

WESTWARD HO!

FROM THE LAND OF OZ TO THE PAINTED DESERT

When we hit the highway for points west, my body tingled with anticipation. The trip coincided with my favorite time of year—the transition of summer into autumn. It promised warm days and cool nights, clear blue skies and the first hints of color change.



1 Elk buck in Rocky Mountain National Park 2 Aspen gleams in pine forest. 3 Mission church in Acoma Sky City Pueblo dates from 1600s. 4 Chili ristras accent New Mexico homes and cuisine. 5 Sandstone mesa glows in El Malpais.

By Rose Muenker
Photography by David Muenker

ON A BRIGHT SUNNY DAY, the road led us through the rich greenery of the Ozark Mountains to Kansas. The Land of Oz’s pastures, wind farms and wheat fields lulled us into a peaceful rhythm of the road . . . until a ferocious north wind started pummeling the side of our RV. Forcing its way inside the rolled-up awning, it unfurled several feet of material. Whack, whack, the fabric slapped against the RV roof. When we found a sheltered place to stop, David secured the awning the best he could using the RVers most prized tool—duct tape. Thankful that the damage wasn’t worse, we chalked the costly mishap up to life on the road and pressed on.

About 60 miles east of Denver, a faint silhouette of the Rockies rose on the horizon. “We’re home!” I cried. One year

away hadn’t diffused my attachment to Colorado. With our RV parked on a friend’s ranch, we were free to stay with friends in their landed homes and acquaint ourselves with the lifestyle we had left. That confirmed two things: we still enjoy Denver and we’re happy with our decision to live on the road. To bask in the beauty of autumn, we spent a week in Grand Lake at the west entrance of Rocky Mountain National Park. Late afternoons, we’d drive into the park to listen to the eerie sound of bull elk bugling as they warded off competitors. Colorado’s leaf color looked exceptionally vivid this autumn.

Several routes could take us west, but the possibility of snowstorms convinced us to head south on Interstate 25. To get back into the rhythm of the road, the first day we only went as far as Raton Pass.



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When you go
Acoma Sky City Pueblo
 acomaskycity.org
Petrified Forest National Park
 nps.gov/pefo
Rocky Mountain National Park
 nps.gov/romo
Santa Fe CVB
 santafe.org



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1 Raton Pass captures sweeping vistas. 2 A colorful palette beautifies the Painted Desert. 3 Loretto Chapel's legendary spiral staircase. 4 Brilliant flowers a la Georgia O'Keefe. 5 Handhold trail leads down from Sky City Pueblo.

The RV climbed to a sweeping vista of mountains and healthy pine forests. How easy the ascent by paved highway is today compared to the days when pioneers scaled the pass in covered wagons!

SANTA FE SURROUNDS

Next, we revisited historic Santa Fe where we joined hundreds of visitors on a toasty afternoon. Native Americans sold hand-crafted jewelry under the portico of Governor's Palace. Local artists displayed paintings and sculptures in open air markets. And restaurants teemed with diners savoring New Mexican and other cuisine.

We took in favorite sites, such as the Loretto Chapel with its impressive spiral staircase. And we explored others we had passed up on previous visits, among them the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi. Inside, an exquisite hand-carved wooden statue of the patron saint, a bird on each of his outspread arms, graced the baptismal font.

Farther south, the RV park at Acoma Sky City Casino became our base for exploring nearby sights. That evening, we drove into the El Malpais (Spanish for Badlands). Sandstone cliffs glowed red under the evening sun, making the desert valley look inviting, despite terrain laced with treacherous lava rock.

Eager to tour the historic mesa-top pueblo of the Acoma people, the next morning we drove across 15 miles of desert to Sky City. Much of Acoma history revolves around the San Esteban del Rey Mission Church built after the pueblo's defeat by the Conquistadores. Its walls soar 70 feet high to original

beams made of pine logs hand-carried from Mount Taylor, 40 miles away. Cornstalks, parrots and rainbows painted on stucco walls—all significant icons to the Acoma people—show how the conquered found a way to integrate their beliefs into Catholicism. Feast days are held here to this day.

Throughout the village, artisans offered distinctive handmade pottery for sale. The few year-round residents are mostly elders. Lack of indoor plumbing, electricity, cell phone and Internet service deters others from visiting their family homes except on feast days and other special occasions.

Shortly after crossing into Arizona, the Painted Desert graced the landscape with its palette of muted ochre, rust, purple, gray and burgundy. Within its canvas, the tree stumps and fallen logs of Petrified Forest National Park lay scattered on rolling hills. Close inspection revealed the bright gem-like colors of these trees turned to rocks. An early morning walk on Blue Mesa Trail deeply connected us to the natural beauty of this land. No one was there but the three of us, the petrified logs and desert hills painted with horizontal blue-gray stripes.

With our sights set on the West Coast, we crossed the rest of Arizona quickly. California here we come!

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