

Travel

## For the quieter side of the Rockies, go west

By Deborah Huso February 5

It is one of those perfect Colorado mornings — the sky a brilliant cerulean stretching for miles over a rough-and-tumble landscape of high desert and red rocks, the blue snow-capped peaks of the Rockies barely visible to the east. I am descending the high bluffs above the Colorado River just west of Hot Sulphur Springs, decked out in hip waders, determined to improve my fly-fishing game.

Under the careful instruction of Jeff Ehlert, owner of Winter Park Flyfisher, I am, within moments, thigh-high in the water, casting a silvery line over my head in delicate ellipticals, my fly grazing the surface of the water, attempting to lure some of the river's many species of trout or even a northern pike.

After several such casts, I see the line pull down, and I reel in hard, feeling the tug of the first catch of the day. My fish surfaces — a brown trout, beautifully speckled, and I capture him in my net for a close-up view before releasing him to try my luck some more.

---

Ad

---

This is the quiet side of the Rockies, the landscape of Grand County on the western edge of Rocky Mountain National Park. While most of the 3 million annual visitors to the national park head in via busy Estes Park, north of Denver, I've found a sweet spot — the far less populated landscape of Fraser Valley, Grand Lake, and the Arapaho National Forest to the west. And it's no more difficult to reach — an hour and a half drive or so from Denver International Airport.

Although the region is perhaps better known for its skiing than its warm-weather activities, what I find on the western slope of the Rockies are not only fly-fishing waters galore but also a mountain biker's dream landscape with hundreds of miles of single-track trails through forests of aspen and lodgepole pine. Jon Brickner calls the Fraser Valley the perfect spot for hard-core bikers, but there is plenty of riding here for the less experienced as well, including the placid and relatively flat Fraser River Trail, which connects Fraser with Winter Park. Brickner, an

accomplished local mountain bike racer (in addition to being owner of the local Winter Park Winery), takes me on about 10 miles of trails beneath Byers Peak just outside town.

As we hop over rocks and jump logs, I find myself hard-pressed to keep up with the wiry Brickner, who pauses periodically to wait for me as I traverse complex (to me) obstacles — a log bridge, a series of boulders, a steep ditch. “When you’re going over a rock, lift the handle bars,” Brickner calls to me. “That way it won’t hurt so much.” But I am too exhausted to lift anything, and by the ride’s end a couple of hours later, I’m feeling serious bike seat pain.

Cautiously, I ask him, “Do you bike like this every day?”

“Nah, this is a leisurely ride. I do the tough trails when I’m training,” he replies.

Awed and ashamed at once, I close myself into silence, eager now to return to my lodgings at the Winter Park Chateau, where I know I will have a mountain-view hot tub as well as wine and cheese awaiting me.

Ad

The next morning, I start my day with breakfast at Carvers in Winter Park. I’ve heard the locals tell tales of the cafe’s homemade cinnamon buns, though I find myself more intrigued by the fact it seems perfectly normal to have beer with breakfast here. Even though the place is open only till 2 p.m., it sports a full bar, and I enjoy eggs Benedict with avocado, although I elect not to try the spicy Bloody Mary this go-round given that I’m about to hit the trail for an ambitious hike in Rocky Mountain National Park.

After breakfast, I head north to the Grand Lake entrance of the park and take a seven-mile trek through the woods on the Green Mountain and Onahu Creek trails with retired local forester Roger Rood. A native of Wisconsin and an avid Rocky Mountain hiker, he plows ahead of me on the trail, as I initially gasp for air, having not yet acclimated to the elevation change from my much lower home town in Virginia.

After an hour or so, my lungs adjust to the thinner air, and we climb among lodgepole pines on steep mountainsides to find picture-perfect views of Mount Ida (12,880 feet) from Big Meadows. Along the way, we converse about marriage, divorce and death, as only two strangers in lonely woods will do. Along the trail we see remnants of an old wilderness cabin, the coppery rapids of Onahu Creek, and a lonesome moose grazing in the forest, oblivious to my attempts to capture his stature on film.

One doesn't have to rough it entirely on the western side of the Rockies, however. Newly updated cabins at Grand Lake Lodge offer long views over Shadow Mountain and Grand lakes just outside the national park, and for those staying farther south, the Winter Park Chateau provides luxury accommodations with evening socials and a hot tub with views of Mount Epworth and the peaks of the Arapaho National Forest.

For me, the hot tub presents a perfect way to end a pleasingly arduous day of hiking in the mountains and casting a fishing line in slow circles over my head along the Colorado. I settle into warm bubbles, a glass of wine in one hand, and gaze east to the wild mountains as the sun settles into the desolate plains behind me.

*Huso contributes to USA Today, U.S. Airways Magazine and FamilyFun Magazine. Her Web site is [www.drhuso.com](http://www.drhuso.com).*

### **More from [Travel](#):**

[A new Rocky Mountain high: Colorado open for cannabis tourism](#)

[Aspen's big shoulder season](#)

[Side Order: Celestial Seasonings factory tour, steeped in tea culture](#)

## **IF YOU GO**

### **Where to stay**

#### **Winter Park Chateau**

405 Lions Gate Dr., Winter Park

970-726-2884

[www.winterparkchateau.com](http://www.winterparkchateau.com)

Within walking distance of most of Winter Park's dining and activities, the chateau offers modern lodging with a slightly Victorian twist. The bennies here include a hot tub and afternoon wine and cheese. Rooms from \$125 a night.

#### **Grand Lake Lodge**

15500 U.S. Hwy. 34, Grand Lake

970-627-3967

[www.grandlakelodge.com](http://www.grandlakelodge.com)

The quintessential mountain lodge with its rustic (from the exterior anyway) mountainside cabins, many recently upgraded with tile showers, this lodge is only minutes away from the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. Rooms from \$140 a

night.

## **Where to eat**

### **Carvers**

78336 U.S. Hwy. 40, Winter Park

970-726-8202

[www.carvers-wp.com](http://www.carvers-wp.com)

The eatery is known for its cinnamon buns, eggs done any way you can imagine, and cocktails for breakfast ... or beer, if you prefer. Entrees from \$11.

### **Hernando's Pizza Pub**

78199 U.S. Hwy. 40, Winter Park

970-726-5409

[www.hernandospizzapub.com](http://www.hernandospizzapub.com)

Perhaps best known for the \$20,000 worth of \$1 bills posted on its walls, this is my fave for its Roma-style pizza, not unlike the freshly prepared pizzas I knew in Italy — sliced tomatoes, olive oil, minced garlic and basil, layered with mozzarella. Pizzas from \$10.75.

## **What to do**

### **Epic Mountain Sports**

Advertisement

78941 U.S. Hwy. 40, Winter Park

970-726-2868

[www.epicmountainsports.com](http://www.epicmountainsports.com)

Don't worry if you don't want to haul your mountain bike on the airplane. This local outfitter will cover you. They rent helmets and other bike gear as well. Bike rentals from \$23 for a half-day.

### **Winter Park Flyfisher**

601 Zerex St., Fraser

970-726-5231

[www.fraserflyshop.com](http://www.fraserflyshop.com)

Looking for a day on the water? Winter Park Flyfisher owner Jeff Ehlert will lead you to the region's best trout fishing waters on half-day and full-day trips. Guided trips from \$225.

## Information

For more information on outdoor activities on the western side of Rocky Mountain National Park, visit [www.grand-county.com](http://www.grand-county.com) or [www.playwinterpark.com](http://www.playwinterpark.com). For additional information on the national park, check out [www.nps.gov/romo](http://www.nps.gov/romo).

– D.H.

Ad

---

---