

**south**

## **Who says winter fun in Colorado is only found in the mountains?**

Treasures down

**By Sue McMillin**

*Special to The Denver Post*

While your neighbors head to the high country, why not turn your sights south this winter — where perfect pandemic escapes await within a few hours' drive from Denver?

Scenery? Gorgeous. Weather? Sunny and pleasant. Lodging? Many choices. Good food? Oh yeah, and a surprising variety. Social distancing? No problem. Beaches? Well, it won't be bikini weather but there are lakes.

You can easily build your own itinerary for a winter getaway to southern Colorado and alleviate cabin fever.

Check out the state's newest wine trail in Fremont County, go on a fossil hunt, linger over brunch on the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk in Pueblo, get your Pueblo chile fix, soak up the maj-

esty of the Spanish Peaks, visit an art car museum, camp where you can walk to a year-round golf course, or immerse yourself in the region's history. Or all the above.

We're offering a couple itineraries, and plenty of options to swap in or lengthen the trip. Who says a getaway is only two or three days?

A couple of cautions:

- We still are in a pandemic. Check websites or call places before you go, and be flexible. Tourism and business folks say they're trying to keep customers happy, but must abide by health department rules and stay solvent and healthy. Show 'em some love.

- Winters generally are mild and sunny in southern Colorado (did you know Cañon City boasts of being the Climate Capital of Colorado?), but it does sometimes snow and you could face similar wintry driving conditions as faced in the mountains. Check the weather and road conditions. Just a little of snow in the high winds that sometimes sweep across Interstate 25 south of Pueblo can quickly cause treacherous conditions.

**Arkansas River Valley**

## **A bit of romance: 2 nights in Pueblo, wine in Fremont County.**

Friday afternoon/evening traffic on I-25 through The Gap can be trying, but it's usually less stressful than I-70 into the mountains. Head to Pueblo after work (or earlier if you can).

There are plenty of motel and hotel options near U.S. 50, and parking is plentiful near the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo. But for just a few more dollars you can stay on or near the Riverwalk itself. There's a couple of Marriott options and the unique Station on the Riverwalk, a boutique hotel housed in Pueblo's former police station and jail along with The Clink lounge and Brues Alehouse.

The hotel offers seven "cells," some with fireplaces or private patios, and if you happen to have kids along there is one with authentic jail cell bunks. Stroll along the Riverwalk under twinkling lights as you survey your dining and cocktail options (reservations advised if you're splurging at Twenty One Steak).

If you're looking for one of Pueblo's famous sloppers — a burger smothered in green chile — walk a few blocks to the historic Gray's Coors Tavern on Fourth Street to taste the original. Is it the best slopper? Not going there. But you can find other recommendations online, including a Food Wars slopper contest, and a fun Chamber of Commerce video.

The Pueblo Riverwalk website has links to its restaurants, lodging and attractions, including a guide to the more than 50 pieces of art installed along it and at adjacent Lake Elizabeth. But save the art for the morning.

Tonight, take a short detour off the Riverwalk at South Union Avenue and head southwest toward D Street. Turn right and then left into the alley — Neon Alley, a must-see. The alley between B and D streets boasts the largest collection of neon lights between Times Square and Las Vegas. Pueblo attorney and native son Joe Koncilja began collecting neon signs years ago, and this is his passion on display, free of charge.

Breakfast options are almost nil on the Riverwalk but there are places nearby, including cafes on historic Union Boulevard and Solar Roast Coffee on North Main Street. Take your coffee and check out the art and other attractions in the 32-acre Riverwalk park. Or stop in the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center, where you will need a timed ticket for entry. But don't linger, you'll want to head west toward Penrose, Florence and Cañon City before noon to start touring the wineries and cideries.

Fremont County has long been known for its apple orchards, but vineyards have dotted the landscape since Italian immigrants settled in the region to work in the coal mines. Now vineyards are being nurtured again and several

boutique wineries have recently opened. Efforts to create a wine trail and market the area as a wine and hard cider destination were just getting underway when the pandemic shutdown hit, but things have opened back up a little, and the owners hope to offer weekend tastings through the winter, said Justin Jenkins, owner of Western Skies Winery in Penrose. Jenkins opened his winery about a year ago, and Christina and James Roth opened Brush Hollow Winery in March — and almost immediately had to shut down. They have a large outdoor patio and have added an outdoor fireplace with a plan for fireside tastings. They've joined with four other wineries (cideries are classified as wineries) in an effort to bring people to the region for tastings. Saturday afternoon is your best bet to find most of them open. They're all within about 20 miles of each other, and offer snacks, food trucks or food from nearby restaurants.

You can start in Penrose at Apple Valley Cider Co., just off Colorado 115 on Broadway. Then move on to C Squared Ciders, which moved from Denver to Penrose last year and recently opened its tasting room. Western Skies is nearby and Brush Hollow is just to the west, on the other side of Colorado 115.

Then head south on 115 through Florence toward the southern edge of Cañon City for a stop at Legatum Cellars, which has its own park and gazebos. The final stop is at the largest and most established, The Winery at Holy Cross Abbey in Cañon City, which opened in 2002. The gift shop is open daily, but reservations are required for tastings because of social distancing requirements. Winter tastings will be on a newly winterized front porch, with an al fresco menu available from the Abbey Events Center kitchen, said founding partner Sally Davidson.

If you've munched along the wine trail you're probably ready to head back to Pueblo, but you could grab dessert at Gooseberry Patch in Penrose.

Some food suggestions:

- Nirvana, Cañon City, for great Indian food, especially the vegetarian selections. Warning: they are true on the hotness scale; Indian hot is face numbing.
- The Owl Cigar Store, Cañon City, an old-style diner, not a cigar store. Reminiscent of White Castle or Wimpy burgers, with small burgers, great fries and the best milkshakes for miles. Closes early.
- Gooseberry Patch, Penrose, for that great comfort food: fried chicken. Do yourself a favor, share the huge four-piece dinner and save room (maybe) for homemade pie. Or just have pie. You're welcome.
- Happy Endings Caboose, for a luscious crepe, sweet or savory. (Currently open limited hours Friday through Sunday.) On Sunday, have a leisurely

brunch at Brues Alehouse and before driving home head east on Santa Fe Drive (Business 50) to stock up on some Pueblo goodies, such as Pueblo chiles, pizzelles (including red or green chile varieties) and potica, at local farm stands and bakeries. Options include: Millberger Farms, Mauro Farms & Bakery, and Peppers and Petals.

Family variation: One night in Pueblo — the kids will enjoy pizza at Angelo's Pizza on the Riverwalk and Neon Alley, then head to Cañon City for a train ride and some fossil hunting on Saturday and Sunday. The Royal Gorge Regional Museum & History Center has an online exhibit on the fossils of Fremont County that you can watch before you head out on a fossil tour. Call ahead to make an appointment for a one-hour, in-person visit to the museum.

The Garden Park Fossil Area, about 6 miles north of Cañon City, is one of the most important spots in the U.S. for the study of Late Jurassic dinosaurs; it's a short hike to the site where some of the most intact Stegosaurus skeletons were found. West of town is the Dinosaur Experience, with science-focused displays and interactive activities (reopening March 1). It's close to the Royal Gorge Bridge and Park, the region's most well-known attraction and worth a visit if you haven't been there.

The Royal Gorge Route Railroad departs from Cañon City and runs through the gorge beneath the famous bridge. The train has added cars to promote social distancing. Daily departures include lunch trains, with breakfast and dinner trains and specialty trains added throughout the year; reservations are encouraged as trains often sell out in advance. And afternoon tea is available during weekends at the railroad-owned and newly restored Royal Gorge Mansion. Reservations are open.

Mountain Biking option: One night in Pueblo and head to mountain biking trails around Cañon City. Fremont Adventure Recreation has maps and suggestions for all levels. There's yearround biking — except when trails are muddy.

For end-of-the-day refreshment: • World's End Brewing Co., Cañon City, for craft beer and food. Try the Blood Orange Rising IPA, Mac & Cheese Bites and Southwest Eggrolls.

- Canon City Brews & Bikes, Cañon City, has a beautiful, spacious patio and a variety of Colorado craft beers, great wings and street tacos. It's closed right now, but check the website for updates; here's hoping they figure out a way to reopen.

- Florence Brewing, Florence, for great beer and food trucks on an extended patio. If the weather's bad, grab a couple of crowlers and pizza from Papa's Italian Restaurant and take them to your lodging place.

## Spanish Peaks region

### Art and History: 2 nights in Trinidad.

I suggest an early-morning departure so you can take in the grandeur of the Spanish Peaks ([spanishpeakscountry.com](http://spanishpeakscountry.com)) as you approach Trinidad. North of town, take exit 27 and head west on County Road 44 for about a half mile to visit Ludlow, a coalmining ghost town and site of the April 20, 1914, massacre of striking coal miners and their family members. An estimated 25 people were killed, including women and children. The United Mine Workers have erected a memorial at the site.

In Trinidad, you'll find other memorials to miners, including a sculpture of a canary in a cage. Miners often carried the birds into mines with them because the birds succumbed to poisonous fumes quickly, a warning for miners to get out. The Southern Colorado Coal Mining Memorial & Museum has been closed during the pandemic, but you can walk around the outdoor monuments near Convent and Church streets.

Trinidad has several hotel and vacation rental options, but if you're looking for something with a touch of local history, try the Tarabino Inn bed and breakfast in the El Corazon de Trinidad Historic District.

The Visit Trinidad website is an invaluable tool for planning your visit and is usually pandemic- updated. It lists restaurants that have remained open or reopened and what services they offer, such as dine-in, take-out or curbside pickup. It also provides a guide to the town's architecture, museums and Space to Create program, which is providing affordable housing to artists. Although the public galleries have not opened, artists are living in the prominent downtown complex. While browsing the architecture, galleries and shops downtown, be sure to drop into the renowned A.R. Mitchell Museum of Western Art. It is housed in the former Jamieson Dry Goods Store, which has its original pressed-tin ceilings and wood floors. Mitchell, an illustrator and artist, was born in Trinidad.

On your walking tour, take note of the Fox West Theatre, which was purchased by the city in 2018 and is undergoing renovation. The theater also produced a virtual show, "Fall Fanfare," which you can find on its YouTube channel.

Another must-see stop is Art Cartopia, where you'll find a collection of art cars. And just what is an art car? True to Trinidad's quirkiness, the museum offers a roundabout explanation, but essentially says it's not a float because a float is towed, not driven. Anyway, it's zany and a visit just might bring you back for the annual (except not this year) Artocade — a parade of art cars.

One thing to remember about Trinidad is that it takes art seriously. Not in a snobbish way, but in an all-inclusive way. Conventional, contemporary, zany. It

all works in Trinidad, which was in the 1960s the home of the artist colony of Drop City (actually it was in a pasture outside of town, but the connection — and pride — persist). Test it yourself. Sit down at one of the town's decorated street pianos and play a tune. It's there just for that purpose. During the pandemic shutdown, the community created a virtual art salon that offers a taste of that inclusiveness.

Restaurant options in Trinidad include:

- Sita's Kitchen, for a wonderful selection of vegan food.
- Colie's Bakery, to satisfy that sweet tooth with a lovely morning pastry or cookie.
- Moose's Social Club and Martini Bar, a locals' favorite that bills itself as a place for everyone with "light gourmet touches, nothing fussy."
- Trinidad Smokehouse, for steaks and ribs.

Camping and golf variation: If you've got an RV, book a spot at Lathrop State Park near Walsenburg and you can walk to the adjacent golf course. (The city golf course and park share an entrance). Play some golf, soak in the vistas and make a daytrip to Trinidad or Walsenburg for some browsing and a meal.

Check out the Museum of Friends to see contemporary art, and pick up some to-go beer at the Crafty Canary Brewery.

The Walsenburg Golf Course has a clubhouse and restaurant that are open year-round, so you don't even have to cook at the campground. Campsites without a golf course also are available at Trinidad Lake State Park.

Highway of Legends option: Weather permitting, take the 82-mile Highway of Legends (Colorado 12) from Walsenburg to Trinidad. Give yourself time for stops in LaVeta, Cuchara and Cokedale along the way. Before you go, download the audio tour on the free TravelStoryGPS app. TravelStoryGPS also has audio tours for LaVeta and Walsenburg.

In LaVeta, pick up some pandemic supplies (masks, scarves) at the Shalawalla Gallery, which also carries other lovely, normal times items. In Cuchara, check out the county-owned Cuchara Mountain Park at the base of the old Cuchara ski area. It provides access to Forest Service land, so take along snowshoes if you're so inclined.

Also, the Panadero Ski Corporation is working to refurbish a lift for transport to higher terrain. Check the progress on its Facebook page.

Bicycling option: Mountain biking trails are being added in the Spanish Peaks region, including some that are planned for the newest state park, Fisher's Peak

(more fully opening in summer). But it's already a haven for gravel biking. From Trinidad you can access 1,600 miles of gravel routes. The often dry and sunny winter weather often makes for more pleasant riding than the hot summer months. *Sue McMillin is a long-time Colorado reporter and editor. Now a regular columnist for The Denver Post and a freelance writer, she lives in Cañon City. Email her at [suemcmillin20@gmail.com](mailto:suemcmillin20@gmail.com).*

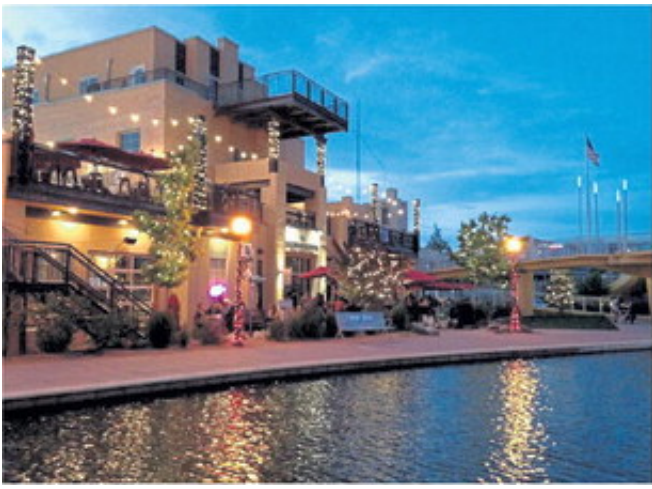
### **SOUTH from page C1 to C3**



**Just off the Riverwalk in Pueblo you'll find Neon Alley, a passion project of Pueblo native Joe Koncilja, an attorney. Viewing the collection is free. *Sue McMillin, Special to The Denver Post***



**Above: Wildly decorated art cars are displayed inside Art Cartopia in Trinidad on Nov. 7. The museum is home to about 40 cars, featured in an annual Artocade in town. *Rachel Ellis, The Denver Post***



**Right: Brues Alehouse is a popular stop along Pueblo's Riverwalk. Adjacent Station on the Riverwalk is a boutique hotel in the renovated old police station and jail. Sue McMillin, Special to The Denver Post**



**There are numerous memorials to Trinidad's mining past in town, including the Coal Miners' Memorial. Sue McMillin, Special to The Denver Post**



**Justin Jenkins, right, owner of Western Skies Winery, talks to visitors during a wine tasting in December 2019. Jenkins and other area winery and cidery owners are creating a regional Wine Trail. Sue McMillin, Special to The Denver Post**





**Passengers admire the sights along the Arkansas River during a ride on the Royal Gorge Railroad in February 2020. *Sue McMillin, Special to The Denver Post***

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