

Summertime "staycations": A guide to local trips that won't break the bank

By Laura Snider

Originally published 12:00 a.m., June 7, 2008

Updated 06:30 p.m., July 9, 2008

***** New staycation added 7/9/08 at the bottom of this article *****

Gas prices are up.

Food prices are up.

Money worries are up.

The only thing down, it seems, is the economy.

But that doesn't have to keep Boulder County residents from enjoying summer and unwinding on a close-to-home vacation.

The term "staycation" is picking up traction as more folks weigh the cost of filling up their gas tanks with the relative fun-value of traveling away from home to recreate. And, in the newly defined world of staycations, living in Boulder County is a very good thing — at least if you love to play outside.

The city of Boulder owns 44,000 acres of open space. The county owns another 89,000 acres and encompasses part of Arapaho National Forest on the western side. Statewide, there are 14.5 million acres of U.S. Forest Service land and 15.2 million acres of land overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, which taken together, accounts for a third of the state.

Colorado is also home to 42 state parks — one just a few miles south of Boulder's city limits — and 16 national parks and monuments.

So whether it's a day of hiking, swimming and picnicking near home, or a farther fling into Colorado's wine country, there are trips for everyone in the Centennial State. Check out the Camera's guide to 10 staycation ideas that could fill up a summer without breaking the bank.

Contact Camera Staff Writer Laura Snider at 303-473-1327 or sniderl@dailycamera.com.

***** Our methodology*****

Prices for all trips assume two people are playing, eating, buying tickets or renting gear.

Picnic prices are based on a recent report by the Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation that found the average picnic costs \$3.50 a person. They included all kinds of eats from hot dogs and hamburgers to potato salad and corn chips. Of course, if you decide to get brats from the Boulder Sausage Co. or buy sprouted wheat organic buns, it'll cost a little more.

Gas prices are calculated using the average mpg rating for American cars, which the Environmental Protection Agency reports is 20. Gas prices are assumed to be \$4 per gallon, and mileage is calculated from the center of Boulder.

Campsite dinners are based off a basic menu found at lovetheoutdoors.com/camping, and their prices are based on the going rate at Boulder's Safeway.

The trips also assume you don't have any gear of your own, except camping supplies. So they'll be quite a bit cheaper if you own your own bikes, fishing poles, horseshoe sets, boats or Frisbee golf discs.

Splash in the Springs ... \$52.10

The place:

Just a few miles south of Boulder, the rushing water of South Boulder Creek carves a gash into the foothills. Longtime Boulderites may take Eldorado Springs State Park for granted, but it only takes seeing one peregrine falcon swoop off the red and gold cliffs of Redgarden Wall to remind visitors that Eldorado Canyon is a treasure — and a cheap way to play for a day.

The plan:

Sleep in before driving down Colo. 93 to Eldorado Springs. After passing through the entrance station, park and head up Fowler Trail. The self-guided nature walk is 0.9 miles one way, and climbs the south side of the canyon on a gentle slope. There are fixed binoculars for watching climbers and educational signs along the way.

After the hike, have lunch along the edge of South Boulder Creek at a picnic table by the visitor center before leaving the park and stopping at Eldorado Springs Resort's swimming pool, which is fed by natural spring water. Once you've had enough fun — or once the pool closes at 6 p.m. — drive back toward town, pulling into the Southern Sun on Table Mesa for a couple of burgers and beers on the patio.

The cost: Eldorado State Park fee per car: \$6

Picnic: \$7

Pool entrance: \$16

Burgers and beers at the Southern Sun: \$19.50

Gas: \$3.60

Total: \$52.10

* Bringing the kids? Children younger than 12 get into the pool for \$5, and a kid's cheeseburger at the Southern Sun is \$2.50.

Details:

Eldorado Canyon State Park: parks.state.co.us/parks/eldoradocanyon

Eldorado Resort: eldoradosprings.com

Southern Sun: mountainsunpub.com

Sunning on St. Vrain ... \$70.80

The place:

Boulder's tiny, quirky neighbor to the north is a nice alternative to spending another sunny day ambling along the Pearl Street Mall. Lyons, a town of 1,500, has beautiful parks and trails along the banks of the St. Vrain River, plus a handful of unique restaurants and shops.

The plan:

Rent a couple of tubes at Whitewater Tube Co., which sets up a tent in front of Boulder's Watershed School, 204 Canyon Blvd., before heading up U.S. 36 to Lyons. (Stop to buy a cheap set of horseshoes at the Sports Authority on 28th Street if necessary.) Once in Lyons, Meadow Park at Colo. 7 and Railroad Avenue is a great place to put in your tube for a float down the chilly — but not too choppy — river. The park also has picnic tables, a playground area and a horseshoe pitching area.

Enjoy a picnic at the park drying off and heading into town to drop some quarters in Lyons' vintage collection of pinball machines. Lyons Classic Pinball, 339-A Main St., has 36 games spanning every decade beginning in the 1960s. Once you've depleted your change collection, walk down Main to Oskar Blues, where you can munch on pizza and enjoy a hand-crafted brew.

The cost:

Renting two tubes: \$12

Set of horseshoes: \$18

Picnic: \$7

Pinball (approx. 10 games): \$5

Medium pizza and beers at Oskar Blues: \$22

Gas: \$6.80

Total: \$70.80

* Bringing the kids? Pack a few extra quarters for the pinball machines, and make that pizza a large.

Details:

Tube rental: whitewatertubing.com

Meadow Park: lyons-colorado.com

Lyons Classic Pinball: lyonspinball.com

Oskar Blues: oskarblues.com

Boulder birding ... \$57.10

The place:

With 44,000 acres of open space in Boulder, nature lovers here don't have to drive across the state to see wildlife. In fact, they don't have to drive at all. Boulder's lattice of bike trails connects residential areas to open space via greenways and underpasses.

Walden Ponds, which has gotten a second life as a wetland after being mined for gravel in the middle of the 20th century, is accessible from the Boulder Creek Trail. Now, the marshy park is stocked with bass and packed with birds, from yellow-headed blackbirds to belted kingfishers. At the ponds, you can plop a fishing lure in the pond or search for birds through binoculars.

The plan:

Rent a couple of bikes at University Bicycle, 839 Pearl St., and cruise a few blocks south to Boulder Creek Trail. Ride toward the plains, tracing the creek and staying on the path until it hits Valmont Road. Turn right, pedaling by Valmont Butte, then taking a left on 75th Street and another left onto Heatherwood Trail, which leads into the heart of the ponds.

Take advantage of the provided grills for a picnic lunch while checking out birds. Once you've tired of stalking the feathered residents, head back the way you came, but stop when you hit Broadway to get some cheap eats at Mustard's Last Stand before heading over to catch a flick at the Boulder Outdoor Cinema behind Dushanbe Tea House, 1770 13th St. The movies start July 11.

The cost: Renting two townie bikes: \$30

Picnic: \$7

Chili cheese dogs, sodas and fries at Mustard's: \$10.10

Outdoor Cinema tickets: \$10

Total: \$57.10

*Bringing the kids? It's \$10 extra to rent a kiddie trailer for a bike.

Details:

University Bicycles: ubikes.com

Walden Ponds: bouldercounty.org/openspace

Mustard's Last Stand: mustardsinc.com

Boulder Outdoor Cinema: boulderoutdoorcinema.com

Peek at the peaks ... \$68.05

The place:

Boulder is flanked on the west by Arapaho National Forest, which protects the spiny Indian Peaks on the Continental Divide. The forest is full of cheap and beautiful ways to play without leaving the county. Nestled at the foot of South Arapaho Peak, Rainbow Lakes campground — elevation 10,000 feet — is a favorite summer spot to cool off.

A steep trail from the campsite winds up six miles across lumpy tundra to the pass below the peak, offering expansive views of the Silver Lake watershed and Arapaho Glacier, which provide Boulder's water.

The plan:

Head up to the campgrounds on a Saturday afternoon, driving up Boulder Canyon to Nederland and then head north on Colo. 72 for seven miles. Turn left on Forest Service Road 298, and drive another five miles to the campsite.

Stroll on the flatter trails by the string of lakes before cooking a meal over the campfire. Consider an easy-to-prepare foil dinner, cooked right on the hot coals of your fire. Just throw ground beef, carrots, potatoes, onions, butter, salt and pepper into some aluminum foil. Wrap it up, and throw it on for half an hour.

Turn in early and rise with the sun to hit Arapaho Glacier Trail in advance of any afternoon thunderstorms. You can hike this one-way trail as far as you like; views are scattered along the length of the hike.

To satiate your hiking hunger as you drive back through Nederland, stop by Kathmandu Restaurant, 110 N. Jefferson St.

The cost:

Campsite: \$10

Picnic: \$7

Campsite foil dinner: \$5.10

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

Chicken tika masala, lamb vindaloo, naan bread and chai at Kathmandu: \$27.75

Gas: \$11.60

Total: \$68.05

Details:

Rainbow Lakes Campground: www.fs.fed.us/r2/arnf/recreation — click on camping & picnicking

Arapaho Glacier Trail: www.fs.fed.us/r2/arnf/recreation — click on hiking trails

Kathmandu Restaurant: nepalidining.com

Ducky down river ... \$259.40**The place:**

The mighty Arkansas River is born a tiny trickle in the high peaks above Leadville. The river flows southeast from the old mining town, gathering power from Cottonwood and Pine creeks before rushing through Salida.

The town has become a rafting and kayaking Mecca, but you don't need mad whitewater skills to take advantage of a few of the local waves.

The plan:

Head to Salida on Friday afternoon and pitch a tent at the Rincon, a state-park campsite on the banks of the Arkansas River. In the morning, rent a couple of duckies from Rocky Mountain Outdoor Center. Staff there will outfit you with everything you need and point you in the right direction for a fun (not frightening) run down the river.

After splashing around, have a picnic lunch and snag a little more river time — rentals are for the entire day. Once tired (but hopefully not sunburned), head back to camp to make some delicious chili and turn in for the night.

On Sunday, consider driving back to Boulder via Leadville so you can trace the Arkansas up to its headwaters. Make a pitstop in Poncha Springs to throw a Frisbee around the 18-hole disc golf course located on 20 acres in the town of South Park.

In Leadville, pull over for sandwiches and lemonade at the Golden Burro Cafe and Lounge before heading up and over Fremont Pass to Interstate 70.

The cost:

Renting duckies (including paddles, helmets and life jackets): \$100

Two nights in Rincon (including entrance fee): \$40

Picnic: \$7

Campsite chili: \$8.80

Two breakfasts of bagels and cream cheese: \$13.20

Buying a mid-range golf Frisbee: \$8

BLTs and lemonades at the Golden Burro: \$17.40

Gas: \$65

Total: \$259.40

Details:

Rocky Mountain Outdoor Center: rmoc.com

Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area: parks.state.co.us/parks/arkansasheadwaters

Disc golf in Poncha Springs: ponchaspringscolorado.us

Soaking in Steamboat ... \$173.40

The place:

Steamboat Springs isn't just a ski town. In fact, the town, which was originally named after the "chug-chug" sounds of spurting natural hot springs, is a great place to check out — and soak in — any time of the year.

In the summer, wildflowers are blooming, rivers are running, and ski trails turn into hiking paths.

The plan:

Get an early start Saturday to drive the three hours to Steamboat. Stop at the ski resort as you come into town and hitch a ride up the gondola to the top of Mount Werner. You can hike around the trails at the summit and have a picnic before riding the gondola back down, or you can hike the 3.5 miles back to the resort.

Head into town and grab a couple of barbecue pork sandwiches at The Double Z Bar and BBQ before driving north a few miles to camp at Strawberry Park Hot Springs. Campsites are snug up to the river and just a short walk from the soaking pools. Get a soak before bed and another when you get up.

On Sunday, you can take advantage of the hiking trails around Strawberry Park, or you can roam around downtown Steamboat on a self-guided history tour. Make sure you print off the walking tour map before you leave home.

The cost:

One night camping at Strawberry Park: \$50

Gondola ride: \$36

Two picnics: \$14

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

Gas: \$66.80

Total: \$173.40

* Bringing the kids? Gondola tickets are \$8 for 6- to 12-year-olds and \$13 for 13- to 17-year-olds. Add \$10 to your camping bill for each extra child. A corn dog at The Double Z is \$4.95.

Details:

Strawberry Park Hot Springs: strawberryhotsprings.com

Gondola Rides: steamboatsprings.com

The Double Z: steamboat-dining.com

Historic walking tour: yampavalley.info

Fishing and fossils ... \$168.60

The place:

Eleven Mile State Park, west of Colorado Springs, is pretty much synonymous with good fishing. Anglers flock to the reservoir there all year round to reel in rainbow, brown and cutthroat trout as well as kokanee and pike.

Just a few miles to the east, Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument provides opportunities for fished-out vacationers to check out one of the richest and most diverse fossil beds in the world. More than 1,700 species that

lived 34 million years ago have been preserved in the rocks.

The plan:

Head to Eleven Mile on Saturday morning. The place gets crowded on summer weekends, and RVs can glut the campsites. But if you're willing to walk a short ways on a flat path, or you find someone willing to shuttle you, you can set up camp in one of the backcountry sites. They're tucked into the trees, making them more secluded and quieter. Have a picnic while casting out on the water.

If you're feeling confident, pack a light cooler and plan to catch your own dinner. If not, toss in a half-pound of catfish fillets for cooking up a "foiled fish" dinner over the campfire.

On Sunday, drive next-door to the national monument, and walk the one-mile Petrified Forest Trail, or stroll along the half-mile Ponderosa Loop Trail. Both have interpretive signs so you can learn while you walk.

On the way home, stop in the tiny town of Florissant for an unlikely feast. Florissant Mountain Burgers, which is set up in the corner of the town's Conoco station, will serve you a plate-sized burger with fries for \$4.95. In a rush to get home? The gas station has a drive-thru window.

The cost:

State park entrance fee: \$6

Camping at Eleven Mile: \$14

Picnic: \$7

Foiled fish dinner: \$6.50

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

National monument entrance fee: \$6

Burgers and fries at Florissant Mountain Burgers: \$9.90

One-day fishing licenses: \$18

Spinning rod set-ups from Target: \$40.60

Gas: \$54

Total: ~\$168.60

* Bringing the kids? Children younger than 16 get into the national monument for free and can fish without a license.

Details:

Eleven Mile State Park: parks.state.co.us/parks/elevenmile

Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument: nps.gov/flfo

Gold in these hills ... \$168.40

The place:

At the top of Clear Creek Canyon sits a town that's often passed by on the way to the ski resorts lining Interstate 70. Just an hour's drive from Boulder, Idaho Springs has a few gems worth checking out — and some precious metals as well. The old gold-mining town has plenty of history, a flood of natural hot springs, and some more-than-decent pizza pies. Plus, it sits at the base of Mount Evans, a fourteener you can summit — in your car.

The plan:

Roll up to Idaho Springs on Saturday morning, making your first stop at Argo Gold Mine, a nationally designated historic site, for a tour and some gold panning. (You can keep whatever you find in your pan.) When you've loaded up all your loot, eat a picnic before setting up camp along Soda Creek at Indian Hot Springs.

Dipping in the pool fed by hot springs is free with the camping fee, but it costs a little extra to take advantage of the on-site geo-thermal caves. Soak till supper, then head into town for pizza and beer at Beau Jo's Colorado Style Pizza.

The next morning, head up to 14,240 feet on the paved road leading to the top of Mount Evans. Eat another picnic at the summit before cruising back to Boulder.

The cost:

Argo Gold Mine entrance fee: \$30

Two picnics: \$14

Camping at Indian Springs and pool access: \$24

Geo-thermal caves: \$32

Beau Jo's two-pound mountain pie with two toppings, plus beers: \$24.80

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

Mount Evans entrance fee: \$10

Gas: \$27

Total: \$168.40

* Bringing the kids? Entrance fee at the mine is \$7.50 for kids ages 7 through 12, and camping is \$6 extra per child.

Details:

Argo Gold Mine: historicargotours.com

Indian Hot Springs: indianhotsprings.com

Mount Evans: mountevans.com

Beau Jo's Pizza: beaujos.com

Wine on the Western Slope ... \$222.60

The place:

Palisade is, well, fruity. Known for its orchards (at least eight fruit farms offer tours) and its wine (there are seven vineyards in town), this Western Slope town is a perfect place to wander around a bucolic countryside during the dog days of summer.

A lazy section of the Colorado River also winds through town, offering opportunities to take a swim or drift downstream in a tube.

The plan:

Get an early start for the westward trek across the state on Interstate 70. It takes about four hours to get to Palisade, which is just shy of Grand Junction. Pull into town and up to Rapid Rivers Cycles and Sports, where you can rent a couple of bikes and head out on the "fruit loop" tour.

You can choose your own challenge — there are three options varying in length — but each tour will take you past

rolling orchards and vineyards along the river. Stop in at any of the wineries for a tour or a sip of their latest selections, or relax by the water and eat a picnic lunch.

When you've returned the bikes, stop in at the Packing Shed, a restaurant owned by life-long Mesa County local Bruce Jensen. Make sure to order the specialty — home-cooked chicken-fried steaks.

Lay your full stomach down to rest at the Island Acres Section of the Colorado River State Park, where you might glimpse wild horses or bighorn sheep before drifting off to sleep. In the morning, you can walk around the camp trails, or take a dip in the "swimming hole," one of the lakes with a sandy shoreline, before heading home.

The cost:

Renting two "wine tour" bikes: \$70

Picnic: \$7

Chicken-fried steaks and sodas: \$21.40

Camping on the river: \$14

Day pass to State Park: \$6

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

Gas: \$97.60

Total: \$222.60

Details:

Colorado River State Park: parks.state.co.us/Parks/JamesMRobbColoradoRiver

Orchard tours, vineyard info and the Packing Shed: palisadecoc.com

Rapid Creek Cycles and Sports: rapidcreekcycles.com

Maximum meditation ... \$312.20

The place:

Where the San Juan Mountains meet the San Luis Valley, there's a place considered spiritual, sacred, auspicious and deeply blessed (depending on who you ask). Crestone's special energy has lured in spiritual centers of every stripe, including a Zen center, a Hindu ashram, a handful of Buddhist retreat centers, a Roman Catholic monastery, a Native American ceremonial foundation and a giant labyrinth, to name a few.

Spiritual tourism is now the cornerstone of Crestone's economy, and guests can take a tour on their own or sign up with a spiritual-tour company.

The plan:

Reserve one of the retreat cabins at the Karma Thegsum Tashi Gomang for a couple of nights over the weekend. Take on the four-hour drive Friday night and spend all day Saturday in contemplation on sacred land chosen by the 16th Karmapa. The cabins are a short walk from the center's stupa, a Buddhist structure containing the relics of enlightened teachers.

Stupas, which are dome-shaped architectural renderings of the Buddhist path, have become sites for pilgrimages from around the world. And while most stupas are built in Asia, there are a handful in the United States and Europe.

The center will shop for you and drop groceries off at your cabin, which is equipped with a stove and all of the necessary cooking tools. On Sunday, take time to tour the mind-boggling array of diverse spiritual centers in Crestone before heading home.

The cost:

Two nights in meditation cabins: \$160

Local shopping and food drop-off: \$70

Gas: \$82.20

Total: \$312.20

* Wanna go it alone? Meditation cabins are only for one person, so although this is priced for couples, it could be a perfect (and much cheaper) trip if you're seeking a solitary weekend. Each cabin is \$30 a night, plus a one-time \$20 fee.

Details:

Stupa and cabins: kttg.org

Crestone Area Visitors Agency: crestonevisit.com

Land of the flat ... \$94.50**The place:**

You can't really know Colorado if you don't experience the prairie, which makes up a third of the state. Though the lure of the snow-capped Rockies pulls weekend vacationers west, explorers driving east to the Pawnee National Grassland will be greeted with more solitude and a subtle -- but intricately woven -- web of nature.

The grassland, located about 50 miles east of Fort Collins, is home to a banquet of birds, including mourning doves, gray catbirds, vesper sparrows and American kestrels. In all, Colorado's short-grass prairie is home to more than 100 threatened, endangered or declining plant and animal species such as the Pueblo goldenweed, golden blazing star, Arkansas Valley evening primrose and the western box turtle.

Pawnee National Grassland is particularly well-known for the Pawnee Buttes -- red-striped columns of eroded sandstone that jut out of the otherwise flat landscape, creating perfect perches for birds of prey.

The plan:

Leave Boulder on Saturday morning and drive to Fort Collins before turning onto Colo. 14 and heading east about 50 miles, then turning north through Keota and to the trailhead. Hike to the Pawnee Buttes, keeping an eye out for diving raptors, song birds and swift foxes. Eat a picnic among the blue gamma grasses.

Head back to the west and camp at Crow Valley -- make sure to bring your own water and the fixings for campsite chili. In the morning, amble along the short birding trails on either side of the campsite before packing up and heading into Fort Collins to tour any one of its half dozen breweries, including New Belgium, Odell's and Anheuser-Busch. Tours are free, and so are the tastings. Swing into Back Country Provisions for sandwiches before making the drive back to Boulder.

The cost:

Camping at Crow Valley: \$10

Two picnics: \$7

Breakfast of bagels and cream cheese: \$6.60

Campsite chili: \$8.80

A High Plains sandwich (fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil pesto), a Bushwhacker (curry chicken salad), and two sodas at Back Country Provisions: \$17.70

Gas: \$44.40

Total: \$94.50

Details:

Pawnee National Grassland: www.fs.fed.us/r2/arnf

Backcountry Provisions: backcountryprovisions.com

Brewery tours: fortcollins.com/attractions.html

Strange things in the San Luis Valley ... \$161.50

The place:

The flat bowl of the San Luis Valley hangs at about 7,500 feet in the south-central part of the state. The windswept flats are studded with chico brush and rimmed by the jagged Sangre de Cristos to the east and the San Juans to the west. The expansive valley, covering 8,000 square miles of Colorado and New Mexico, is home to strange phenomena — both natural and, some say, supernatural.

Just east of Mosca, the sandy bottom of an ancient lake has blown into the curve in the Sangre de Cristos, creating the tallest sand dunes in North America. The dunes, which are formed because of a precise mix of the opposing winds, the trickling streams that keep the sand wet and the shape of the mountain walls, are re-sculpted on a daily basis. Visitors to Great Sand Dunes National Park can play on the dunes, hike into the mountains or amble around the wetlands.

A relatively short drive outside the park yields other wonders — even more bizarre than 750-foot-tall sand dunes tucked into the Rockies. Between Mosca and Hooper, curious Coloradans can hang out with more than 400 alligators at the Gator Farm. The farm also features emus and ostriches for those who aren't inclined toward reptiles.

Farther north in Hooper sits what is likely to be the world's only UFO Watchtower, where visitors can keep an eye to the night sky for signs of extraterrestrial life.

The plan:

Head out on a Saturday morning with camping gear, a packed cooler and your old skis or snowboards if you want to carve the dunes. Stop by the gator farm on the way into the dunes, and if you're looking to burn some extra cash, you can pay for a bonafide gator wrestling class. Otherwise, wander among the gators, emus, ostriches and snakes.

After a picnic lunch, drive east a few miles to the entrance of the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. You can set up camp at Pinyon Flats. (If it's full, there's also camping right outside the park at San Luis State Park.) Watch the sun turn the sands golden red while cooking some dinner over the campfire.

Get up early to enjoy some sand skiing before the day gets too hot, or hike along some of the trails that head into the mountains. On your way back to Boulder, make sure to stop in at the UFO watchtower outside of Hooper and look for aliens — or just sit peacefully in the healing garden. The UFO watchtower is accepting donations, including a black helicopter, a Geiger counter and "flying objects of all kinds."

The cost:

Entrance fee for Great Sand Dunes National Park: \$6

Camping at Pinyon Flats: \$14

Entrance fee for Colorado Gator Farm: \$25

Two picnics: \$14

Bagels and cream cheese for breakfast: \$6.60

Campsite foil dinner: \$5.10

Gas: \$90.80

Total: \$161.50

*Bringing the kids? Children younger than 16 can go to see the sand dunes for free, and kids ages 6 to 15 pay \$6.25 to get into the gator farm.

Details:

Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve: www.nps.gov/grsa

Colorado Gator Farm: www.gatorfarm.com

UFO Watchtower: www.wtv-zone.com/WebbieLanDotNet/judy/index.html

Aspens, gold mines and ghost towns ... \$88.60

The place:

Caribou Ranch — Boulder County's westernmost mountain park — is a kaleidoscope of habitats, including meadows, streams, wetlands and woodlands. Closed for much of the spring to protect calving elks and migrating birds, the land just reopened July 1 for visitors to hike the 4.5-mile loop.

With the entire trail above 8,500 feet, Caribou Ranch is a welcome respite from the oppressive Boulder heat, and it also offers an opportunity to check out a little bit of Boulder County's mining history first-hand since the trail loops hikers by the old Blue Bird Mine site.

The plan:

Drive up Boulder Canyon first thing in the morning, stopping off in Nederland for coffee and scones at the New Moon Bakery. Sip your joe while wandering around the mining museum to get a feel for the area's prospecting roots.

Head north out of town on the Peak to Peak Highway, turning left after just a couple of miles on County Road 126 to access Caribou Ranch. Bring your picnic lunch with you as you hike around the 4.5-mile loop. You can eat lunch at the picnic tables by the old DeLonde homestead, or just by the side of the trail. Caribou Ranch is closed to dogs and mountain bikes, so enjoy the quiet and keep an eye out for birds.

When you've finished the hike, get back on the Peak to Peak and continue north, turning right before you get to Ward on Gold Hill Road. Drive into town on dirt roads and take a walking tour around the quaint mining town, checking out the one-room schoolhouse (still in use) and the general store.

For dinner, drop by the historic Gold Hill Inn, where you can be served a six-course, gourmet meal for only \$31 a person. The menu is always changing, but past menus have included avocados stuffed with smoked fish for starters, roast duck with raspberry sauce and a sour cream apple pie.

The cost:

Coffee and scones at New Moon: \$8.60

Picnic: \$7

Six-course meals at Gold Hill Inn: \$62

Gas: \$11

Total: \$88.60

Details:

Nederland mining museum: www.nederlandmuseums.org

Caribou Ranch open space: www.bouldercounty.org/openspace/recreating/public_parks/caribou_ranch.htm

New Moon Bakery: www.newmoonbakery.com

Gold Hill Inn: www.goldhillinn.com



© 2006 Daily Camera and Boulder Publishing, LLC.