. Get to the Fall River Entrance by driving on Hwy. 34 west from Estes Park. Stay on Hwy. 34 as it becomes Trail Ridge Road to enjoy a spectacular tour of the park's incredible landscapes.

3 WILD BASIN ENTRANCE

Because the Wild Basin Entrance is about a 30-minute drive south of Estes Park, most park visitors never visit the Wild Basin area. But it's a great entrance for those traveling the Peak-to-Peak Highway from Nederland, Colo., who don't want to join the crowds in Estes Park. It's a wonderful area to explore eight lakes and three waterfalls.

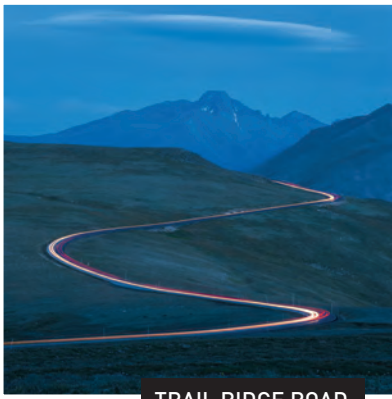
To reach the Wild Basin Entrance from Estes Park, head south on Hwy. 7. If you get to Allenspark, you have gone too far. Park staff advise not to drive RVs here. The last stretch to Wild Basin is a narrow, gravel road that becomes a single lane in places.

4 GRAND LAKE ENTRANCE

This entrance brings you away from the traffic of Estes Park to one of Colorado's most authentic towns, Grand Lake. It's the only entrance on the park's west side and is just minutes from Grand Lake.

Tucked in the folds of the Rocky Mountains and anchored by a stunning lake, this town is lined with locally owned shops, restaurants and hotels. You won't find major grocery stores here [although you can drive 25 minutes to Granby and shop at its City Market]. What you will find is old-fashioned charm combined with great hiking and boating activities on Grand Lake. Luckily, the downtown was spared in the 2020 East Troublesome Fire.

At press time, the park had not made a decision as to whether it will require special timed entry passes, in addition to the park entrance fee, for 2022. Please check nps.gov/romo for updates.



TRAIL RIDGE ROAD



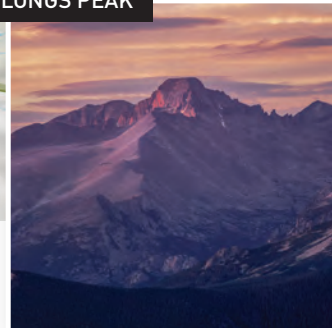
BEAR LAKE



ESTES PARK

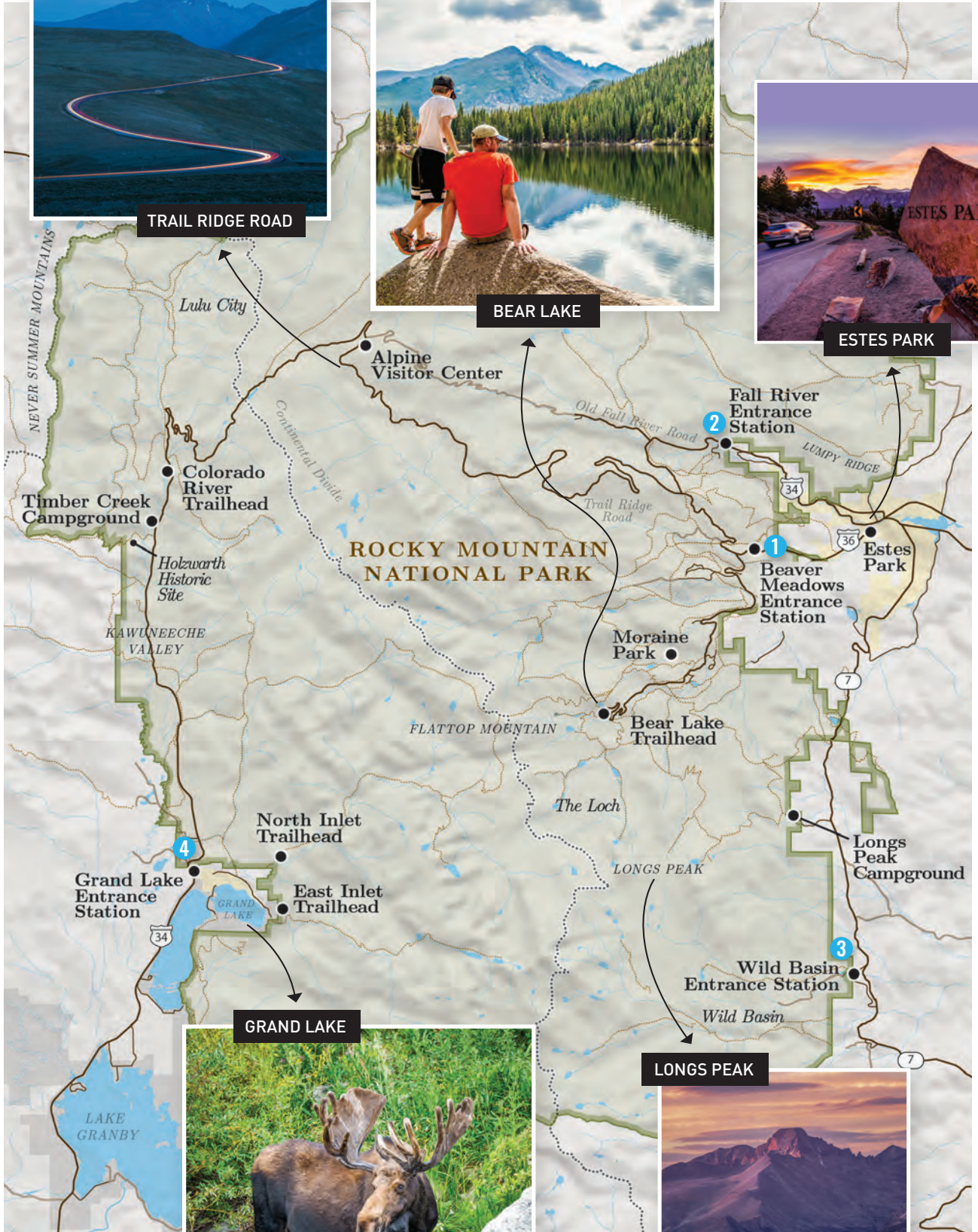


GRAND LAKE



LONGS PEAK

PHOTOS: Bear Lake [Marilyn Lambertz, Tamron Photo Contest], Estes Park sign [Depositphotos], Longs Peak, Moose in Grand Lake, Trail Ridge Road [Grant Ordeheide]



Map by Peter Sucheski



LET LIFE TAKE ON A WHOLE NEW POINT OF VIEW

YMCA of the Rockies—Estes Park Center is a natural paradise
bordered on three sides by Rocky Mountain National Park.
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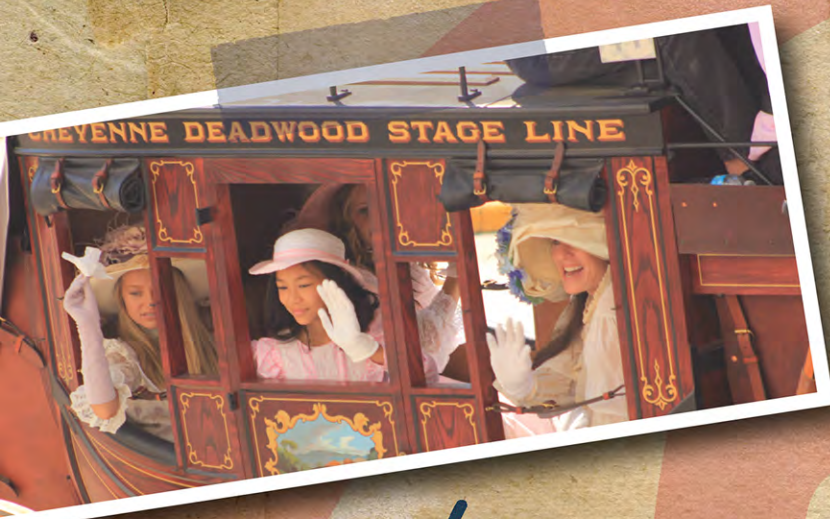
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TOP 6 AT GREAT SAND DUNES

From sledding down dunes to watching the sunset, here are the best things to do.

By Mikaela Ruland



1

EXPERIENCE THE DUNES

Explore the sand dunes by hiking for as long as you want since there are no trails. Start early during the summer to avoid scorching sand that can reach up to 150° F. Star Dune, North America's tallest dune at 750 feet, is a five-hour round-trip hike.



2

GET WET

Medano Creek is filled with water in early summer months, so splash and build sand castles near the dune fields. If the creek is dry, drive 12 miles from the visitor center to Zapata Falls trailhead. Hike .5 of a mile to wade in and see the 30-foot falls.



3

ATTEND A RANGER TALK

Spend some time at a free ranger program or on a ranger-led sunset hike. Weekly activities are posted online at nps.gov/grsa or at the visitor center.



4

GO FOR A RUGGED DRIVE

Explore Medano Pass Primitive Road, if you have a four-wheel drive vehicle. You'll encounter soft sand, rocky terrain and creek crossings.

Stop to hike to Medano Lake, a 3.2-mile, one-way trek from the trailhead.



5

FLY A KITE

The often-windy weather is ideal for kite flying, so bring your favorite kite and watch it soar over the blue Rocky Mountain skies.



6

SEE THE STARS

Visit the park at night to see a star-filled sky but leave glow sticks at the edge of the dune field by the trail near your car. That way, you won't get turned around trying to get back in the dark. Don't forget to pick them up when you leave.

PHOTOS: Great Sands Dunes National Park (Grant Ordelheide), Viewing the dunes, Medano Creek, Ranger Talk (Courtesy NPS/Patrick Myers), Medano Lake (Courtesy NPS/Art Hutchinson), Kite (Depositphotos), Milky Way over Great Sands Dunes National Park (Gaurang Telang, Tamron Photo Contest)



BLACK CANYON'S TOP 4

With incredible sheer black cliffs and a history-filled past, Black Canyon of the Gunnison is one of Colorado's most underrated destinations. Here are our top 4 things to do.

By Mikaela Ruland

1 Experience the Views

Black Canyon is named for its sheer black cliffs that plummet 2,000 feet to the Gunnison River below. Get a peek into the canyon's depths at one of the South Rim's 12 overlooks on Rim Drive. Our favorites? Chasm View, Painted Wall, Pulpit Rock and Sunset View.

2 Camp in the Canyon

For a truly unique camping experience, check out the East Portal campground. Situated right next to the river, you can fish "Gold Medal" waters, hike or just enjoy the views. Looking for a more intense adventure? Hike to the Gunnison River from the canyon rim. This experience is not for the faint of heart. There are no clearly marked trails, the journey is steep and often quite a scramble and frequent hazards include poison ivy, ticks and stinging nettle. Acquire a same-day backcountry permit at the visitor center and start early with plenty of water since temperatures can be extreme in the summer.

3 Take a Drive Through a Time Portal

Drive down into the canyon via the East Portal. This 16% grade road is paved the whole way but is very steep and includes many switchbacks. Leave your RVs at the top and take your personal vehicle down into the canyon. Before you go, grab a brochure on the history of the East Portal from the visitor center to learn about the amazing engineering feat that turned Montrose into fertile farmland.

4 Boat Down the River

Curecanti National Recreation Area, Black Canyon's sister national park site, offers ranger-led boat tours into the canyon every day but Tuesdays throughout the summer. This 1.5-hour tour will allow you to experience the magic of the inner canyon while learning about the geology, wildlife, history and water of the area. Reservations are required and it's strongly encouraged to make them several weeks in advance. Call (970) 641-2337, ext. 205 to reserve your seat.

PHOTO: View from Exclamation Point at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (Grant Ordelheide)

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MESA VERDE'S TOP SIX

Here are our favorite things to do
in Mesa Verde National Park.

By Mikaela Ruland



1

TAKE A SUNRISE TOUR

Beat the heat by seeing Mesa Verde's most adventurous cliff dwelling, Balcony House, at sunrise. A ranger will lead you up ladders and through narrow tunnels. Reserve your spot at [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov).



2

SEE PETROGLYPHS

Hike the 2.4-mile round trip Petroglyph Point Trail to see the only petroglyphs in the park. Start near the Chapin Mesa Archeological Museum.



3

GO FOR A DRIVE

Don't miss the six-mile Mesa Top Loop Road, a scenic drive that stops at 12 archaeological sites, including surface sites and overlooks into cliff dwellings.



4

SEE FOR MILES

Head to the highest point in Mesa Verde to see the view from the Park Point Fire Lookout. This structure was built in 1939 to provide early fire detection.



5

EAT IN STYLE

Make a reservation at the dinner-only Metate Room, an award-winning restaurant with locally inspired dishes and stunning views from the dining room.



6

ATTEND A RANGER TALK

Attend a ranger-led evening program at the Morefield Amphitheater to learn about the history of Mesa Verde. Check the schedule at the museum for start times every night in the summer.

PHOTOS: Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park (Depositphotos), Crawling through tunnel at Balcony House (Topher Yanagihara), Petroglyph Point (Adam Baker), Trailhead sign on Mesa Top Loop Road (Ken Lund), Park Point Fire Lookout (Depositphotos), Metate Room (Courtesy Aramark Mesa Verde), Ranger at Mesa Verde National Park (Courtesy Durango Area Tourism Office)