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Colorado's Wildflower Capital Is Secretly Its Best Ski Town

Crested Butte is more than worth the four-and-a-half-hour drive from Denver.

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Photo by Danica Bona - Sweet Tea Studios Danica Bona

Not to rip on any of Colorado's better-known ski towns (we're looking at you Vail, Breck, and Aspen), but Crested Butte is kind of the best. It's quiet—the four-and-a-half-hour drive from Denver keeps the crowds away—full of independent restaurants, shops, and bars, and, oh yeah, it's jaw droppingly gorgeous. And while it may be most popular in the winter months for the slopes, Crested Butte is definitely worth visiting when it's not covered in snow, too.

The town is super quaint, with Elk Avenue serving as your hub for eating and drinking and your home base for all that outdoor frolicking. There's not even a traffic light in town to slow down your fun. Here's why you need to get Crested Butte onto your to-visit list, from a noteworthy distillery to a remote new backcountry lodge to all the stunning vistas and views you can handle.



Photo by Danica Bona

In a state full of places to enjoy the great outdoors, this is one of the best

Obviously winter is a prime time to visit Crested Butte—it's known for its steep terrain and its non-hour-long lift lines—but spring through fall has a lot to offer, too. With more than 750 miles of singletrack, mountain bikers have plenty of terrain to explore. Novice bikers can rent bikes in town and ride the beginner-friendly Lupine Trail, while experienced riders might want to check out the Chainless World Championships, a gnarly downhill race from Kebler Pass to downtown Crested Butte. Without chains. And in costumes.

Chairlifts run in the summer and winter up Mt. Crested Butte, where hikers can get a major head start on summiting the mountain. (Or you can skip the lift and start at the base for a much longer day.) The eight-mile Rustle Gulch trail is a popular hike thanks to its views of Maroon Bells, Mt. Bellevue, and Mt. Baldy, and if waterfalls are your thing, an easy hike on the Judd Falls trail takes you to a pretty one.

If you'd rather take it easy than bike or hike, you can always drive around and take in the views from the comfort of your car. No judgment; we love sitting too. The West Elk Loop Scenic Historic Byway winds its way through nearby Carbondale, Paonia, Hotchkiss, and Gunnison. A quick detour takes you to the stunning Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park or to a dip in Penny Hot Springs natural geothermal pool.

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Photo by Danica Bona

It's the wildflower capital of Colorado

Yes, that's really a thing. Starting in late June and going through July, Crested Butte looks like a Monet painting—but in real life and less blurry. There's even a [Crested Butte Wildflower Festival](#) that takes place each July, where you can drop into more than 200 workshops on all things floral, like pollination, photography, and even cooking with the edible little beauties.

Flowers you'll be positively tripping over (but try not to; you shouldn't step on the flowers or pick them) include Aspen sunflowers, larkspur, King's Crown, Indian paintbrush, elephantella, columbine, and so many more. You'll find them along many of the trails (see above), but also pretty much everywhere.



Tasting Room | Photo courtesy of Montanya Distillers

There are some mighty fine drinks

For being such a small town, the cocktail options here are pretty fantastic. Start at the female-owned and -operated [Montanya Distillers](#), where you can take a tour of one of the highest (it sits at 8,885 feet) rum distilleries in the world. The small-batch operation has a tasting room right on the main drag on Elk Street, where you can sample rum flights and/or artisan rum cocktails. If you can handle the heat, be sure to check out the Hot Flash, made with pineapple and habanero infused rum, Honeycrisp apple cider shrub syrup, and fresh ginger.

More amazing drinks are to be had at [The Dogwood](#), an old miner's cabin turned cocktail lair. The menu is organized by your spirit of choice—whiskey, rum, gin, or vodka—which are then mixed with house-made syrups, sodas, and bitters. Order the Fennominal, with vodka, fennel, strawberry, and lemon, or the D Cup, a blend of cucumber, wasabi, and gin.

Beer lovers have options here, too. [Irwin Brewing Co.](#) uses mountain snow melt to create award-winning ales, stouts, and lagers, and [The Eldo Brewery](#) has been whetting locals' whistles with hazy IPAs and a fan-favorite sour series since 1996.



Feast in the Field | Photo by Nolan Blunck

You won't leave hungry

With a catchphrase of Peace, Love, & Gluten, Breadery is hardcore about carbs. The naturally leavened sourdough breads go fast, or take a seat and have a dinner that absolutely must begin with a hunk of that bread slathered in black garlic butter. Their charred sourdough-based flatbread pizzas are worth staying for as well.

Getting a lot of buzz is José Mexican restaurant inside the Elevation Hotel & Spa. The menu features regional Guadalajara dishes like enchiladas de res and tacos de carnitas, and the outdoor patio at this slope-side restaurant is best enjoyed while munching on queso fundido and sipping a Squozen (a fresh-squeezed frozen margarita).

The annual [Feast in the Field](#) dinner is worth planning a trip around. This farm- and vineyard-to-table experience is summer bucket list-worthy, taking place on August 12 on the idyllic Red Dog Ranch. You'll have dinner in one of the most beautiful locales you'll ever see, all while benefiting the non-profit Mountain Roots' efforts to donate fresh, organic food to families in need.



Photo courtesy of Campfire Hut

There are cool new places to stay

For those looking to put in a little work to get to their lodgings, Campfire Hut, opening in July, should be well worth the effort. Located north of Mt. Crested Butte in Washington Gulch, this backcountry lodge can only be accessed most of the year via a four-mile ski, snowshoe, snowmobile, or hike in. (Or you can cheat and drive in the summer months.) With 15 beds, a full kitchen, and—don't you worry—running water and flushing toilets, this is a rustic retreat with modern amenities, which is really the best kind of rustic retreat.

Elevation Hotel & Spa got new ownership and a refresh heading into the summer season. Besides adding José restaurant, the hotel also recently opened a lobby bar and lounge (within José) to inject some fresh energy into the property. While not exactly a late night destination (the bar closes at 9 pm), it's a nice post-ski or hike hangout.

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