

2-Week Fall Road Trip Itinerary Through Colorado, New Mexico and Moab, Utah - 2021 **From kimdawley.com**

Visit date: September 2021

Our 2-week time frame drove our itinerary – there were a couple of places we cut out and many places we would have loved to spend more time – but overall it was a dream trip that made us feel we had truly experienced the area. We visited 4 national parks (Rocky Mountain, Arches, White Sands, and Carlsbad Caverns) and 9 cities/towns in Colorado (Denver, Estes Park, Breckenridge, Aspen, Glenwood Springs, Telluride, Ouray, Colorado Springs, Manitou Springs), 1 in Utah (Moab), and 6 in New Mexico (Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Alamogordo, Carlsbad, Roswell, Taos).

Even though much of our time was spent in Colorado, this started out as a New Mexico trip to see White Sands National Park and Carlsbad Caverns. Denver turned out to be the most economical option to fly both in and out of, and not adding a different drop-off destination fee made the rental car cost more reasonable as well. And Colorado has been on our visit list for a while. It wasn't until I was looking at possible routes that I realized how close Moab, UT was to Colorado. I've tried to fit Arches into previous trips 3 times and each time it was just too far, so I was delighted to make it work this time.

We took this trip in Fall 2021 and we were fully Covid-19 vaccinated but not yet eligible for a booster. Outdoors or socially distanced indoors with enforced masks were key criteria for this trip; we may have chosen different things to do if we were visiting under different circumstances. I also want to mention that since we planned to visit 4 National Parks, the \$80 annual America the Beautiful parks pass paid for itself just on this trip.

Here you'll find a summary of our driving distance between towns and what we ended up doing in each place. Since I researched a good number of options, in this pdf itinerary (coming soon) I included "Other Options" at each stop, in case something fits better for your family. I've also removed all pictures in the pdf to make it easier to print.

Day 1, Saturday - Denver

My favorite thing we did in the Denver area was see the [Red Rocks Park and Amphitheater](#) in Morrison, CO. Seeing the stadium itself was so unique, but we especially enjoyed seeing the Visitor Center's display of all the performers that had played there. If you can time your visit to see an actual show I'd definitely do that, or even time it for a morning yoga class seems like it would be a cool experience. Pro tip: be sure to check out the concert schedule, even if you're not planning to see one. We were originally going to come here on the way back into the city in 2 weeks, but discovered it closed at 2pm that day for a concert that evening, so we'd have been out of luck.

We used street art as a way to explore various parts of the city, driving to different areas (like RiNo and LoDo) and walking the streets, which was cool. We also attempted to see other areas

like the 16th Street Mall and Confluence Park, but we ended up doing a lot of walking (12,800 steps and it was 97 degrees in the sun) without seeing much. If we had it to do again we'd have rented the scooters everyone was tooling around on to cover more ground and have a bit of a breeze while doing so.

One other thing I seem to have forgotten in our year away from traveling – trying to squeeze in more on day one due to gaining more hours because of a time zone change, doesn't mean you still didn't still get up at 4am to catch your flight and deal with the tiresome travel process including an especially frustrating post-pandemic 2 hour wait in the airport Alamo to get your rental car. When your body says ENOUGH, listen.

OTHER DENVER IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **tubing at Confluence Park**/South Platte River, 2250 15th Street, Denver. Photo Op – Confluence Park: to get the city skyline in the background, Confluence is best photographed in the afternoon. *Never found tubing, assume closed in September.*
- **City Park**: 2001 Colorado Blvd, Denver, CO. Denver's premier regional park contains the Denver Zoo; the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and IMAX; tennis courts; horseshoes; baseball, football and soccer fields; two lakes; historical monuments and statuary; picnic sites and two playgrounds. Photo Op – While you're there, you'll be treated to unbeatable views of Denver's skyline, framed by the spectacular Rocky Mountain Front Range. You may not find a better panorama in all of Colorado.
- **International Church of Cannabis** (crazy colors), 400 S Logan St, Denver, Colorado
- **The 1up** – Arcade + bar. Most the games are just .25
- **Colorado Convention Center**: for photo beneath "I See What You Mean," aka "The Big Blue Bear." Position your subject underneath the bear, stand back about 50 feet and point and click for a true "Only In Denver" photograph.
- **Rocky Mountain Arsenal** – 6550 Gateway Road, Commerce City CO, Open sunrise to sunset. Here, you can drive your vehicle 11 miles through the refuge, and view some true Colorado wildlife! Try to go early in the morning, or right before sunset to get the best chances of seeing wildlife. Especially if it is a super hot day, you won't see much during the peak afternoon hours. You might see bison, deer, elk, bulls, coyotes, prairie dogs, pelicans, and more! Keep your eyes peeled, you never know what might pop out! Free archery range. Free to visit. https://www.fws.gov/refuge/rocky_mountain_arsenal/
- **Colorado State Capitol** - One of the coolest things about visiting the capitol is that you can stand at exactly one mile above sea level. There are actually three different markers on the steps, with the one on the 13th step being the most recent and most accurate. Snap a photo here to show you properly visited the Mile High City. Inside, you'll see beautiful stained glass windows that depict scenes from the history of Colorado. Be sure to climb up the steep 99 steps to reach Mr. Brown's Attic, where you'll enjoy a 360-degree panoramic view of downtown and the Rocky Mountains.

- Tour the **US Mint**. Their ticket window opens up at 7AM and you can only get tickets for the same day. There are six tours a day at 8, 9:30, 11, 12:30, 2, and 3:30. Tours are free. *May not be available due to Covid.*
- **Elitch Gardens** theme park – open Sat/Sun in Sept, <https://www.elitchgardens.com>, \$45pp, \$20 parking
- **Samana Float** – Interesting idea. You can even get \$15 off your first float by using this referral code: mf-686841. Single 90 minute float for \$70. *Option for last day.*
- Catch a **Colorado Rockies game at Coors Field** – there are reasonably priced tickets available on our last evening of the trip. *We decided it would have been too hectic leaving early to get to the airport.*

Day 2 – Sunday, Rocky Mountain National Park

Drive: Denver to Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park Entrance: 1.5 hours (65 miles)

The first important point is that you currently need a [timed entry pass](#), which opens a month out. We wanted to explore Estes Park first, and weather highs were in the afternoon (63 vs 43 lows), so we got our pass for 1pm. I later read there can be afternoon thunderstorms (and there were during our visit), so not sure the best way to time things in September. We spent some time in town in Estes Park and had lunch in town before heading out to RMNP.

Since we are more walkers than hikers, we chose the easiest hike, **Bear Lake** (.7 miles), and possibly adding on the hike to **Alberta Falls** (1.6 miles). Unless you are leaving first thing, these popular hikes require parking at the park & ride and taking the shuttle to the Bear Lake trail head. The rain started coming down when we boarded the shuttle. Fortunately there was a shop at the trail head with RMNP baseball hats and clear rain ponchos. The rain slowed to a drizzle before we finished circling the lake, but we decided not to continue on to Alberta Falls.

When we got back to the car our other priority was to drive the Trail Ridge Road. Our goal was to make it to the **Alpine Visitor Center**, the highest visitor center in the USA at just under 12,000 feet. The sun came out and this drive was truly stunning – I highly recommend it. We turned around at the Visitor Center and drove back, as our hotel room was in Estes Park. We had good reasons to stay in Estes Park instead of Grand Lake (the town at the other end of the Trail Ridge Road), mostly that after Labor Day there are risks of the Trail Ridge Road being closed for snow. But in hindsight I wish we had driven the entire Trail Ridge Road and stayed in Grand Lake. This is in part because our Estes Park evening plans didn't pan out – the Stanley Hotel (from *The Shining*) had a guard at the entrance and we were just hoping to wander around; it was too cold (for us) for the evening Learn to Fly Fish lesson I had scoped out but not booked, and it was our least favorite hotel of the trip. Also, if you're there at a time when road closure is not a possible problem, Grand Lake will shave a half hour off your next day drive to Breckenridge.

OTHER ESTES PARK IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- Spend morning enjoying beautiful Estes Park. Explore the many locally owned shops downtown, take a walk along the river, and tour the Stanley Hotel (333 E Wonderview Ave., Estes Park, CO) which inspired Stephen King's *The Shining*. *We didn't do the latter.*
- **Learn To Fly Fish** –In the town center area of Estes Park is **Kirk's Flyshop**, a family-owned outfitter that will set you up with all the gear you need and take you out on a guided fly fishing experience. \$27.75pp fishing license, \$200 for the 2 hr evening spot at 6:30pm <https://www.kirksflyshop.com/evening-hatch-2-hours/>

Day 3, Monday – Breckenridge, CO

Drive: Estes Park to Breckenridge (2 hrs, 45 mins)

Ah, weather. When we were keeping an eye on the weather leading up to the trip, Breckenridge seemed to change every single time we looked. Turned out there was good reason for that. We had cloudy/chilly periods (that we dressed for), periods of bright sun that lifted the temperature enough for us to shed layers, and rain showers that would last 15-30 minutes and then stop. But even with those weather challenges, we LOVED Breckenridge!

As you can see it's a beautiful town with art pieces everywhere, the shopping on **Main Street** was our favorite – creative, unusual items that didn't break the bank, and we really enjoyed the food, which again was reasonably priced. The rain kept us off the Blue River Bike Path ride we were planning to take, but we did really enjoy seeing the [Breckenridge Troll](#), which is an easy 400 foot walk from the Stephen C West Ice Arena parking lot south of town.

One other important note. Although it wasn't an issue for us in Breckenridge, it has become increasingly difficult to eat out on Monday nights as MANY restaurants take that as a night off. Decide early where you want to eat, call to double check hours, and ask if they take reservations.

OTHER BRECKENRIDGE IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Blue River Rec Path, Breckenridge to Frisco** – Pedal the paved Blue River bike path from Breckenridge to Frisco along the river and the shores of Lake Dillon through colorful aspens and towering pines. Beer lovers can make it a biking brewery tour by customizing the ride with stops at [Breckenridge Brew Pub](#), and [Broken Compass Brewery](#) in Breckenridge, and [Outer Range Brewery](#) and [HighSide Brewing](#) in Frisco. After taking in views of the lake or embarking on an afternoon SUP or kayak session, bike back or hop on the free [Summit Stage](#) bus (they have bike racks) back to Breckenridge. Plan for 10 miles one way or 20 miles total if you take on the round-trip journey.
- [Broken Compass Brewery](#) is a great place to spend the afternoon. Bring your own snacks, grab one of the games they provide and order a flight to try all their delicious brews! Play some chess or make new friends playing Cards Against Humanity at one of the communal tables. The bartenders are friendly and knowledgeable.

- **Boreas Pass** - While there are a ton of amazing scenic drives near Breckenridge, Boreas Pass is the quintessential fall experience. This captivating scenic drive tops out at 11,481 feet, and is full of history, scenery, a trip across the continental divide, high alpine views and aspens galore. The Section House marks the top of the journey and if you are ready for some fresh air — park the car and take a hike on Black Powder Pass or pack a picnic lunch to enjoy above treeline. Road is dirt/gravel – consensus seems to be that cars can do it but better in an 4x4.

Day 4 – Tuesday, Aspen and Glenwood Springs

Drive: Breckenridge to Aspen (2.5 hrs – via Independence Pass), Aspen to Glenwood Springs (1 hr)

The drive from Breckenridge to Aspen was actually a highlight of the day, as we drove via [Independence Pass](#), which summits at 12,095 feet and crosses the continental divide. The drive had some fun Aspen fall foliage, both at the vista pull-outs but also all along the drive. And as you can see it was VERY windy at the top.

We arrived in Aspen in time for lunch, and we had an excellent meal at [Hickory House Ribs](#). The weather was perfect to eat outside, my rib-eye steak was so good and Tom loved the ribs special. Before tip the meal was just under \$40 (with soda, not alcohol), which we thought was reasonable for the delicious food.

The main thing I wanted to do in Aspen was see the [Maroon Bells](#). This seemed more complex to time than it ended up being, because most sites advise taking a bus to shuttle parking, and the shuttle needs a reservation. We kept an eye on shuttle availability and ended up driving right to Aspen Highlands (\$5/hr to park - \$15 total) and bought standby tickets (\$20 each vs \$16 in advance) and we hopped right on the next bus. Our total cost was \$55, which was well worth it for us to not have to worry about arriving 45 minutes in advance as advised with reservations. The walk in and around Maroon Lake is easy and paved and only about a mile, but we decided against the longer walks we were contemplating (3 mile scenic loop trail and 3.5 mile Crater Lake) as the weather was having on and off showers and we didn't want to get stuck in forecasted thunderstorms. If you're staying in Aspen overnight, I'd try to do Maroon Bells early so that you can drive right there and avoid the shuttle and I've read the lake reflections are breathtaking first thing (water was choppy when we were there), but that just didn't work with our plans.

We took a quick stop by the Silver Queen Gondola, even though the gondola itself is closed during the week, just to see the area. We thought we might have a drink on the Ajax Tavern patio, but they were setting up for a private event. So a few quick photos and we were off to Glenwood Springs where we were staying for the night.

OTHER ASPEN IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Silver Queen Gondola** at the base of Aspen Mountain Ski Resort. In the winter months this area is the pulse of Aspen, even in fall it's a great spot to check out. Ride the gondola or grab a drink on Ajax Tavern's patio. Did you even go to Aspen if you didn't take a photo at the base of Aspen Mountain? **ONLY BE OPEN WEEKENDS IN SEPTEMBER.**
- **Hunter Creek Trail** is an easy and enjoyable hike with lovely fall colors. This hike is just under 2 miles with minimal elevation change. With the trailhead only 15 minutes from downtown this is a wonderful option for a quick morning hike.
- **North Star Nature Preserve** – This is a great trail with gorgeous yellow aspen trees to visit during Fall in Aspen. It's not too crowded and is a great place to have a fall photoshoot.
- The **John Denver Sanctuary** is nestled in the heart of Aspen, next to the Rio Grande Park, adjacent to Theatre Aspen's summer performances. Its location, near the Roaring Fork River, makes this an ideal spot for quiet meditation or a family picnic. The Song Garden features many of the iconic singer's lyrics etched into native river boulders placed in a perfect circle to represent the circle of life as a score of music. At the circle's center, a single Colorado Blue Spruce was planted which symbolizes the spirit of John. It is an idyllic location and visitors will not wonder for long where "Rocky Mountain High" originated. Please note there is no public parking at the sanctuary so we recommend that you utilize the nearby parking garage at 427 Rio Grande Place.

Day 5, Wednesday – Glenwood Springs and Moab, UT

Drive: Glenwood Springs to Moab (3 hrs)

We spent the morning in Glenwood Springs checking off a bucket list item – white water rafting!

We chose the 75-minute [Shoshone Rapids Short Trip](#), which still gave a taste of class III-IV rapids and some gorgeous scenery without a half day commitment, as we weren't sure how tiring it would be. It was \$106 for us both and you check in 45 mins ahead for a talk on how to follow the various instructions from your guide. We really enjoyed our guide, who seemed very experienced even though she was finishing her first season there. Also loved that they had a photographer on land taking photos at different points on the trip – not surprising for those who know me, we bought all the photos (\$60) from our session. This was a great mix of rapids and then easy paddling areas, and ended up a highlight of our trip. Can't recommend enough.

We then had a 3-hour drive to Moab, UT, so our plan was to find a nice place to catch the sunset once there. Our original thought was Canyonlands, since we didn't have a full day slotted to otherwise visit, but we ended up stopping at [Dead Horse Point State Park](#), which has a reputation for amazing sunsets. This cost \$20/car whereas Canyonlands is included in our National Parks pass, but here we knew right where to head – to the overlook at the end. This felt very similar to Horseshoe Bend in Page, AZ, and both places have in common that it's hard to get a photo that does justice to being there. There were a decent amount of people but we were still able to social distance, and the sunset did not disappoint.

OTHER GLENWOOD SPRINGS IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Glenwood Hot Springs Pool** is best for families with children; exercising and swimming laps; fun and adventure on the water slides and those who enjoy large pools. **Iron Mountain Hot Springs** is best for adults and couples who want a beautiful, intimate setting; Families with older kids; People who enjoy luxury items at the pool and in the locker rooms. There are 16 different soaking pools with temperatures ranging from 98° F to 108° F. Each are filled with a hundred percent mineral water. The pools are connected by heated walkways for your comfort (so you are not hopping on freezing feet from pool to pool.) A Cooling Corner rains cool water on you to cool you between pools when you get too hot. 9am-10pm, \$25pp, 281 Centennial Street, Glenwood Springs, CO 81601
- **Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park's Alpine Coaster** - It not only offers a wild ride with a steep 3,400-foot descent, but also the opportunity to sit back and enjoy the scenic view whilst coasting along the rails. Unlike typical alpine slides, you can't fall out of the Alpine Coaster. The Coaster is affixed to its track, can make hairpin turns, and it can operate year-round due to its track system. **Address:** Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park, 51000 Two Rivers Plaza Road, Glenwood Springs, CO 81601, Note: Can't just buy the Alpine Coaster, all rides are \$61pp, park closed on 9/14, open on 9/15 10am-5pm https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/colorado/denver/alpine-coaster-near-denver/?utm_source=pinterest&utm_medium=social

Day 6, Thursday – Arches National Park, Moab, UT

We approached visiting [Arches](#) with the same planning and precision that we approached our one and only Disneyworld visit. This is key both because of traffic and temperatures (highs were in the low 90s). So this is the one time this night owl planned to be not only up but in the park for *sunrise*! Our goal was to see a maximum number of arches with minimal hiking, especially once the temperature climbed.

There was no one at the entrance booth when we arrived (so we didn't get the map or sign photo until the way out). We started with sunrise at Balanced Rock, and we had a detailed plan for the order with which to see approach the day. This was particularly helpful as we didn't think about the fact that we wouldn't have the park map to guide us. We ended up seeing 10 arches in all (Delicate, Pine Tree, Tunnel, Landscape, Partition, Skyline, North and South Windows, Double Arch, and Parade of Elephants).

We had contemplated heading to [Canyonlands National Park](#) after lunch as it's not far (30-40 minutes) from Arches. We were just going to drive around and walk the Mesa Arch Trail. But Arches was already closed and we didn't know if Canyonlands might be too, and a swim and nap just seemed more compelling. With such a busy trip itinerary, we definitely had to be willing to let go of plans and listen if our bodies were saying enough.

Day 7, Friday – Telluride, CO and Ouray, CO

Drive: Moab, UT to Telluride, CO (2 hrs and 45 mins), Telluride to Ouray (1 hour)

One thing I missed in my research was that this weekend was the **Telluride Blues and Brews Festival**. That might have been a very cool thing to do if we had tickets; but instead it just meant a LOT of people and traffic, and we didn't end up going to **Bridal Veil Falls** or on the free **Gondola** ride, which were our plans. That said, downtown Telluride was gorgeous and we had a nice lunch and enjoyed walking around the shops.

Then we took the hour drive to Ouray where we were spending the night. We went to the [Box Canon Waterfall](#), which is inside a slot canyon. This was fine for a short visit, worth the \$5 each admission, but also fine to miss if you find other things to do. We also checked out the cute shops downtown and had an excellent dinner at [The Outlaw](#). They fit us in without a reservation, but I'd suggest one. Their prime rib was excellent as was the garlic bread and margaritas. And the piano player was fun – highly recommend.

We ended the day taking in the town-run [Ouray Hot Springs](#), which stayed open until 10pm. It was a unique experience, though a bit pricey at \$18pp for how long we stayed. It looks like a collection of regular pools, but they're all warmed to different temperatures. It was pretty chilly outside, which minimized our pool hopping, but I'm glad we tried it. I had worried it would smell like sulphur but it didn't. It was especially cool that the geothermal water is sourced from the Box Canon waterfall we visited earlier in the day.

OTHER TELLURIDE IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- [Bridal Veil Falls](#) near Telluride is Colorado's tallest waterfall. It spills an incredible 365 feet down the canyon. To access this site, you do have to hike, but it's not extreme. It's less than two miles each way and takes most hikers less than an hour each direction.
- Possibly take a **4x4 jeep tour** to Bridal Falls (2 hour options and ½ day options) <https://www.telluride.com/play/activities/4x4-off-roading/>, <https://www.tellurideoffroad.com>
- Take a quick and **free gondola ride** from the town of Mountain Village to Telluride's box canyon, which is surrounded by mountains on all sides and showcases golden trees in every direction. Address: W San Juan Ave, Telluride, CO 81435
- **Downhill Mountain Bike the Village Trail** - After riding the gondola up, I highly recommend riding the scenic and iconic mountain biking trail, the Village Trail. This trail is best for beginner/intermediate riders and is filled with some of the most amazing views I've ever seen. As you descend, you'll be greeted with picture perfect views of mountains being framed by orange and yellow aspens.

OTHER OURAY IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Bachelor Syracuse Mine Tour**, 95 Gold Mountain Trail. Ouray, CO 81427, [970-325-0220](tel:970-325-0220), \$18pp, 10am-3pm hourly departure, The Bachelor-Syracuse Mine Tour walks you 1,500 feet horizontally into Gold Hill, rich in gold, silver, and other

precious metals. Guests are at all times accompanied by a thoroughly trained guide who has first-hand experience working the mine. <https://bachelorsyracusemine.com>

Day 8, Saturday – Albuquerque, NM

Drive: Ouray to Albuquerque (5.5 hours via Million Dollar Highway to Silverton and then through Durango)

Today was our longest drive, but then again, the drive was the event of the day. As with many of the scenic drives on our trip, they are made to sound really scary online, with lots of warnings about weather and tight fits on the hairpin turns. Luckily that did not scare us off; we had excellent weather and the views were spectacular on the so-called [Million Dollar Highway](#). We had some yummy donuts for breakfast in Ouray and lunch in Durango, but we were also glad to have some snacks in the car for the drive.

We drove straight to our planned Albuquerque activity of the afternoon, the **Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway**. It's \$29pp, which seemed a bit pricey, but we figured we could hang out for a bit at the top before making our way back down. However, when we saw just how PACKED the tram car was as we were walking to get in line, we bailed. It was the only time on our trip that we felt a planned activity was not Covid-safe, and to us it just wasn't worth it. Instead, we walked a bit around **Old Town**, and had some drinks at the [Sawhill Market](#), which had a fun vibe.

We ended up staying at a hotel on Route 66, **Sandia Peak Inn**, which was very kitschy and very cheap (\$85/night including tax). It has guest laundry, and that's how we ended up spending the time after dinner, which is key to factor in when you have a 2-week trip. Just know if you stay on Route 66 that the cars seem to enjoy revving their engines at all hours, so it wasn't our best sleep.

OTHER ALBUQUERQUE IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Chevy on a Stick**, Rt 66 roadside attraction, Gibson Blvd SE, Albuquerque, NM
- **Breaking Bad RV Tour**, 3 hours, \$80pp, <https://www.viator.com/tours/Albuquerque/Breaking-Bad-Tour/d28131-67241P1>

Day 9, Sunday – Santa Fe

Drive: Albuquerque to Santa Fe (1 hour each way)

We decided to make Santa Fe a day trip, not only because it's easier to have a few days when you don't change rooms every night, but also because staying in Albuquerque put us an hour closer to our Day 10 destination.

We had SO many interesting things on our Santa Fe to-do list, and we had to choose. So as much as I enjoyed the activities we decided on, Santa Fe (and its surrounds) is the area from this trip we can most see ourselves wanting to further explore on a future trip.

We ended up choosing to see two completely different museums. I have LONG been a fan of Georgia O'Keefe, so the [Georgia O'Keefe Museum](#) was my top choice to visit in Santa Fe. The tickets (\$18pp) become available for sale 30 days in advance, so keep an eye on availability. There was so much of her work that I was familiar with, but also lots that I wasn't, so I loved it. When we left the museum we walked around for a bit admiring the art everywhere.

We decided to make this a full-on art day, spending a couple of afternoon hours at the wild and wacky [Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return](#), self-described as a mind-bending, explorable art experience for people of all ages. It's pricey at \$35pp and requires a timed-ticket entry which we bought same day, but it was quite funky and is so unusual that I'm glad we went.

OTHER SANTA FE IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Drive the Turquoise Trail from Albuquerque to Santa Fe.** The Turquoise Trail, though, takes you up the long way, detouring via Tijeras and Route 14. Although the drive is only a little longer in distance, it'll take 1 hour & 40 minutes because of the lower speed limit. Officially, the [Turquoise Trail](#) starts in Tijeras, on historic Route 66, with a musical road as you drive eastbound. As your car passes over rumble strips at 45 miles per hour, tactile vibrations and audible rumblings are transmitted into your car, playing *America the Beautiful* clearly. The [Singing Highway](#) here is one of only two musical roads in the USA, making it worth the short detour. Continuing northbound on Route 14, you'll enjoy views of the gorgeous Sandia Mountains, where Sandia Crest overlooks the city at 10,678 feet. For something more eclectic, stop in at the [Tinkertown Museum](#), a folk museum of old signs, coin-operated machines, and miniature carvings. As you return to Route 14, you'll drive through history. Of the old mining towns, Madrid is the most stop-worthy. The town has come alive with arts and crafts. Enjoy shopping for unique jewelry made from local turquoise, sample organic chocolates, and try out homemade lotions and soaps. If you work up an appetite, this is also a great place to stop for a snack. Jezebel Soda Fountain has ice cream in locally inspired flavors. A great last stop on the Turquoise Trail is Garden of the Gods, a park that shows off the cool rock formations in the area.
- **The Railyard District** – a walkable area with shops, boutiques, art and murals, Saturday Farmer's Market
- The southwestern city of Santa Fe makes a great base for leaf-peeping, especially at the tail end of September into mid-October. The **Ski Santa Fe chairlift** is a convenient way to catch a panoramic view, as is a hike up the **Aspen Vista Trail**. You can also take a casual stroll through town along Alameda Street and the Santa Fe River Trail to see a rich palette of colors.

Day 10 – Monday, White Sands National Park

Drive: Albuquerque to Alamogordo (3.5 hours)

Visiting [White Sands National Park](#) is one of the destinations that drove this entire trip. One important scheduling thing to note is that WSNP is located next to the White Sands Missile Range and is subject to occasional last-minute closures for missile testing. We made sure to time our stay so that we could visit on either Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning if it was either bad weather or closed for missile testing. But the weather was perfect, so Monday afternoon and evening it was. Be sure to get sleds and wax – our AirBNB provided them. And note that the park gets more picturesque the further in you go, so don't be discouraged that it doesn't look like much heading in.

We took to heart the warnings that blowing sand and reflecting sun make it both easier than normal to lose your way and to quickly get dehydrated, so we never lost sight of the road. We drove the 8-mile **Scenic Drive** that takes about 45 minutes, walked the **Interdune Boardwalk** – an easy .4 mile ramp walk, and took the free, ranger-led **Sunset Stroll**. The most fun time we spent was walking barefoot on the dunes – unlike beach sand its not hot to the touch, but otherwise like the softest beach sand. Loved it! We also liked sledding, but never got up the snow sledding type of speed, but it was unique fun none-the-less.

A fun aside. On our way into town, we stopped in at [Pistachioland](#), primarily to see the world's largest pistachio.

I also wanted to give a shout-out to our AirBnb, Foothills Casita in Alamogordo, which we rated at 5 stars. It oozes cozy comfort, especially the bed. There were so many small touches, including a book with area recommendations; a basket with shampoo, soap, face masks, and slippers; and as mentioned, sleds and wax made available even before the 4pm check-in time. The owners live next store, so if you're fine with that I'd consider this an excellent choice.

Day 11, Tuesday – Travel Day to Carlsbad Caverns

Drive: Alamogordo to Carlsbad (3 hours, 15 mins)

In case we needed the morning to see White Sands National Park, all we planned on for today was to get to Carlsbad and see the ranger-led [Bat Flight Program](#) at sunset. The bat flight doesn't require reservations, doesn't allow any cameras or recording devices, and is completely silent once the bats start to fly. And it was an AMAZING, totally unique experience I would highly recommend. As much as I enjoyed the caverns, the bat flight was my favorite part of this destination.

I think it's important to mention that while we were very happy with our decision to see Carlsbad Caverns, it adds considerable distance and time to the trip, both down and back. If this is not as high a priority for you, this would be the easiest destination to eliminate, either to cut down on days or spend more time elsewhere.

This was the second night in a row that we stayed at a 5-star airbnb, The Bungalow on Blodgett, that I would totally recommend. From the outside you'd drive right by it, totally non-descript. But inside it was total comfort, starting with a/c on and soft jazz playing through the TV/sound

system when we walked in. The bed was very comfy as was the loveseat and chair, the kitchen was well-stocked, and boy that bathroom – a soaking tub, rain head shower, and very plush towels. Not cheap at \$210, but worth it, especially on a day that we spent more time than normal in the room.

Day 12, Wednesday – Carlsbad Caverns National Park and Roswell, NM

Drive: Carlsbad to Roswell (1 hour, 15 mins)

You do need timed entry reservations for [Carlsbad Caverns](#) proper. We got reservations to enter between 8:30 and 9:30am. We opted to take the elevator both ways (vs. hiking the natural entrance trails) and you explore the loop around the Big Room at your own pace. The best way I can describe it is relating it to my experience seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time – you’ve heard how big it is, but until you see it yourself you don’t quite grasp the majesty. Another similarity is that the photos don’t do it justice. Masks are required in the caverns, which we appreciated, even though we weren’t that close to people outside of the visitor’s center.

Once we left Carlsbad we headed to Roswell, which brings hokey kitsch to a whole new level. Though we expected this, I thought there might be a bit more substance of UFOs under the surface, but if so, we didn’t find it. I was impressed with how the whole town participates; I liked the light posts and give points to Dunkin’ Donuts for going all in, apparently Aliens Run on Dunkin’ too. A must do IMHO is a photo in front of the **Roswell ... we believe! mural**, found at [9058 W. 2nd St., Roswell, NM](#). If you’re looking for some fun Insta photos, then by all means spend the \$5pp to check out **Alien Zone: Area 51** at 216 N. Main Street (entrance is via the doorway to Cosmic Jukebox). We spent about 20 minutes here. The [International UFO Museum](#), also \$5pp, had a bit more about the story of Area 51, some docs from people who say they were abducted by aliens, some paraphernalia from the show Roswell, and a few alien sets for photos. This museum was more reading-intensive than I expected, which can be fun if you’re invested, but kids who aren’t won’t find much of interest.

Our main reason for going to Roswell was to get closer to Taos to make the Day 13 drive more manageable and let us do more in Taos. If I had it to do over, I’d stop in Roswell for about an hour, drive through Main Street, take a photo with the We Believe mural and see either the International UFO Museum or Alien Zone, and then keep driving further north, to either Santa Rosa (2 hours) or even Santa Fe (3 hours).

OTHER CARLSBAD IDEAS WE DIDN’T FIT IN

- **Sitting Bull Falls** – 45-60 minute drive outside of Carlsbad. See pinterest post about this. Be sure to check web site for hours before you go. Suggests early afternoon or late afternoon in summer. You can swim in the pools of the falls (rocks in the water are very slick even with water shoes). You WILL lose reception on way there so print directions. \$5/vehicle, have restrooms and limited picnic areas. **WRONG DIRECTION TO ROSWELL**

- **Living Desert Zoo and Gardens State Park** – plants and animals native to the Chihuahuan Desert, 9-5pm (last entry is 3:30), 1504 Miehls Drive N., Carlsbad, NM, 575-887-5516, \$5 entry fee

Day 13, Thursday – Taos, NM

Drive: Roswell NM to Taos (4.5 hours)

The long drive meant that we didn't have as much time in Taos as we would have liked, another reason I can see us coming back and spending more time in the Santa Fe/Taos area.

We really enjoyed driving along the Rio Grande, and especially along the dirt road that brought us up to the [Rio Grande Gorge Bridge](#). Once we got into Taos proper we walked around [Taos Plaza](#) and went to some very fun shops. I loved that art was everywhere we turned. So even though we didn't do as much here as other destinations, we got to see both some lovely nature and lovely art. And I expect we'll be back.

OTHER TAOS IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **Natural Hot Spring Next to the Rio Grand River** - there are a couple of prime warm hot springs that are right near town ranging from 90-100 degrees. These hot springs are known as Black Rock Hot Springs & Manby Hot Springs. Know that there is a good chance you won't have these to yourself, especially if going on the weekend. Furthermore, clothing is optional to these and out of the 10 people we saw in our time half were nude... How to get to **Manby Hot Springs**? Getting here can be rough, especially since residents were able to get the route changed on Google Maps to tell you to go the long and rough way! There are a few ways to get here, one is often fenced off (Apple Maps might take you this way), one is a mud bog and one is ideal but residents don't want you to go that way and sometimes a ranger can be there stopping people. The ideal way to get there, which you may get turned around from is through the Stagecoach Hills Neighborhood via Tune Drive. The hike from the parking lot to the springs isn't too bad at all being about a 15-20 minute walk. You will find two pool of which one is significantly warmer than the other, which is often the busier of the two for this reason. **Black Rock Hot Springs** - These are the easiest of the two to get to, which in turn can make them the busiest. Both pools aren't as perfectly situated along the river like Manby but still are very cool of course. If you don't have tons of extra time I would definitely come here as it is much quicker to drive to and just a 10 minute walk. I loved both hot springs and suggest even going during the week to avoid crowds. How to get to Black Rock Springs? With these ones you can trust Google Maps as it will take you right there. You' turn off of Highway 22 onto County Road B007 and follow the road up until John Dunn Bridge, going over the Rio Grande. From there you'll go left up a hill for 30 seconds and you'll see the small sign to park there. If you go to switch back to the right you've gone too far.

- Spa treatments:
https://www.elmontesagrado.com/i/downloads/The_Living_Spa_Menu.pdf
- Taos was apparently the epicenter for elk, coyotes, deer and bighorn sheep during our visit. We were lucky enough to be driving carefully at night or else there is a good chance we could have had a run-in.

Day 14, Friday – Colorado Springs and Manitou Springs

Drive: Taos to Colorado Springs (3.5 hours)

Colorado Springs wasn't even initially on our itinerary, but once I discovered it, there were so many cool things I wanted to see. We started with lunch at the hotel bar patio of the incredibly grand **Broadmoor Resort**. We had a yummy prime rib french dip and the grounds were gorgeous, but it was disturbing that not a single guest (other than us) or employee that we saw, inside or out, was wearing a mask. We didn't explore as much as planned for this reason.

The complimentary shuttle to **Seven Falls** leaves from the Broadmoor parking lot next to the Golden Bee Restaurant, tickets are purchased for \$16.50pp at the entrance gate (no online orders or reservations). The one-mile easy walk to the base of the falls is gorgeous natural scenery that has been impeccably landscaped by The Broadmoor. There are lots of stairs you can climb to view the falls from different vantage points, or you can do what we did and take the elevator. The falls themselves weren't as spectacular as others we've seen this year, but the surrounds made this a visit we loved.

We then headed to the very cool and completely free **Garden of the Gods**, which is only about 15 minutes north of Seven Falls. We stopped in at the visitor center before it closed at 5pm and then headed to the park. The rock formations really are breathtaking, and surprisingly unique – I thought it might be similar to Sedona's red rocks. We drove completely through, with a few stops for photos, and there were a few parking spots when we came back around so we walked around for a bit. It seems a lot of folks come here to walk after work so another time may be quieter. If you do nothing else in Colorado Springs, this would be my recommendation for where to spend your time.

We were driving through Garden of the Gods and I noticed a sign to turn this way for **Manitou Springs**, and on a whim I suggested we check it out for dinner. We'd already had a full day, and had no idea what to expect, and I LOVED the town. We parked easily, it was very walkable, there was so much cool art, and a babbling creek running through town, and stores carved into hillsides. During a trip that had many stores and restaurants closing early, I was delighted that so many of the shops were still open to explore, and we easily found a nice restaurant with outdoor seating that was the perfect end to the day. I have no idea what the options are to stay here, but I'd suggest you investigate it to compare with Colorado Springs.

OTHER COLORADO SPRINGS IDEAS WE DIDN'T FIT IN

- **The Royal Gorge Bridge** is the highest suspension bridge in North America at over 956 feet above the Arkansas River. You can access by walking or Segway. Other options to experience are an aerial Gondola, ziplining, or Royal Gorge Rafting. There is also the option of traveling on the Royal Gorge Route Railroad by train for 24 miles to really get an up-close and personal look of the gorge. When you purchase your tickets for the entrance (\$21.00), it comes with the aerial gondola ride that takes you across the gorge. 4218 Co Rd 3A, Canon City CO 81212 *OUT OF THE WAY, MAKES IT 3 HRS, 50 MINS FROM AIRBNB*
- **Cave of the Winds** gets its name from a cool breeze that emanates from the entrance. The cave was opened in 1880 and is now home to over 20 massive and lighted rooms. These spaces feature limestone, stalagmites, and other awesome rock features. Furthermore, the site features a 150 cliff drop with its Terror-dactyl ride, a Wind Walker Challenge Course, and the Bat-A-Pult ride that gives you an aerial view of the mountains. Discovery Tour \$22pp
- **Olympic Training Center** - What I love about this place is that you get to watch real Olympians in training! *Training center is currently closed.*
- **The Paint Mines** are odd and colorful geological formations about 45 minutes east of Colorado Springs. When you arrive you'll find flat, unsuspecting grasslands that suddenly open up to prehistoric clay deposits eroded into the quirky rock formations we see today. Today you can enjoy an easy walk along the the 3.5 mile loop through the hoodoos and natural spires. The park is free and open every day from dawn to dusk.

Day 15, Saturday – Colorado Springs and Denver

Drive: Colorado Springs to Denver (1 hour, 15 mins)

Our last day! Our flight out wasn't until 11:20pm, so our plan was to start early to make the most of our day.

We headed back into Manitou Springs first thing, to try [Rocky Mountain Beignets](#) for breakfast. We got the bites and I highly recommend them – perfectly bite-sized (and therefore not crazy messy), powdered-sugar yumminess.

First stop of the day was to the [Cheyenne Mountain Zoo](#) (GPS: 4250 Cheyenne Mountain Zoo Rd, Colorado Springs, CO.) You need to buy timed tickets in advance and we got ours from 9 to 11:30am. The idea of a zoo on the side of the mountain was what initially attracted me, without thinking about the fact that you're then climbing uphill to see exhibits – not a big deal but it didn't register for me. What we found the most unique about this zoo was the level of interaction with the animals, especially the giraffes. It wasn't cheap at \$34.75pp, but it did feel enough different from our local zoos that I was glad we went.

We headed toward Denver, but the next stop was complete indulgence for me. I get the [Sundance](#) catalog, and regularly peruse it but never buy. But, I saw that there was an actual retail store in Lone Tree, CO so I added it to today's itinerary. It was fun to try on different clothes and make note of the styles and sizes I like (and I picked out a few items for my

Christmas list). Sitting while I try on clothes is definitely one of Tom's least favorite things to do – thankful they at least had a comfy chair for him.

There were many things on our Denver list we didn't get to do the first day, but most were daytime activities vs. evening. So we landed on exploring and having dinner at the **16th Street Mall**. It was fine, with some cool lights and art, but given all the cool places we had visited, it felt like it could have been in any city vs. somewhere unique to Denver. We slept a bit on the red eye home, but luckily had all day Sunday to rest, nap, and get started on laundry. Excellent trip!