



## Divide and Conquer

THE SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS in southern Colorado are more desolate than most. The peaks—there are ten above 14,000 feet—are too gnarly for the ski resorts and hubbub found farther north. Instead, a two-lane blacktop winds its way through alpine meadows, swift rivers, old railroad towns, and North America's highest sand dunes. It's a place lost in time, full of wildflowers, grazing elk, and jackrabbits. Out on this frontier, you even straddle the Continental Divide—a rugged, windblown rendezvous where East meets West.

—Devon O'Neil



**DON'T FORGET:** Heavy-duty sunblock. The average altitude on this road trip is approximately 7,500 feet, so UV rays are 15 percent stronger than at sea level.

### {THE PIT STOPS}

**DAY 1** Spend half a day running the Numbers, a relentless seven-mile splash down the Arkansas River through Class IV rapids (\$68; [whitewatercolorado.com](http://whitewatercolorado.com)). Post-paddle, drag your soggy bones to Salida's West End Cafe for some homemade pasta and an Avalanche Ale. Cruise the town's riverfront historic district (once a booming railroad hub) and recoup at the Century House Cottages (\$165; [centuryhousecottages.com](http://centuryhousecottages.com)).

**DAY 2** If navigating the hairpin turns along 11,312-foot Monarch Pass doesn't take your breath away, pull over for a view of the Continental Divide. Roll on to Crested Butte, rent bikes at the Alpineer, and head for Trail 401, with its Rocky Mountain vistas, eye-watering descent, and handlebar-high wildflowers (\$35; [alpineer.com](http://alpineer.com)). Hang up your helmet at Elk Mountain Lodge (\$150; [elkmountainlodge.net](http://elkmountainlodge.net)).

**DAY 3** Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve is 234 square miles of the Sahara plopped into Colorado. Trek to the top of 750-foot Star Dune—the tallest on the continent—but keep your shoes on: While air temps stay in the 80s through August, the sand gets nearly hot enough to fry an egg (not recommended). Pitch a tent at Pinyon Flats Campground for one of the most spectacular night skies on Earth (\$14; [nps.gov/grsa](http://nps.gov/grsa)).

**DAY 4** Tiny Westcliffe (pop. 456) is content to stand in the big range's shadow. Grab a map at Take A Hike gear shop, then hit Comanche Lake Trail, a 7.8-mile loop through elk and bighorn sheep country with sprawling views of the Wet Mountain Valley. Back in town watch the sun set behind Crestone Peak from the Historic Feed Store Pub and Grill's deck, then bunk at the Westcliffe Inn (\$75; [westcliffeinn.com](http://westcliffeinn.com)).