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Mountain Marvels

Exploring Two of Colorado's Wonders

Contents

EDITOR

Kim Blonigen

EDITORIAL OFFICE

2779 Aero Park Dr.,
Traverse City MI 49686
Phone: (316) 652-9495
E-mail: editor@blonigen.net

PUBLISHERS

Dave Moore
Village Publications

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Rachel Wood

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Mike Revard

PUBLICATIONS DIRECTOR

Jason Smith

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Jenna Reid
King Air Magazine
2779 Aero Park Drive
Traverse City, MI 49686
Phone: 1-800-773-7798
Fax: (231) 946-9588
E-mail: jenna.reid@vpdcs.com

ADVERTISING ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR AND REPRINT SALES

Betsy Beaudoin
Phone: 1-800-773-7798
E-mail: betsybeaudoin@villagepress.com

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

Rhonda Kelly, Mgr.
Kelly Adamson
Jessica Meek
Jamie Wilson
P.O. Box 1810
Traverse City, MI 49685
1-800-447-7367

ONLINE ADDRESS

www.kingairmagazine.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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COVER PHOTO

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4
Colorado's Contours,
Part II: – Discovering the
Marvels of Man and Nature
by Matthew McDaniel

12
Ask The Expert –
Icing in Flight: Part I
by Tom Clements

18
Maintenance Tip –
Buyer Due Diligence
by Dean Benedict



26
In History –
The Super King Air Arrives
by Edward H. Phillips

2
Correspondence

32
Advertiser Index

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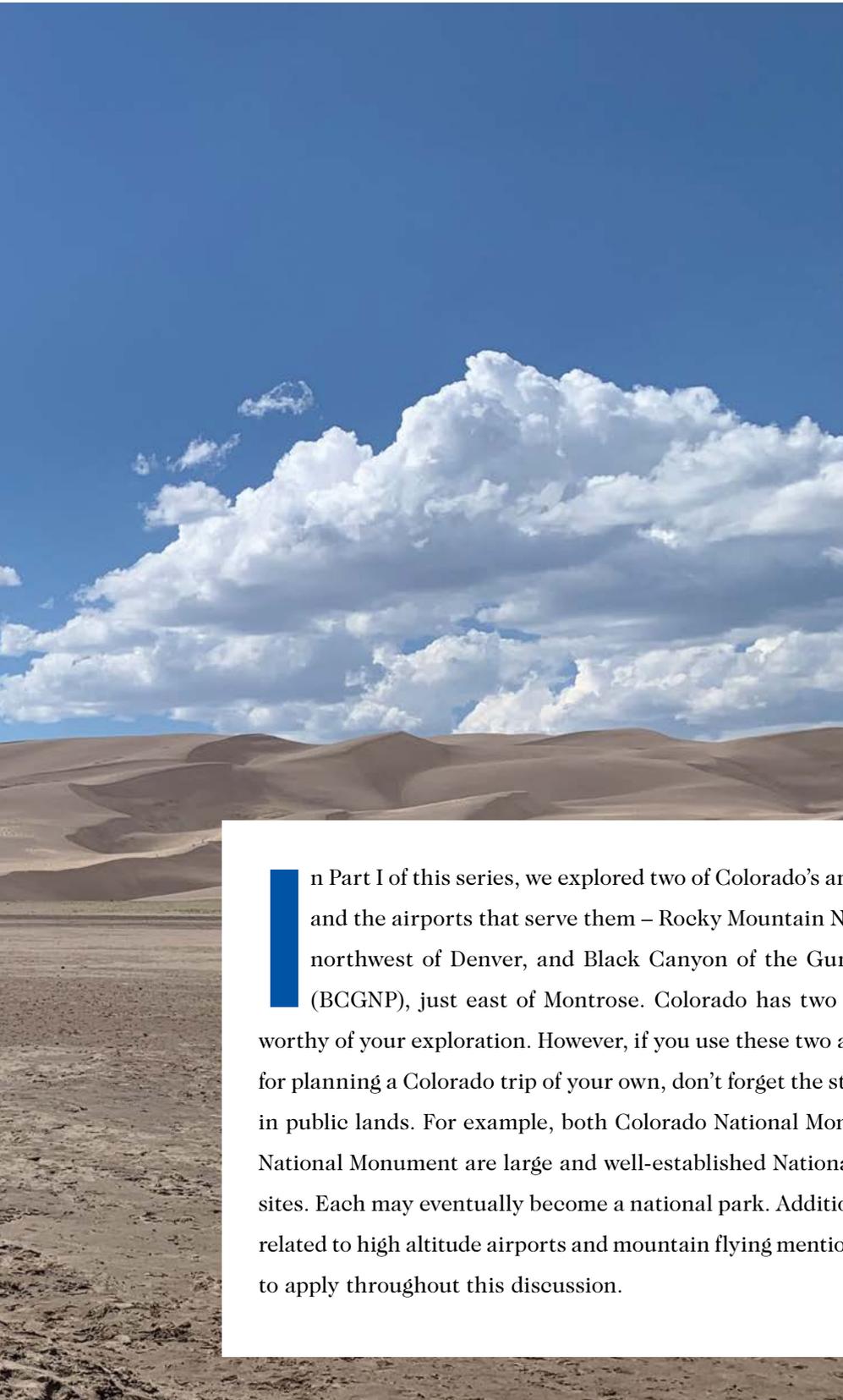
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Colorado's Contours, Part II: Discovering the Marvels of Man and Nature

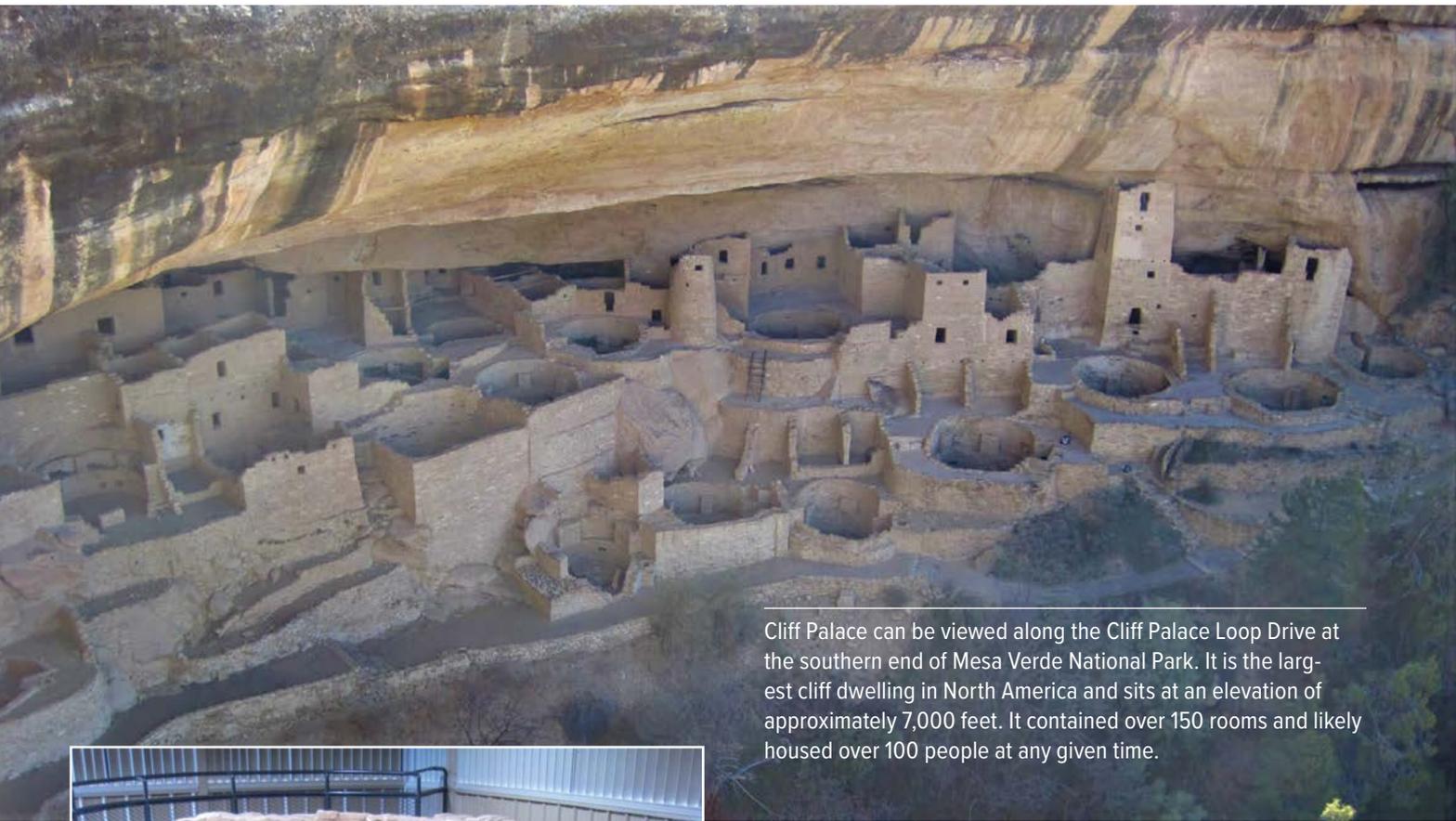
by Matthew McDaniel





Great Sand Dunes National Park, as seen from the Medano Creek bed's "beach" area. The expanse of sand is nearly impossible to comprehend, much less capture in a photo.

In Part I of this series, we explored two of Colorado's amazing national parks and the airports that serve them – Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP), northwest of Denver, and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (BCGNP), just east of Montrose. Colorado has two other national parks worthy of your exploration. However, if you use these two articles as a motivator for planning a Colorado trip of your own, don't forget the state offers much more in public lands. For example, both Colorado National Monument and Dinosaur National Monument are large and well-established National Park Service (NPS) sites. Each may eventually become a national park. Additionally, all precautions related to high altitude airports and mountain flying mentioned in Part I continue to apply throughout this discussion.



Cliff Palace can be viewed along the Cliff Palace Loop Drive at the southern end of Mesa Verde National Park. It is the largest cliff dwelling in North America and sits at an elevation of approximately 7,000 feet. It contained over 150 rooms and likely housed over 100 people at any given time.



An excavated pit house near Navajo Canyon View in Mesa Verde National Park. Pit houses were the chosen dwellings of the Archaic Mesa Verdeans and date to approximately 1,000 BCE.

Mesa Verde National Park (MVNP)

We ended Part I at Montrose Regional Airport (MTJ) in west-central Colorado. From there, the under 100-nautical-mile flight to the southwest corner of the state will keep you west of the highest terrain within the Colorado Rockies. Of course that only means you'll avoid peaks in the 13,000- to 14,000-foot range. You will still have to overfly the Uncompahgre National Forest, which includes several peaks near or above 10,000 feet. Further southwest, the Little Cone and Lone Cone peaks rise to 11,981 and 12,613 feet, respectively. Lone Cone, the highest point along the route, is almost directly underneath a direct course between MTJ and Cortez Municipal Airport (CEZ). Cortez is the gateway airport into one of the most fascinating archaeological treasures within the United States — Mesa Verde National Park.

Like the park itself, CEZ is a throwback to a bygone era. It's a quiet, non-towered airport with an old-school FBO that prioritizes service over grandiose facilities. Cortez Flying Services offers all the amenities pilots and their aircraft typically need. Plus, it does so in a friendly and reasonably priced fashion. For overnight stays or even day trips into the park, rental cars can be reserved and waiting at CEZ and tie-downs are available to secure your aircraft while you are away. The airport is a single runway (03/21) with four instrument approaches to choose from – GPS LNAV approaches to both runway

ends, plus a legacy VOR approach and a modern GPS LPV approach to Runway 21. The LPV minimums are quite low for a mountain airport, with published minimums of 302 feet AGL. While the VOR and LNAV approaches to 21 keep you reasonably clear of the immediate area's highest terrain, the LNAV to 03 and LPV to 21 are forced to contend with the terrain more creatively. Both thread the needle between the nearly 10,000-foot Sleeping Ute Mountain and the high mesas that encompass much of MVNP (on the inbound segments for the LNAV 03 approach and the missed approach segment for the LPV 21). The runway's 7,205-foot length should prove adequate for all but the most extreme conditions, with proper management of aircraft weight and performance. Once safely landed and parked at CEZ, the wonders of Mesa Verde are mere minutes of driving time away.

While Mesa Verde is most famous for its some 600 ancient cliff dwellings, the park protects over 5,000 sites of ancient archaeological, historical and social significance. Mesa Verde is not only a U.S. National Park but also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. American Indians are known to have inhabited the area within MVNP as early as 9,500 to 7,500 BCE. Around 1,000 BCE, Archaic Mesa Verdeans developed permanent settlements, incorporating pit houses, the remains of which can be viewed at MVNP today. The Ancestral

Puebloans began constructing the area's first pueblos between 600 to 650 CE. While they steadily improved their culture's farming, housing and food storage technology, they also battled droughts, depopulation, migrations and warring settlements. After a severe drought in the early 12th century, much of the population left their traditional mesa-top dwellings and began constructing and living in cliff dwellings below the mesa tops. These hard-to-reach dwellings helped grow larger and tighter-knit communities in the area by offering protection from both weather and enemies while also consolidating the population and locating them closer to valley water sources. The Ancestral Puebloans constructed and lived within these now-famous dwellings for around 100 years before migrating elsewhere due to decades of severe drought and especially harsh winters. Yet, since their rediscovery between 1873 and 1885, they have captured and held the imagination of millions who struggle to imagine how ancient people managed to build and survive within villages clinging to jagged cliff faces.

Mesa Verde is one of those places you can endlessly read about yet fail to fully appreciate it until you've seen it firsthand and walked among its sites. From CEZ, follow Highway 160 northeast for five minutes, into and through Cortez. Another 10 minutes east of town and you'll arrive at the MVNP Visitor & Research Center.

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A view of Mesa Verde National Park. Early inhabitants of the area lived on the mesa tops. It was not until around the 12th century CE that they began to move their homes and villages below the mesa tops, into the natural alcoves and ledges on the cliff sides.

Via Mesa Top Ruins Road and the park's north entrance, you'll begin your journey back in time.

You can enjoy MVNP with scenic drives and various overlooks, some within walking distance to many archaeological sites and cliff dwellings. Of course, the park has plenty of hiking if you have the time and inclination. The Mancos Valley Overlook is the first point of interest after entering the park. Beyond it, the Morefield Campground provides access to several trails – two easy, 2-mile, out-and-back trails and the Prater Ridge Trail, which is a more challenging 7.8-mile loop. Continuing along this picturesque mountain ridge, stop at the various overlooks to take photos. Wetherill Mesa Road branches into the western reaches of MVNP and provides access to the Step House (the only cliff dwelling you can tour self-guided). Beyond Step House, the 6-mile Long House Loop paved trail provides access to that dwelling (tickets required) and several other sites. However, keep in mind, Wetherill Mesa Road is only open May-September (weather permitting) and is limited to smaller vehicles. Thus, the more popular option (especially for day-trippers) is to continue south to the Chapin Mesa Archaeological Museum and Spruce Tree House. Adjacent to the museum is several easy trails through canyons leading to ancient petroglyphs. The paved road then branches into two loop drives. The

Mesa Top Loop takes visitors to several Archaic-era pit houses and villages and the fascinating Sun Temple (all open year-round). Saving the best for last, the Cliff Palace Loop (closed in winter) leads to Balcony House and perhaps MNVP's most photographed site, Cliff Palace. Both are accessible via ticketed, guided tours only.

Regardless of where your MVNP touring takes you, you'll have to backtrack to the north park entrance through which you came. During that drive, you are sure to be taking in the scenery while also deep in the awe-struck wonder of what the ancient people who inhabited this area centuries and millennia before were able to accomplish. Their engineering skills were well developed, but their survival skills were acute enough to be willing to abandon their unique dwellings and move on when required. Mesa Verde is teeming with information gained through decades of dedicated research and preservation efforts. Yet, it's also a collection of endless mysteries that you will carry with you back into Cortez and beyond.

Great Sand Dunes National Park (GSDNP)

From Cortez eastward, it is roughly a 130-mile flight to reach the San Luis Valley. Along the way, the route passes along the southern reaches of the San Juan Mountains, where extensive soaring activity is common



Vegetation (small and large) provide some degree of stability to about 89% of Great Sand Dunes National Park's 330 square miles of sand. The other 11% is made up of the main dunefield, which shifts and moves as the winds drive it ... ever moving, ever evolving.



as glider pilots take advantage of the nearly endless supply of ridge lift. Summit and Conejos Peaks will be immediately south of the route, while Horseshoe Mountain will be north – all rise above 13,000 feet. These mountains are jagged and fall sharply into San Luis Valley's sub-8,000-foot elevations.

Several airports are available to choose from within the valley. Del Norte's Rominger Field (RCV) and Monte Vista Municipal (MVI) have single runways exceeding 7,000 feet and offer fuel and basic services. However, for easy access to rental cars, more hotel choices and a greater variety of available services, Alamosa's San Luis Valley Regional (ALS) is the obvious choice. With over 8,500 feet of runway (02/20), served by an ILS and two GPS/LPV approaches, ALS can meet both the performance and weather needs of most any GA aircraft (turbine or piston). Centric Aviation is equally well suited to serve the pilot's needs, and a call ahead will ensure they have all the amenities awaiting your arrival. Once in your rental car, a very different national park experience awaits only 45 minutes away.

Of course, MVNP has gorgeous natural beauty and unspoiled acres to gaze upon and wander through. But it is mainly the elements built by ancient man that visitors seek there. Conversely, Great Sand Dunes National Park is mostly untouched by human habitation, where nature and wildlife are presented in stunning vistas and solitude. The tallest dunes in North America reside there. One reaches 755 feet tall (Star Dune) and continuously changes height, shape and dimension. Winds and streams, freezing and thawing are the powerful forces combined to erode mighty mountains down to these towering piles of sand. Over 330 square

miles of prehistoric mountains have been reduced to sand within GSDNP and about 11% of those sands make up the desolate dunefield. Outside the dunefield, the sands are mostly hidden (and stabilized) by plants and grasses. Adjacent to the park, Great Sand Dunes National Preserve protects much of the Sangre De Cristo Mountains, which are part of the greater ecosystem that created (and continues to build) the dunes over the last 400,000 years or so.

Touring GSDNP is a different national park experience. It is loosely divided into "Main Use" and "Mountain Use" areas. In the Main Use area, climbing the dunes is popular, as is sledding or sandboarding back down them. It is also a real workout to trudge through the deep sand, up steep inclines. At least two hours is required (round trip) to hike/climb from the Visitor Center parking to High Dune (the second-highest dune in the park, at 699 feet tall). The sand temperature can exceed 140° F during the summer months, so take appropriate precautions for health and safety. Yet, the views of the entire dunefield from atop the tallest dunes are spectacular. Roughly April through June, Medano Creek flows past the base of the dunes and can be wonderfully refreshing to splash in after a hot dune hike. A short (30-minute) grassland trail hike is accessible from the Visitor Center too. Nearby, the Montville/Mosca Pass Trailhead leads hikers into three ridge view trails. These hikes can be a shady respite from the dune area, ranging from 30 minutes to 3.5 hours.

Leaving the paved road north of the Main Use area, The Point of No Return is exactly as the name implies. From there, everything beyond is accessible by hiking or high-clearance vehicle only. The Sand Pit Picnic

area is closest, requiring a 1.5-hour hike (round trip). For the truly hardy, the Sand Ramp Trail is 11 miles (each way) along the eastern and northern edges of the dunefield, ending at the northern end of the Star Dune Complex. The Medano Pass Primitive Road leads out of GSDNP and into the preserve. There, several other long, backcountry hikes to mountain lakes are available. Still, all are beyond the scope of this article, as they would not be accessible via a typical rental car. Even sticking to the Main Use area of GSDNP, it is a truly unique park. Because it is close to a versatile airport and is relatively small by western national park standards, it's a great day or weekend trip destination. If your timing allows, be sure to stay after dark. Stargazing over the dunes is incredible, thanks to the lack of light pollution in the vast, open area. Wildlife viewing is also best in the low light of sunrise and sunset, when elk, mule, deer and pronghorn are more likely to venture into open areas to graze.

Colorado has no shortage of awe-inspiring destinations to tour aurally and terrestrially. Perhaps the most popular state for mountain recreation of all sorts, it is also equally popular for gaining mountain flying training and experience. In many of the mountain flying courses I've taught over the years, Colorado has been the state of choice to begin the course. Its many national parks, national monuments and other NPS sites alone could keep one busy touring for years. Add to that its many fun

and challenging airports, beautiful mountain villages and endless unspoiled backcountry, and it's hard to imagine anyone ever feeling like they've seen all that Colorado has to offer. Whether it is for business or pleasure, make it a point to add some Colorado flying and tourism to your travel wish list. Then, with proper training completed, start trading those wishes for experiences. The mountains await. **K**

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Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 19,500 hours total, over 5,600 hours of instruction-given and over 2,500 hours in various King Airs and the BE-1900D. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also an Airbus A-320-series captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings and has flown over 95 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for nine consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.

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