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Road Trip through Beautiful Ancestral Territory

17 posts

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By [Alex Berger](#)
[location Colorado, USA](#)



Sandwiched into a pickup we took to the road for thirteen days to eat, fish and explore the beauty of the Colorado Rockies and the San Juan Mountain Range. As fall set in and the aspen leaves changed, the incredible scenery re-affirmed that no matter how far I wander, I will always be a Colorado country boy at heart.

Colorado, USA

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[location Click to see the location of this post on the story map.](#)[location Cortez, CO 81321, USA](#)

After two years scattered across three continents my brother and I returned to the US. Two years previous he and I left within three days of each other. For me, it was time to start a Master's Degree at a Danish University. For him, it was the start of a two year enlistment in the United States Peace Corps which deployed him to do health education in rural Zambia. Our return to the US was filled with excitement, curiosity, and a hint of trepidation. Eager to have the family back together we did what we always do as a family — we took to the road and began a thirteen day road trip from Prescott, AZ up to Estes Park, CO.

The road trip took us through our ancestral territory, over high mountain passes, along the headwaters of some of North America's greatest rivers, and through relaxing aspen groves. It was a wonderful adventure along back roads spent fishing, eating, and exploring the beauty of one of the most gorgeous places on earth — the Colorado Rockies and San Juan Mountain Range. It also meant long hours with the four of us sandwiched into our white Chevy Crew Cab pickup truck. A trusty companion that opened up back roads and dirt paths to us.

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Alex...

[location Cortez, CO 81321, USA](#)

Our first stop was Cortez, Colorado. A funky little service town full of wonderful people, and incredible southwestern charm. It's also where both my brother and I were born, and will always hold a special place in my heart as "home". On the second evening in town an amazing thing happened: one of the harsh storms that tore across Colorado and lead to massive flooding in the northern part of the state passed over us. The windblown storm raced across the open plains and then crashed against the San Juan Mountains. The resulting sunset was unlike anything I've ever seen before. The world turned golden as rain, and humid haze formed a magical mist that crawled past the Sleeping Ute Mountain and out over the open plains. This photo captures a sliver of that moment.

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[location US Highway Fs Road 535, San Juan National Forest...](#)

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Just outside of Cortez is the sleepy town of Dolores. It straddles the Dolores river, and is perhaps most famous as the place that gave us Osprey backpacks. A 30 mile drive from the town up and along the west fork of the river left us winding through stunning aspen groves, and high altitude meadows as we were surrounded by the jagged, and richly colored rocks of the San Juan Mountain Range.

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[location County Road 38, San Juan National Forest, Dolores, CO...](#)



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The clouds stayed with us, a shawl to cloak the mountains and keep us warm, though luckily they refrained from drenching us in a torrential downpour.

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[Trout Lake, Uncompahgre National Forest, Colorado...](#)



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Our path eventually led us over Lizard Head Pass and to Trout Lake - a snowmelt fed, turquoise lake that rests in the crook of mighty mountains. The rich dark soil of the exposed lake bed quickly reminded us just how dire the recent droughts and lack of heavy snowfall has been. It serves as a stark contrast to the knowledge that heavy flooding was sweeping across the northern part of the state, and with the low hanging clouds that drifted across the mountaintops.

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[location Telluride, CO, USA](#)

Our road trip traced its way delicately through the San Juan mountains. We were in no rush to head north, and took every opportunity to pause and fish, wander, and explore dirt roads and small streets. Eventually we arrived in Telluride - a city that the locals say got its name from the old timers who referred to the area as to-hell-you-ride. The advent of electricity, heating, and paved roads have changed a once harsh destination into one of the southwest's most desirable. We paused in a small rib shop my folks had found during a previous trip and for \$20 were greeted with a heaping mound of some of the best ribs I've had anywhere. All accompanied by one of my favorites - fried okra.

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[location Imogene Pass Road, Uncompahgre National Forest...](#)



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Along the way to Ouray we were greeted by a mixture of magical sights. Though I've seen a lot of mountains, the raw beauty of the San Juan Mountain Range remains one of my favorites — only challenged by the rugged beauty of places like their Patagonian cousins.

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[location U.S. 550, Uncompahgre National Forest, Ridgway, CO...](#)



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When not ringed by mountains, we found ourselves pulled forward by the rich black of wet pavement and tinted by the vibrant colors of bright rainbows.

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[location Ouray, CO, USA](#)



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Situated deep within a side canon, the small town of Ouray rests atop famous hot springs. The town is at the base of a white knuckle pass and surrounded by rugged nature. It sits as an interesting contrast between civilization and nature. As I walked the town near sunset, enjoying a small group of five wild deer that had wandered into town to feast of the townsfolk's flower gardens I was met by the rising moon. The view left me feeling as though I'd somehow stumbled into a portal and been transported to some other planet or time.

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[location 9800 Highway 347, Montrose, CO, United States](#)



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Perhaps the greatest surprise of the trip was an impulsive decision to explore a National Park we saw signs for from the road. The signs promised a canyon just outside of Gunnison. The landscape suggested something tame and unimpressive but we decided to explore it in the hopes of finding a good lunch spot. To our surprise the winding road soon crested a small hill and then began to wrap along the edge of one of the most jagged, primitive, and gorgeous canyons I've ever seen.

In many ways the Black Canyon of the Gunnison was as impressive as the Grand Canyon, though smaller in size its contrasts and raw nature are every bit as compelling. Given just how impressive it is, I can't believe that it is virtually unknown. It is truly one of Colorado's great secrets.

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[location Hotchkiss, CO, USA](#)

As we left the Canyon and wound up towards its headwaters, and then double back along its north rim, we were greeted by a winding road that clung to the side of a cliff and left us with stunning views over the Colorado plains. That view, especially just before sunset, served as an exciting contrast to the Canyon's winding folds.

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[location Trail Ridge Rd, Grand Lake, CO 80447, USA](#)



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Our luck, and the weather held as we arrived at the mouth of the Rocky Mountain National Park on the first day that Trail Ridge Road over the pass and down to Estes Park re-opened.

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[location Trail Ridge Road, Rocky Mountain...](#)

While many of the side roads remained closed due to damage from the previous week's disastrous flooding we found ourselves met by a nearly empty National Park full of wild animals, crystal clear streams to fish, and thin air with long views.

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[location Trail Ridge Road, Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes...](#)



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Winding through the national park, trail Ridge Road is said to be one of, if not the highest paved road in the continental United States and at 12,183 feet I believe it.

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[location 505 Colorado 149, Gunnison, CO 81243...](#)

Having reached Estes Park and come within 11 miles of Wyoming, we began our slow journey home. As we did, the weather cooled slightly and brought with it the rich yellows and deep oranges of fall. The color of aspen leaves changing, as they stand in stark contrast with blue skies, and their white and black bark, is something that has inspired paintings, poems and countless songs. This is the view from just outside Lake City.

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