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Want placid? Try Lake City

As change of pace, visit a town that's true to its roots

By Janet Reese, Special to the News

Lake City is not a typical Colorado mountain town. There are no fast-food restaurants, big-box stores or shopping malls. Little has changed there since the 1940s and '50s.

Streets are lined with rows of tall, mature cottonwoods. Most historic buildings remain an integral part of the town's day-to-day life. Many date from the 1870s gold rush period and include businesses, churches, homes and pioneer log cabins. Rustic auto-court cabins called "tourist camps" still offer cozy lodging.

Lake City is in the heart of the San Juan Mountains range, 55 miles southwest of Gunnison on the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. At an elevation of 8,671 feet, it is one of the highest towns in the United States.

Five Fourteeners, 26 Thirteeners, alpine lakes, cascading waterfalls and endless miles of hiking trails surround the town. It's no surprise it's a paradise for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, camping, boating, bicycling and jeeping are just a few choices.

Fall is a great time to visit. The town's endearing historic sites, spectacular mountain scenery and relaxing and friendly ambience make it an ideal weekend getaway or vacation destination for all ages. Bonuses for fall visitors include golden aspens blanketing the mountainsides and the Wine and Music Festival on Sept. 24.

Dynamic past

In 1874, Enos Hotchkiss, considered "the father of Lake City," made a rich strike of gold and silver and built the first log cabin. It was the beginning of the mining era that lasted through 1905. The Great Depression and mining's decline slowed the town's growth, but tourists rediscovered the town after World War II.

The town was named for the nearby Lake San Cristobal, the second-largest natural lake in Colorado. Lake City, the county seat and the only municipality within Hinsdale County, has a year-round population of 400 and summer population of 2,500. Hinsdale is one of the least-populated counties in the country.

"Lake City's sense of timelessness, history, tradition and connection with its forebears is rare - not every town can offer that," said Grant Houston, a town native and 27-year editor/owner of *The Silver World* newspaper founded in 1875. "What people like here is the continuity they see. Things haven't changed, because 97 percent of Hinsdale County is still on public lands."

Lake City's historic charm is an important reason for its appeal as a visitor destination.

"Our history draws people looking for a safe, old-time feel," said Sandy Heins, assistant editor of *The Silver World*. "We have a historic gem of a town. Many others have to start from scratch. Here, historic buildings are in good condition. Many of the 75-plus buildings are over 100 years old."

In 1978, Lake City historic district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In February, Lake City was designated as a Colorado Main Street community, a milestone for the Lake City Downtown Improvement and Revitalization Team that spearheaded the effort. The Main Street Program is designed to revitalize older, traditional business districts within the context of historic preservation.

Numerous historic sites are seen on a short walk along the downtown historic loop. Queen Anne-style dwellings, false-front commercial buildings, The Armory, Hinsdale County Courthouse, Miners and Merchants Bank, and the Hinsdale Country Museum highlight the loop.

Silver Thread, Alpine Loop

Two of the best ways to enjoy the fall beauty of the San Juans is to drive on the Silver Thread Scenic Byway and the Alpine Loop National Back Country Byway.

The Silver Thread is a 75-mile, all-weather paved road open year round. This picturesque section of Highway 149 connects Lake City to Creede and ends in South Fork.

The Silver Thread traverses sparsely populated land, through the Gunnison and Rio Grande national forests, across Slumgullion Pass and over the the Continental Divide at Spring Creek Pass. Stop at North Clear Creek Falls - it's the most photographed waterfall in Colorado - near the summit of Spring Creek Pass.

A popular jeeping route is the scenic 65-mile Alpine Loop from Lake City to Silverton or Ouray via Cinnamon Pass and returning on Engineer Pass. Depending on snowfall, the loop closes in mid- to late October and opens in late May or early June.

The loop follows trails laid out by miners more than a century ago. Nearly two-thirds of this well-maintained dirt road is suitable for two-wheel-drive vehicles. To traverse Cinnamon Pass, Engineer Pass or Mineral Creek, a high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicle is required. The loop takes about six hours to drive, plus time for sightseeing stops. Along the way, you can explore mines and ore mill sites; ghost towns of Sherman, Capitol City, Carson City and White Cross; and aerial tram structures.

Peak bagging and hiking

The Alpine Loop offers access to a smorgasbord of Fourteeners: Uncompahgre Peak; Handies Peak; Redcloud Peak; Wetterhorn Peak; and Sunshine Peak - at 14,001 feet, the lowest Fourteener in North America.

Uncompahgre, the highest point in the San Juans, and Handies are the two easiest Fourteeners to climb in the Lake City area. Redcloud is a reasonable day hike, but people often climb Redcloud and Sunshine the same day by hiking the ridge between the two.

Wetterhorn, though, is a challenging peak for more seasoned climbers. The difficulty of the summit pitch is class three, requiring scrambling on loose, exposed rock.

If peak bagging is not for you, the Lake City area hosts many mountain hiking trails that fit a variety of skill levels. Stop by the visitors' center for directions. Or just stroll around the downtown area and browse the boardwalk shops. Stop by the San Juan Soda Company for an old-fashioned milk shake, made to order, or the Mocha Moose - it's the town's early-morning gathering place - for a coffee drink. You also can enjoy a fine meal at any of the town's restaurants.

Lake City information

- Getting there: Lake City is about a 255-mile drive from Denver. From Denver, take westbound U.S. Highway 285. Just north of Poncha Springs, turn west on U.S. Highway 50 to Gunnison. Just west of Gunnison, take Colorado 149 south to Lake City.
- Jeep rentals, lodging, camping, dining: www.lakecity.com
- Communication: Lake City has DSL broadband and reliable cell phone service.

Events

- Fifth Lake City Wine and Music Festival: Sept. 24, Lake City town park. Gates open at 10 a.m.; music begins at 11 a.m., and wine is available at noon. Tickets: \$50 a person for wine and music, and \$30 for music only. Music will feature Texas singer/songwriter Guy Clark, The Gourds, Sisters Morales and Terri Hendrix with Lloyd Maines. Order tickets online: www.lakecitymusicfest.org
- Arts Council: Sponsors community theater by Cabin Fever Players with performances such as *The Trial of Alfred Packer* and *Dearly Departed*. For an arts and entertainment calendar, visit www.lakecityarts.org

Attractions

- Slumgullion Earthflow: About 700 years ago, an unstable mass of mud, clay and rocks slipped from the ridge beyond and flowed three miles to the Lake Fork River. The slide dammed the river to form Lake San Cristobal. View the slide from Windy Point Overlook four miles south of Lake City along the Silver Thread Scenic Byway.
- Alfred Packer Massacre Site: In 1874, Alfred Packer was charged with murdering and eating five fellow gold prospectors, a charge he denied. The victims' gravesite overlooks Lake City on Slumgullion Pass.
- Hard Tack Mine Tour and Museum: Three miles up Henson Creek/Engineer Pass Road on the Alpine Loop. Take a guided tour and see mining, crystal and mineral displays. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

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