

CAMPING OUT

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CAMPING ON THE RIM | PHOTO BY KELLY RHODERICK

The Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and its associated Wilderness Area offer an impressive variety of outdoor activities. One of the best ways to experience this beautiful, yet rugged, area is to wake up in the heart of it.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Montrose native Brittany Panter and her British partner, Rob McGovern, love globetrotting as freelance writers. They always look forward to coming back to Montrose to see their cat, Churchill, as well as to camp, hike, cycle, and ski.

The flawless royal blue sky stretches northward until it meets the mountains, while the sun sparkles without so much as a single cloud to sully what is known in these parts as a typical day. There are, so they say, around 245 of these days a year and each and every one of them is perfect for getting outside and immersing yourself in Colorado's truly great outdoors. To really take advantage of these beautiful Colorado days, though, you'll need a sleeping bag and a tent.

The Montrose area is brimming with quality camping opportunities, and you don't even have to go far to find them. Ridgway State Park and Black Canyon National Park are both popular, and for good reason, but an often overlooked gem that happily stands shoulder-to-shoulder with those other sites is the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA).

A stone's throw from downtown Montrose — around 30 minutes or so, depending on which part of the area you want to enjoy — the 62,844 acres of the Gunnison Gorge showcase a wide range of terrain, from desert shrub and sagebrush lowlands to rugged pinyon and juniper covered slopes and the beautiful double canyon that gives the gorge its name. Formerly a Native American hunting ground, archaeological findings from one of the cultural sites along the Gunnison River revealed that it has been continuously occupied by people for nearly 13,000 years, making it the oldest human occupation site in Colorado.

Entering the Gunnison Gorge is to take a step back in time. The 21st century fades away rapidly as you leave the highway and begin climbing until the wilds of this area spread out in front of you like a painting of the Old West. Heading toward Cottonwood Grove campground, one of only a few designated, vehicle-accessible campsites in the GGNCA, you start a rocky

descent that requires you to guide your trusty steed (in this case a hot pink 1995 Chevy Blazer) down to the water with the theme song from an unnamed western playing in your head.

Cottonwood Grove campground isn't particularly far from the highway — around 30 minutes from Highway 92 — but you will still pass several trailheads (North Sidewinder, Smith Mountain Saddle, Sun Cliff Canyon, Cool Rock Canyon), which means the GGNCA is perfect for a few hours of hearty exercise or a night under the stars. And not only is it incredibly accessible (school buses regularly take local kids down to Cottonwood Grove for excursions), it's free.

Named for the grove of cottonwood trees that stand watch over the campground, there are six sites as well as a wheelchair-accessible fishing pier and a hand-carry boat launch ramp. There is a vault toilet, but no water or trash service, so remember the golden rule of camping: pack it in; pack it out. There are other non-wilderness sites that are marked on maps, so it's a good idea to stop in at the Montrose Public Lands Center (2465 S Townsend Ave) if you need more information.

Having set up camp earlier in the day, there is one final, essential piece to your camping experience: the campfire. As the final vestiges of light give way to darkness, the campfire offers warmth and light and in a way connects you to everyone who has camped here previously, including cowboys and Native Americans. As the coals that had earlier roasted marshmallows (another camping trip essential), still barely glowing, are extinguished, darkness envelops the campsite and reveals a stark black sky teeming with stars. Your bed beckons. Wrapped up snugly, sleep comes easily as the river flows and offers up the exact soundscape Native Americans would have heard hundreds of years ago.

Plan to spend at least part of the following day enjoying the beautiful and rugged landscape of the Gunnison Gorge. The fishing pier at Cottonwood Grove begs you to cast a line — this is Gold Medal trout fishing country, after all. Or perhaps you would rather explore — on foot or by horseback, in a kayak or raft, on two wheels or four, motorized or otherwise — or use the boat ramp next to the fishing pier to launch an easy, four-mile float trip down to the Orchard Boat Ramp. The river is open to nonmotorized watercraft only.

The Cottonwood Grove campground is located along the 14-mile Smith Mountain Loop, comprised of South River Road and Smith Mountain Road. The loop offers spectacular views from your vehicle of choice: high-clearance four-wheel drive (4WD), all-terrain vehicle, dirt bike, mountain bike, or your own locomotion.

For those looking for a little more adventure, the wilderness beckons.

Located south of Cottonwood Grove is the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area. Such areas, administered under authority of the Wilderness Act of 1964, are managed with solitude and preservation in mind. It is this solitude that defines a Wilderness Area and allows its breathtaking charms to survive and thrive.

Pass through the Gunnison Gorge into the 17,784 acres of wilderness, and a veritable treasure trove of primitive recreational opportunities reveals itself, including more remote and rugged camping opportunities that can extend your time to experience and explore. Access to these campsites is either by boat or via one of several hiking trails, some of which are also accessible on horseback.



CAMPING UNDER THE COTTONWOODS | PHOTO BY SCOTTY KENTON

GET OUT THERE

National Conservation Lands

National Conservation Areas (NCA) are lands designated by congress to protect, restore and conserve the landscape, flora, and fauna that live inside them. The Gunnison Gorge is one unit of BLM's larger group of special landscapes known collectively as National Conservation Lands, which offer exceptional opportunities for recreation, solitude, wildlife viewing, exploring history, and scientific research, plus a wide range of traditional uses.

Wilderness Camping*

River corridor camping is allowed only in designated hiker or boater campsites identified on BLM maps and signs. Visitors must purchase camping permits and register and reserve campsites at wilderness trailheads or the Chukar boat launch. Maximum stay length in the wilderness and upstream of the Gunnison Forks is two nights/three days. Hikers may stay two nights at hiker sites. Boaters must move on after one night; no layover days are allowed.

One way that NCAs and Wilderness Areas differ is how access is controlled. Motorized use is permitted in NCAs, but in the wilderness, motorized vehicles or any form of mechanical transport is prohibited. Access is limited to two feet, four hooves, or a robust upper body for paddling, which means no wheels of any kind — not even a wheelbarrow. Only wheelchairs for mobility-impaired people are exempted from the rule.

Peach Valley Road, a two-wheel drive (2WD) dirt road, leads to the access roads that in turn lead to the four main wilderness trails: Chukar, Bobcat, Duncan, and Ute. The trail names each correspond to their respective access roads, which are all dirt roads and vary in difficulty. Keep in mind that 4WD roads in the GGNCA are impassable when wet.

Chukar Road, which leads to the Chukar Trailhead, requires a 4WD vehicle with high clearance as the road is rough, particularly as you near the trailhead. Chukar Trail provides the easiest wilderness access to the river and features vehicle camping with covered picnic tables at the trailhead. Chukar Trail drops about 600 feet over the course of a mile to reach the river. It's a moderate hike and is also used to carry boating gear from the trailhead parking area to the river via horses. This is the river access point for all whitewater rafting trips through the wilderness. There are hiker camps down at the river, as well as a vault toilet. Watch for poison ivy near the river.

The Chukar Geologic Trail features captivating views of the river and takes you back over a billion years through geological history. The hike begins at the gravel parking area along the drive to Chukar Trailhead, about one-third of a mile from the end of the road.

Like the approach to Chukar Trail, Bobcat Road, which leads to the Bobcat Trailhead, is rough and steep (but much shorter), and requires a 4WD vehicle with good clearance. Bobcat Trail offers quick access for experienced hikers, but it's quite steep and, therefore, requires a bit of fortitude. There is a very necessary rope to hang on to at the steepest section, which rules out bringing along your canine and equine

CAMPING IN THE GUNNISON GORGE | PHOTO BY JEREMY MATLOCK

Non-Wilderness River Camping*

Camping is allowed only at the Cottonwood Grove campground and designated river campsites identified on BLM maps and signs. Use of a portable toilet system is required in all river sites without restrooms. Maximum stay length is six nights/seven days for sites downstream of Gunnison Forks.

Dispersed Vehicle Camping

Camping is allowed in the remainder of the NCA for up to six consecutive nights, unless otherwise posted. Check BLM maps, signs, and website for camping information.

Day-Use Recreation Sites

Camping is not permitted in day-use areas, including the Gunnison Forks Recreation Area and Smith Fork Canyon. You may not enter or remain in day-use areas after sunset or before sunrise.

**All river sites available on first-come, first-served basis; no early sign-ins for campsites.*

companions. Once you reach the bottom, relax for the night at two hiker camps.

Duncan Trail accesses a nice stretch of shoreline, which makes it popular with fishermen. Bighorn Trail follows the inner rim of the gorge between Bobcat and Duncan trailheads and, while it doesn't access the river, it's quite scenic and suitable for horses.

The longest, and arguably the most scenic, wilderness trail with river access is the 4.5-mile Ute Trail. As with many of the trails in the wilderness, the access road to the trailhead (where vehicle camping is available) isn't too long, but it's steep, rugged, and requires a high-clearance vehicle. A consistent gradient makes it a great trail to tackle on horseback, but the 1,200-foot descent to the river can be taxing to you and your steed, especially on a hot day. Along the river, Ute Park offers more shoreline than any of the other trails (which means great fishing) as well as four hiker camps and a primitive pit toilet.

South River Road is a dirt and gravel road that can be used by 2WD vehicles. With the exception of one sharp, steep turn that leads down into the canyon, the road is generally easy. A rougher section of South River Road extends about a mile from Cottonwood Grove campground to the West River Trailhead. This route offers the chance to drive to the river and hike the relatively flat West River Trail that meanders 2.5 miles along the river into the wilderness. Easy access to remote fishing opportunities and three wilderness campsites add more reasons to embark on this Gunny Gorge hike.

The river itself offers plenty of activities for all, whether a family on camping holiday or day trippers looking for a relaxing few hours away from it all. A number of outfitters are authorized to provide commercial boating and fishing opportunities — everything from jet-boat access up into the canyon, to multi-day wilderness float fishing trips on Class III-IV whitewater, to day trips floating and fishing calmer water (see page 46 for more information). For those equipped with their own boats and gear, there are several good public river access sites.



Tips for a successful trip

As beautiful as it is, the gorge is remote and wild, so there are a few things to consider to make your trip incident-free:

- Nighttime temperatures can drop significantly, even in the middle of summer; be prepared with plenty of warm clothes.
- Daytime temperatures can soar, so be equally prepared with clothes that will help keep you cool, and remember to bring sun protection and plenty of water.
- Dispersed and wilderness campsites offer no amenities and often no restroom facilities:
 - Do your research to determine essentials you may need.
 - Always remember: pack it in; pack it out!
- Follow the rules, regulations, stay limits, and obtain passes or permits where required:
 - Entering and camping in the NCA is free.
 - Inside the Wilderness Area, day use passes are \$3 per person and camping fees are \$10 per person for one night and \$15 per person for two nights (the maximum number of consecutive nights allowed).
 - Annual day use passes are \$15 per person.
- Remember that access roads can be impassable and flash floods are possible during periods of heavy rainfall:
 - Water releases from dams upstream of the Gunnison Gorge and heavy rain can cause unexpected increases in river flows.
 - There are no campsites within flood zones.

CAMPING OPTIONS

There are plenty of RV parks nearby if you prefer more amenities while camping, including Montrose/Black Canyon Nat'l Park KOA, Cedar Creek RV Park, and Jellystone Park of the Black Canyon. Most RV areas in town have dump stations that can be used for a fee.

Cabins and yurts are yet another option for campers. Ridgway State Park has yurts available year round. The San Juan Hut System (SanJuanHuts.com) has huts for mountain bikers, backcountry hikers, and backcountry skiers on Grand Mesa, along the Uncompahgre River, and in the San Juan Mountains. Their hiking/ski huts offer year round accommodations, while bike huts are available seasonally from mid-June through September.

Camping on National Forest lands

The National Forest lands surrounding Montrose are peppered with developed campgrounds, each with their own mix of scenery, size, amenities, and fees. Helpful information is available at VisitMontrose.com/Camping.

Camping in undeveloped (dispersed) areas is popular and permitted in National Forests. Facilities are not normally associated with this type of camping, and you are expected to take full responsibility for yourself: tread lightly; observe travel regulations; pack out all trash; remove or bury human waste at least six inches deep and 200 feet from water and campsites; keep campfires small; only burn dead and down wood; and be considerate of others. Travel regulations require campsites to be within 300 feet of designated routes, and they prohibit resource damage.



PACKING INTO THE GUNNISON GORGE | PHOTO BY TISHA MCCOMBS

Official Motor Vehicle Use Maps are available from the Ouray Ranger District at the Montrose Public Lands Center (2505 S Townsend Ave). Overnight camping is not permitted in day-use sites, including trailheads.

Camping at Black Canyon National Park

The national park has two established campgrounds within its boundaries; one on the South Rim and another on the north. East Portal Campground, located at the bottom of the canyon via East Portal Road on the South Rim, lies just outside the park's boundaries in the Curecanti National Recreation Area.

The South Rim Campground contains 88 individual camping sites arranged in three camping "loops." Water is available during warm weather, typically mid-May to mid-October. Loop B features electrical hookups. Loop A is open throughout the year, while Loops B & C open in the spring and close in the fall.

The changing seasons bring additional opportunities to the gorge, including hunting in the fall (see page 45 for more information). Relatively light snowfall during winter means trails often stay open. The area is also quite popular with photographers, thanks to the diverse range of wildlife in the GGNCA and wilderness that includes mule deer, elk, collared lizards, mountain lions, wintering bald eagles, spotted bats, river otters, and kit foxes.

There are countless camping opportunities in the vast expanse of public lands surrounding Montrose, including in the San Juan Mountains, the Uncompahgre Plateau, and nearby Black Canyon. Gunnison Gorge is a spectacular example of the wide scope of recreational experience and interests that make Montrose so appealing to so many. It's just the tip of the recreational iceberg.

As night comes and the Milky Way lights its path across the swath of sky above your camp, consider this: "With so many choices, how shall you play tomorrow?" ●



North Rim Campground is located approximately 16 miles southwest of Crawford, CO. The last seven miles of North Rim Road are unpaved. All 13 sites are shaded within a pinyon-juniper forest.

Both campgrounds have a maximum stay of 14 consecutive days and maximum of eight persons, and two vehicles are allowed per site. Vehicles more than 35 feet in length are not recommended.

East Portal Campground is located near the historic Gunnison River Diversion Tunnel in the shadows of box elder trees and the towering canyon walls. All 15 sites are first-come, first-served. Vehicles exceeding 22 feet in length (including trailer) are not permitted on the East Portal Road because of the steep 16% grade and sharp, narrow curves.

