

Out & About: Estes Park

by Sandy Perlic

It never fails: every time I drive out of the Big Thompson canyon and spot the awesome mountain peaks serving as a picturesque backdrop to the tiny town nestled beneath them, I have visions of moving to Estes Park. A house among the fragrant pines, with a view of the mountains, would seem like paradise. My daydreams inevitably vanish, though, with the too-practical realization that I really can't afford to follow that dream. Fortunately, making frequent trips to this wonderfully-situated town near Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) is within my budget.

When my family and I visit Estes Park, we nearly always venture into RMNP first (www.nps.gov/romo/; \$20 for a weekly pass). No matter the season, a drive through the national park provides stunning views of forests and craggy mountain peaks at nearly every turn. And we're sure to get a peek at the resident wildlife: elk, deer, bighorn sheep and often a fox or marmot.

We love to soak in the views by taking a drive up the Old Fall River Road in the summertime (closed October to June 30) to the Alpine Visitor Center, and then take Trail Ridge Road back down toward the Beaver Meadows Visitors Center. These two roads lead to lots of short hikes to tease us out of the car, but our favorite walks have to be on the picture-perfect trails circling Bear Lake (0.6 mile) and Sprague Lake (0.5 mile) off of Bear Lake Road. These trails are fairly level and easy to navigate, even for our young children. The trails' popularity, though, means parking lots are often full in the summer, and taking a free shuttle bus from the Park & Ride across from the Glacier Basin campground may be advisable.

After some good exercise and fresh mountain air, we'll head into Estes Park for a bite to eat. We love the pizza and family-friendly atmosphere at Bob and Tony's Pizza (124 W. Elkhorn), the great burgers and barbecue at the Grubsteak (134 W. Elkhorn) or the tasty Mexican fare at the Grumpy Gringo (1560 Big Thompson).

If we're in a tourist-y mood, we'll wander along Elkhorn Avenue and peruse the many T-shirt and art shops. The Wild Spirits Gallery (148 W. Elkhorn) has beautiful framed nature photographs that I stare at as long as my children will let me, and I'm captivated by the colorful glasswork and pottery, and the original paintings displayed at Earthwood Collections (141 E. Elkhorn) as well.

The buttery smell of caramel corn wafting into the street is the only invitation we need to venture into one of the best snack shops in Estes: the Caramel Crisp Shop (108 E. Elkhorn). With a large variety of flavored popcorns, homemade chocolates and creamy fudge, as well as bins of candy to choose from, this small shop manages to hold my kids' attention for record amounts of time.

Time permitting, a stop at one of Estes Park's more interesting diversions, the Stanley Steamer museum may be in order (www.stanleymuseum.org; free, donations accepted; in the Lower Stanley Village near McDonald's). With two Stanley Steamers (the famous steam-powered automobiles) on exhibit and many informational displays, it will entertain anyone with an interest in history or cars.

Before we leave town, we've made a bit of a tradition of making two more stops. Dick's Rock Shop (490 Moraine Avenue) has a great selection of rocks for everyone

from hobbyists to serious collectors, and just seeing the store brings out the rock collector in my boys. And on the outskirts of town we love to stop for a game of mini-golf at Cascade Creek (\$7 for ages 12 and up, \$6 for kids; 2250 Big Thompson), one of our all-time favorite mini-golf courses. It boasts two wonderfully scenic courses set alongside the Big Thompson River, with some great water features.

Sidebar:

Travel Tip

If you're looking for something different to do this summer in Estes Park, Suzy Blackhurst, communications officer for the Estes Park Convention & Visitor's Bureau, suggests you check out some of the great live entertainment and festivals Estes has to offer:

Beginning in mid-June, Estes Park plays host to a variety of musicians every day of the week. Most concerts are free. Get a complete schedule of events at www.EstesParkCVB.com.

New to Estes this summer is a live theater production called The Rocky Mountain Revue, billed as a "western musical revue and vaudeville show." Get more information at www.nationalparkplayers.com.

Don't forget the Jazz Fest & Art Walk May 19-20, the Wool Market June 16-17, the Scandinavian Midsummer Festival June 30-July 1, or the Rooftop Rodeo July 10-15. Find more information at www.EstesParkCVB.com.

Blackhurst also highly recommends taking an educational seminar from the Rocky Mountain Nature Association. Courses are held in Rocky Mountain National Park, and range from photography to art to wildlife identification. Go to RMNA's website at www.RMNA.org for more information.

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