

Grand County mountains take your breath away

Melody Wren
Special to The CJN

For me, a pleasurable holiday balances exploring new sights and getting outdoor exercise, with a bit of adventure. Grand County, Colo., certainly met all those requirements and more.

Referred to as the Switzerland of the United States, Grand County is a two-hour drive from Denver, up steep mountain roads with the occasional hairpin that had my stomach churning, but were no problem for the studded tires.

Our destination was a well-appointed townhouse in Winter Park. When I travel, I often prefer to rent rather than stay in a hotel. The townhouse gave us a base to sightsee from, make breakfast in, and have snacks on hand to take with us when we explored. Situated directly across from the ski resort, the townhouse had fabulous views, and the location was central for travelling to nearby Fraser, Granby, Grand Lake, and Rocky Mountain National Park.

We only had to cross the street to ski, snowboard or take a snowcat tour (highly recommended.) Advertising its rentals as "luxury mountain lodging," Destinations West offers approximately 60 properties, with a wide range of choices and homes in Winter Park, Grand Elk, and Grand Lake. (Call 800-545-9378 or visit www.mtnlodging.com for more information.)

The focus in the area is skiing and other winter sports that celebrate winter. Grocery stores, cafés, restaurants and boutiques are filled with the sound of clomping ski boots, ski apparel being de rigueur.

Winter Park Resort is a sprawling ski resort with numerous chair lifts, restaurants, ski shops, a ski school, bars and cafés. We took a snowcat tour on a scenic route, travelling across the beginner, intermediate and expert ski trails, with plenty of stops for photo ops.

A snowcat is a 13-passenger, heated bus-like vehicle on monstrous treads that climbs sedately up and down almost vertical slopes as snowboarders and skiers whiz past. Such a great experience for only \$49 (US) per person. Winter Park Resort has many trails for beginners and experts, but if you don't snowboard or ski, you can take ski bike lessons or a snowmobile tour. (Reservations: 1-800-979-0332. www.winterparkresort.com)

There is nothing more unnerving than letting your little ones start ski lessons, but with the innovative Flaik GPS device, parents can relax as they track their toddler's every move while they are on the mountain. Winter Park Resort in Colorado offers private rentals of the GPS systems, and outfits every ski-school student and instructor with one.

Parents can track their children from the comfort of the lounge and compare last year's statistics with progress made this winter. They can also view individual trails, enjoy video playback and share the day on Facebook. Data



Horses at Devil's Thumb Ranch. The ranch is a great ski resort.

is available in near real time on the Flaik website, www.flaik.com. (For more information, visit www.winterparkresort.com.)

Everywhere I turned, there were mountain views that took my breath away, literally. The high elevation is nothing to ignore, as it can affect you physically, with headaches, dizziness and fatigue. A local pharmacist recommended "altitude adjustment" – Aspirin and lots of fluids – which did the trick. It's also effective if you start a course before you go.

Rocky Mountain National Park is beautiful to visit at any time of year, but particularly pretty in winter with its snow-capped trees. You can take advantage of many organized activities, including cross-country ski tours and snowshoeing tours with a park ranger. The Kawuneeche Visitor Center is located within the park, about a mile north of Grand Lake on Trail Ridge Road (Hwy. 34). It's a great base for a winter hike. (For more information about the park, call 970-627-3471.)

Grand Lake is a tiny charming village, the main street lined with log-sided stores and cafés. The aromas of the bakery-café lure you in, and the selection of freshly baked goods keeps you there. We ate lunch perched on willow furniture, admiring the mountain views (www.bluewaterbakers.com). You can also rent a house on the lake during the summer.

Devil's Thumb Ranch in Tabernash is a stunning, enormous ranch situated on 5,000 acres, offering so much to see and do, with 125 miles of groomed trails for cross-country skiing. If you have not done it before, sign up for a class with the ranch's very patient instructors. I forgot how much fun cross-country skiing is. I experienced a curious combination of bitter cold threatening to snap my nose off at every step, combined with full body sweat from the physical exertion. After spending a couple of hours on the well-groomed trails, we were pampered at the spa, then staggered into Heck's Restaurant.

Our waitress held yoga classes between meals in a sunny room surrounded by windows. We practised mountain pose with mountain views, a wonderfully relaxing end to an enchanting day.

The ranch also offers horseback riding, sleigh rides and ice skating. If you are too tired to leave, you can stay in one of the ranch's elegantly rustic rooms, or rent a cabin with your family. Many of the rooms had a view of the Continental Divide. (800-933-4339, www.devilsthumbbranch.com)

Allow time before you head back to airport to check out Cherry Creek Mall in downtown Denver. The anchor store is Nordstroms, and the mall includes Eddie Bauer, Sephora, Cole and Haan, Restoration Hardware, Anthropologie, Talbots and J Jill.

Melody Wren's trip was sponsored by Grand County Tourism, www.visitGrandcounty.com.

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Kids with Flaik GPS system. [M. Wren photos]