

Gunnison County, Colorado: Snowshoeing and More

by Jim Fagan

My wife and I recently had the opportunity to get away from Texas for a few days of snowshoeing in western Colorado. We had snowshoed in Colorado many times, but never west of the Continental Divide by more than a few miles.

Normally, we drive to Colorado for snowshoeing. Due to time constraints and distance to this locale, we decided to fly to Colorado Springs and rent a car. Crowds and security lines are minimal, yet they have everything you need in one building within easy walking distance.

Walking down the concourse, you can't miss a spectacular view of Pike's Peak, as well as other snow-capped mountains dotting the horizon. We were getting excited by then. Rental car counters are directly across from baggage claim and cars are parked right outside. We had our car and were on our way within 30 minutes from deplaning. You can also fly directly to the Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional Airport. We just got a good deal to Colorado Springs and didn't mind the drive.



Driving from Colorado Springs to Crested Butte takes about four hours. Take Highway 115 South to Highway 50 and go west. Beautiful scenery makes the fairly long ride worthwhile. You enter the Arkansas River Canyon after leaving Cañon City. There are spectacular rock formations and views of cascading rapids as you parallel the picturesque Arkansas River. On previous trips, we have even spotted Bighorn Sheep, so keep your eyes open for wildlife.



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After exiting the canyon you go through Salida, one of our favorite Colorado towns. If you have time, drive down some of the tree-lined streets where you will see some well-maintained early 20th Century bungalows. For a good meal at a reasonable price, try the Country Bounty Restaurant, located on Highway 50 on the left heading west. The Buffalo Burgers are great.

On the map, the drive from Salida to Gunnison looks like an easy, 65-mile drive. However, a “little” obstacle called Monarch Pass can, at times, be a significant challenge. The outbound trip was no problem – roads were plowed and clear.

Our return trip was another story entirely, as the area had just been hit by a major snowstorm. The decision to rent an all-wheel drive vehicle proved to be the right one. Going west, once you get to Gunnison, turn right (north) on Highway 135 for an easy 28-mile drive through the Gunnison Valley to Crested Butte. You gain about 1,100 feet in elevation, a gradual climb with no steep or winding mountain roads.

Crested Butte: A Mountain Gem Off the Beaten Path

Arriving mid-afternoon in Crested Butte left time to explore the town with the help of Beth Buehler, Public Relations Director for the Gunnison/Crested Butte Tourism Association. Beth took us around the small but charming town that is inhabited by only a little less than 1,500 permanent residents.



The entire Crested Butte area has a population of about 3,800. Of course, this number swells during the winter and summer tourist seasons. Our only previous visit to Crested Butte was in the summer, about twenty years ago. That is too long to go between visits. Crested Butte has many excellent examples of Victorian architecture.

For you history buffs, be sure to visit the Crested Butte Mountain Heritage Museum, located in the middle of the town in a building that opened as a

hardware store in 1883. Exhibits chronicle Crested Butte's history as a mining and ranching community. Included in a nominal fee, you get a brochure mapping out a walking tour of the town. For more information, go to <http://www.crestedbutte.com>.

If you're looking for chain establishments for food or lodging, you won't find them here. That's part of the attraction for many visitors. Lodging runs the gamut from small hotels and inns to cabins and B&Bs.

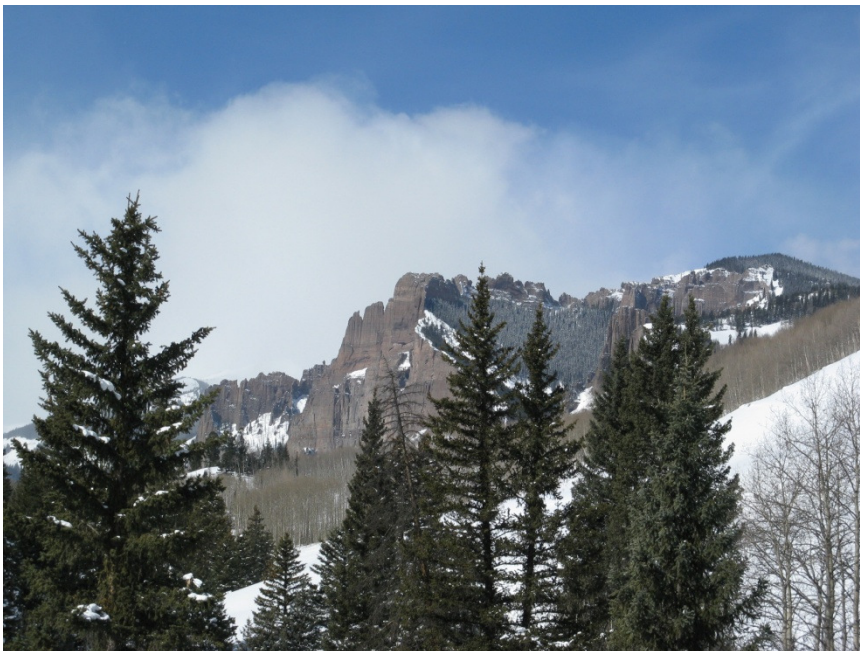
As for restaurants, there is one to suit most tastes and budgets. We stayed at the Old Town Inn on the South edge of town. Family run, it was clean, affordable, and comfortable. A good breakfast and fresh warm cookies in the afternoon were welcome. The staff was friendly and eager to supply us with information about the area. It is located within easy walking distance of a stop for the free shuttle bus, an excellent way to get around town or to the ski area.



At Brick Oven Pizzeria and Pub, you will find excellent pizza and salads. Pitas In Paradise serves Mediterranean cuisine. There are many other dining options, from plain to exotic.

Mount Crested Butte

The community of Mount Crested Butte is just three miles north of the town of Crested Butte. It essentially consists of the ski area, related lodging and retail facilities. Condos, hotels and restaurants are situated right at the base of the ski area. The big plus of this arrangement is the



convenience of being able to ski in and ski out, as well as having everything you need in one compact area. Crested Butte Mountain Resort will celebrate its 50th anniversary in November of 2011.

While not as large as some ski areas along the I-70 corridor, it is nonetheless a major ski area with 16 lifts and a vertical drop of almost 3,000 feet. Snowmaking is available on much of the terrain if needed to supplement the average annual snowfall of 300 inches.

In addition to downhill skiing and snowboarding, CBMR also offers a terrain park, ice skating, tubing, bungee trampolines, and yes-snowshoeing tours. For additional information, log onto <http://www.skicb.com>.

Atlas Snowshoe Tours

Crested Butte Mountain Resort has on-site snowshoeing tours as an alternative for those not interested in skiing, or skiers wanting to take a day off to try something different. The cost of the tour is \$75, which includes the services of an experienced guide, one ride up on a ski lift, snowshoe and pole rentals, water, and a light snack. By utilizing the ski lift, most of the snowshoeing is either flat or gradually downhill. This makes it ideal as an introduction to snowshoeing.



No experience is necessary as the learning curve for snowshoeing is almost non-existent. Tours leave from the base area at 9:45 a.m. and 1:45 p.m. The tours last about two and a half hours. Call 1-800-544-8848 or visit <http://www.skicb.com>.

We joined an experienced local guide, Mel Harper, for a morning tour. We were most impressed with her friendly demeanor and knowledge of the area. Once we were off the lift, we put on our snowshoes and headed for the wooded areas. There, you quickly forget that you are in the midst of a major ski area.

Snowshoeing in a forest of aspen and spruce trees transports you to a different state of mind. Mel pointed out various animal tracks in the snow and trees with bark that had been stripped and eaten by porcupines (which actually sleep in those trees). Snow conditions were perfect for our tour, which ended all too soon. Moonlight snowshoe tours are available when the moon is full in December, January, February and March. Instead of riding the chairlift, you will be transported up the mountain on a snowcat.

After our snowshoe tour, we had worked up a good appetite. We met Erica Reiter, marketing project coordinator for Crested Butte Mountain Resort for lunch at the 9380 Restaurant – located at Elevation Hotel and Spa. During a delicious lunch, Erica briefed us on most of the winter and summer activities at Crested Butte Mountain Resort.



Adaptive Sports Center

One of the most interesting things about our recent trip to CBMR was visiting the Adaptive Sports Center. We met with Erin English, director of marketing and communications for the Center. She took us on a tour of the facilities and showed us some of the equipment used by individuals with disabilities ranging from autism to visual and physical impairment.

Programs at the center are in operation year-round. What we saw was focused more on winter activities. There are skis and ski devices that have been adapted to accommodate various disabilities.

One program that really caught my attention was the Roger Pepper Camp for teenage burn survivors. These young people, many of whom have endured countless surgeries and treatments, come to Mt. Crested Butte to enjoy snowshoeing outings led by staff and volunteers at the center.

What a special way this is to provide these youngsters an outlet for focusing on something other than the physical and emotional trauma they all face. Erin's descriptions of these camps, and the positive reactions on the part of the participants, were truly touching.

Some photos from a recent camp are included in this article. Watch for a separate article about the Adaptive Sports Center in a future edition of Snowshoe Magazine.

Visit <http://www.adaptivesports.org> will tell you more about programs at the Center.

Crested Butte Nordic Center

After leaving the Adaptive Sports Center, we met with Keith Bauer,

director of Crested Butte Nordic Center. The center is located in the town of Crested Butte and is one of the stops on the free shuttle bus route. Opened in 1987, the center has seen an average of 11 percent increase in customers per year over the last five years.

Activities offered at the center include cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and sledding. There are even competitive junior ski and biathlon programs. The center has 50 kilometers of trails groomed for both classic and skating styles of skiing.

There are no dedicated snowshoeing trails, but snowshoers are allowed to use the skating lanes of the ski trails. Snowshoe rentals are available for a modest cost. More information on rentals, lessons, and pricing is available at <http://www.cbnordic.org>. While snowshoeing is not the main attraction at the center, it is on the map and has great potential for growth.



Freelancing Snowshoeing in the Gunnison Area

On our last full day in Gunnison County, we decided to drive down the valley to the Gunnison area to find a trail or two for our favorite kind of snowshoeing – striking-out on our own via forested trails. Beth Buehler had recommended trails at Mill Creek, about 17 miles northwest of Gunnison.



Take highway number 135 north out of Gunnison for four to five miles. Then take road number 730 (Ohio Pass Road), which will be on your left. Go north on 730 about eight miles until you get to County Road 727. If you get to mile marker No. 9, you have gone a little too far. Turn left on County Road 727, go about five miles and it will end at the trailhead.

We stayed on the main trail, finding it to be a gradual ascent through the Gunnison National Forest. This was like hitting the jackpot of snowshoeing; a perfect day, excellent snow conditions, and the only sounds were made by our snowshoes.

Eventually, the trees on the trail's right side thinned out. There we were treated to a spectacular view of a sheer rock formation known as The Castles. The trail back to the parking area is mostly downhill, thus offering a reward for the uphill trek during the first part of the hike.

A word of caution: The road leading to the trailhead will be snow covered in the winter, so exercise proper care.

One last attempt for more snowshoeing was at the Hartman Rocks Recreation Area, located on the South edge of Gunnison. It is heavily used by the locals. It consists of 8,000 acres of trails that can be used for hiking, biking, snowshoeing, and cross country skiing – depending on snow cover. Much of it is in open areas, dotted by sagebrush. Snow cover was thin enough that we felt snowshoeing wasn't a good option that day. The best time to snowshoe at Hartman Rocks would be after a major snowstorm.

After a good night's rest at the Holiday Inn Express in Gunnison, we packed up to head east over a very snowy Monarch Pass. Unlike the trip west to Crested Butte, this one proved to be an adventure. We arrived safely back home, thinking we had just scratched the surface of possibilities in Gunnison County. That leaves unexplored trails for future trips, in both winter and summer.





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