

Roll up to the Red River

Our press tour rolled into Red River just in time for dinner. We'd been on the road almost a week, experiencing the attractions of north-central New Mexico from Santa Fe north, even straying into Colorado on the Toltec and



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On Travel

Copper King Lodge —

so imagine my surprise when I looked out the bedroom door the next morning to see the Red River tumbling by and a flock of ducks pecking in the grass. It was just past sun-up and the air at 8,750 feet was cool and crisp.

Grabbing a sweater and my camera I slipped quietly out the door, hoping not to disturb the ducks. Most of them were mallards, male and female, but in the midst of them was a brilliantly colored wood duck. I can't think of a better sight to start the morning.

Our morning outing was a scheduled Jeep trip up Greenie Peak, at 11,249 feet the highest point in New Mexico accessible by vehicle. Jeff Fagan, an independent guide with New Mexico Adventure Company, was our fearless leader. It was an added bonus that he's a Kevin Costner look-alike. Our vehicle looked like

what you'd get if a truck married a Jeep. Jeff was in the cab, the rest of us had unimpeded views from the open back benches. Even though we could feel the air warming up, Jeff piled blankets in the back with us, warning us, "For every 1,000 feet we go up, the temperature drops about three degrees." We were glad of the covers, especially as we wound through shady areas.

The ride got bumpier as we left the paved roads and headed up old logging and mining trails. The first major mining efforts were made by the Spanish in the 1600s. Over the past 150 years, almost 1,000 mines were active in these mountains.

The only gold we saw on the trip was in the trees. Acres of beautiful, golden aspens covered the region, punctuated by dark outcroppings of pink and spruce. Aspens have an amazing ability to send out roots which produce suckers that grow into generically identical trees.

One tree is actually capable of sending up enough stems to cover 100 acres with clones!

We bumped and jostled through the trees, through puddles, over rocks and finally came out on top of the mountain. We weren't above the tree line, but the tree cover was definitely thinner. We breathed in the fresh air and revealed in the silence until we detected in the distance, then coming closer ... a gaggle of ATVs coming up the other side of the mountain. So much for solitude!

ing mountains and valleys. Jeff pointed out the ski mountain, the San Luis Valley and, in the far distance, the Jemez Mountains.

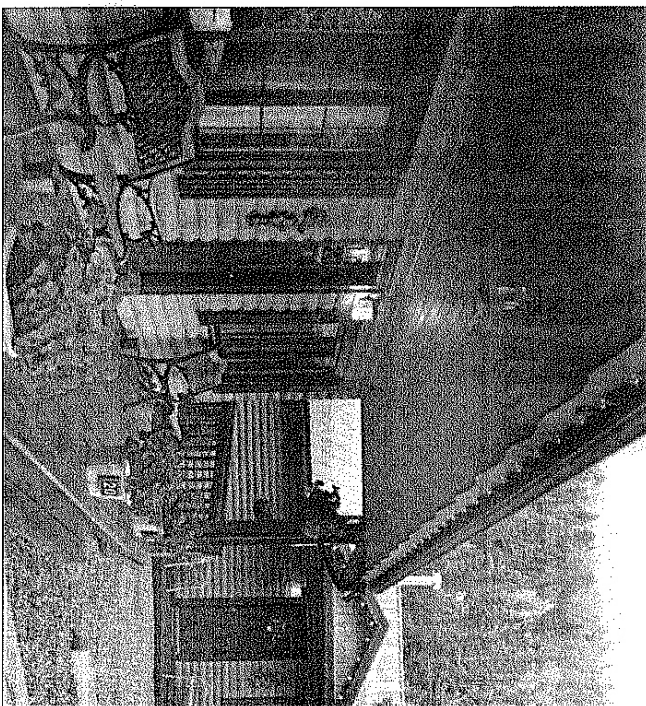
The trip back down the mountain seemed much faster than the trip up. Coming back into town we passed Mallette Park, an ideal spot for picnicking. The park also features a nature hike trail, tennis courts, swings and a disk golf course.

Red River has lots of little eating spots — we ate at Mountain Treasures Gallery Coffee Bar and Bistro, just off Main Street, tucked into a large building with other shops, we almost missed the place. That would have been a shame because

where else in New Mexico can you get a nearly-genuine New Orleans muffaletta? Or kolaches? Of course, they do have more conventional choices and great homemade soups. The day's soups were creamy chicken and noodle and creamy potato.

Red River is a great year-round destination. Summer offers cooler temperatures and mountain scenery. Fall is a hit for the spectacular color. Horseback riding and river rafting take a back seat to skiing and snowmobiling during the coldest months.

The ski area opens Thanksgiving weekend with snowmaking equipment to compensate for any lack of cooperation on the part of Mother Nature. The town is right at the base of the ski mountain, making it handy for skiers. The Copper Lift was just a few steps away from my back door. I love Red River because it seems to me to be the



Copper King Lodge offers comfortable accommodations on the Red River. ELAINE WARNER, SPECIAL TO THE SUN

most family-friendly of the New Mexico ski areas. No long car rides to get to the slopes. Ski a few hours, then head back to a comfortable condo if the kids tire out. The runs are about equally divided in difficulty with 32 percent beginner runs, 30 percent expert and the rest in the middle. Lift tickets and ski rentals are also more family-friendly than some of the tonier areas.

At just under ten hours, Red River is worth the drive for its beautiful mountain scenery, pocketbook-friendly values and the warm welcome visitors will experience. My visit was way too short and I can't wait to go back.

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