

TRAVEL

Mesa Verde Country resplendent in the fall

The Four Corners region beckons with culture and cuisine

By **RENEE FAJARDO**
SPECIAL TO CAMINOS

There is more to Mesa Verde Country than meets the eye. The ancient Pueblo ruins in Mesa Verde National Park draw most folks to the Four Corners area for summer vacation.

But there are many more attractions in the fertile Mancos and Montezuma valleys. Just as in ancient times, this area remains an enclave of a vibrant thriving farming community. Come for the archeological spectacular and stay for some of the state's best wines, fresh produce, bakeries, coffee



roasters, cheese makers, unique restaurants, festivals and spectacular fall colors.

From Pueblo, Mesa Verde country is a 5½-hour drive. The good news is that whatever route folks take, either traveling west from Pueblo or south on Interstate 25 to Walsenburg through Wolf Creek pass and Durango, the drive down is breathtakingly beautiful.

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The Cortez Farmers Market is bursting with fresh fruit and vegetables.

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The cliffs, mesas, valleys and gorges are spectacular. Once there, two scenic byways, the Trail of the Ancients and the San Juan Skyway are well worth visiting.

Towns in the area include Cortez, Mancos and Dolores.

Cortez is the largest community near Mesa Verde National Park and offers the most services for visitors. The town is nestled between the majestic La Plata Mountains, Sleeping Ute Mountain and the silhouette of Mesa Verde.

Lodging varies from primitive camping in the 164,000-acre Canyons of the Ancients, which is still largely unexplored, to bed and breakfast to national chain hotels.

One of the best bargains in town is the Best Western Turquoise Inn and Suites (535 E. Main St. in Cortez, 800-780-7234). The large suites include living area with kitchenette, wireless Internet, heated indoor and outdoor pool, complimentary hot breakfast, two water features and a newly renovated plush lobby area and courtyard. The fall rates start at \$120 per night.

It is the bounty of the harvest that also makes the long drive worthwhile.

Local wine maker Guy Drew has



COURTESY PHOTO/BARBARA GRIST

Hauser's Pumpkin Patch near Cortez sells plenty of seasonal gourds.

been producing some the nation's most celebrated vintages for over a decade. The rich soils of the area also produce a plethora of innovative farm produce.



COURTESY PHOTO/TOM VAUGHAN

The Mancos Valley is decorated in fall colors beckoning seasonal visitors.

Cortez farms offer local honey, goat cheese, fresh-baked organic breads, organic pinto beans, free range beef, elk, and buffalo, herbs, flowers, and a cornucopia of organic vegetables. For information, visit the farmer's market website.

Be prepared to eat your fill in Cortez. Try Pippo's for the locals' version of the down-home breakfast, a fun-filled, nostalgic throwback to road trips with Mom and Dad back in the day.

For fine dining try Shiloh's Steakhouse with regional beef, elk and buffalo hand cut by owner Mark Rodgers.

The Metate Room is a four-star restaurant located in Mesa Verde National Park. Enjoy spectacular views with such delights as Turkey Napoleon, Cinnamon Chili Pork Tenderloin and Blue Corn and Pine Nut Dusted Trout.

At Nero's, executive chef and owner Todd Halier makes a mean Proscuitto Wrapped Chilean Sea Bass, Lamb Osso Bucco and pasta dishes. The mouth-watering desserts include such delights as Espresso Mousse and Swiss Merengue Mousse along with more traditional fare.

For unique and innovative Mexican food, try the Pepperhead, owned by fifth-generation restaurateur Theresa Montano, who has created a signature chile relleno and chicken mole dishes to knock your peppers off. The savvy Chicana has a master's degree from the University of Iowa and spent considerable time in Italy. Her style of Mexican fare might be called "worldly."

October and November are the perfect time to visit since the region is less crowded and hectic than summer. Trips to archeological sites in addition to Mesa Verde include Hovenweep National Monument, Cortez Cultural Center, the Anasazi Heritage Center and the expansive Canyons of the Ancients.

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The area boast two fall color changes, one in early fall (mid September to early October) when the aspen change and then late fall (through mid-October) when the scrub oak and cottonwoods peak. There are the expansive pumpkin patches, also.



John Fajardo of Denver found the hike into Mesa Verde park 'well worth the effort' despite his 73 years.



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO CAMINOS/RENEE FAJARDO
 Bessie White, one of the founders of the Cortez Farmers Market, talks to John Fajardo of Denver about produce from her dry farming operation.

PEPPERHEAD CHICKEN MOLE

- 10 oz. peanut butter**
- 20 oz. warm water**
- 1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder**
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder**
- 1/2 cup red chile powder**
- 1/2 teaspoon salt**
- 1/4 cup sugar**
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon**
- 1/4 teaspoon vanilla**
- 5 pounds cooked and cubed chicken**

Whisk all ingredients together. When smooth add chicken and fold together until all are coated equally. Bake in covered pan at 300 degrees for two hours. Remove from oven and fold carefully to release oils. Let sit for 10 minutes. Skim off oils.

Almond or pecan butter may be used in place of peanut. Chile powder can be varied to adjust heat and taste.

Learn more

Mesa Verde Country at 800-530-2998 or www.mesaverdecountry.com



The ranches and farms of the Mancos Valley are resplendent when autumn arrives.

COURTESY PHOTO/TOM VAUGHAN

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