



Visit Estes Park
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Estes Park Tourism Dates Back Thousands of Years

ESTES PARK, CO — The first tourists to visit Estes Park were not from Texas, Kansas, New Jersey, California or Nebraska. They did not arrive by car, in a bus, RV, motorcycle, bicycle or any other modern mode of transportation.

The archaeological record shows that humans have lived in the area for at least 12,000 years. Remains from the Clovis culture, the first known people to cross the Bering Strait land bridge from Asia into North America, have been found within the park. Later, around 2,000 B.C., the McKean people, one of the Paleo-Indian cultures, conducted game drives in which animals were funneled towards natural “traps” where they would be descended upon by groups of eagerly awaiting hunters.

It was only 10,000 years ago that this popular family vacation destination first attracted Ute and Arapaho Indian families who summered in the Estes Park area and wintered in the Middle Park region south of Grand Lake. Remnants of the trail they used to cross the Continental Divide still are visible in Rocky Mountain National Park.

In about 1800, the first of the many adventurous explorers from the east arrived, including the intrepid “mountain men” who came in search of beaver pelts and bear skins. One of the first organized explorations to see the Rockies was led by Major Stephen H. Long in 1820. As head of the Yellowstone Expedition, his mission was to probe the secrets of what was a very new and wild part of this country. Longs Peak, the 14,000-foot centerpiece of the park, is named in his honor though he never scaled the peak.

When gold was discovered in Colorado in 1859, significant numbers of people began to make their way into the Estes Valley. Although most of the gold mining was south of here, one miner did wander into the area: Joel Estes, the man for whom the village was named.

Estes, a Kentucky-born adventurer who had struck it rich in California a decade earlier, “discovered” the Estes Valley in 1859. A year later, he moved his wife and 13 children along with a herd of cattle to a beautiful meadow area along the east side of the mountains where they lived from 1860 to 1866.

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In 1864, William Byers, the owner and editor of the Rocky Mountain News, visited the area and named it Estes Park in honor of his host. However, Estes found the high altitude and short growing season made cattle ranching impractical, so he sold his homestead to Griff Evans who established a dude ranch. One of Evans' guests, the Earl of Dunraven, was so enamored of the area he decided to buy the entire valley for his own resort and hunting preserve. Dunraven's questionable actions to achieve that goal eventually were thwarted by area ranchers and mountain men. Colorful characters like Mountain Jim and Isabella Bird (a Victorian lady from Great Britain who chronicled her visit to the area in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*) dot the area's history.

Large cattle ranches were established in the 1870s by individuals like Alexander Q. MacGregor, who brought in prized herds of Aberdeen Angus. The MacGregor Ranch and Museum occupy the site of the founder's operation and is still a working ranch. Another settler, W. E. James, built the Elkhorn Lodge and supplemented his income with a "fish ranch." James and his sons would catch 500 to 800 trout a day for restaurants in Denver.

F. O. Stanley, originally a guest at the Elkhorn Lodge, came from Massachusetts in 1903 seeking a cure for tuberculosis. Stanley is credited with developing a critical photographic process and co-inventing the Stanley Steamer automobile with his twin brother F. E. Stanley. The mountain air proved so beneficial that he settled here and built the Stanley Hotel as a luxury travel stop. The facility, which opened in 1909, cost more than half a million dollars to build and the publicity created a boom in the area's resort business. In an effort to capitalize on the growing numbers of people taking vacations by train, Stanley ran regular "mountain bus" trips up the Big Thompson Canyon, probably one of the first shuttle services in the Rocky Mountain region.

Since those early days, Estes Park's reputation as a resort destination has grown. Millions of people have stayed and enjoyed vacations here since Stanley's days. In 1993, Pope John Paul II spent several days near Estes Park enjoying a respite during his U. S. visit that year. In 1994, the Emperor of Japan included Estes Park on his travel itinerary.

What the visitor sees downtown today is vastly different from what was visible even 18 years ago. In 1982 a man-made earthen dam burst in Rocky Mountain National Park, sending the river out of its banks and into downtown Estes Park. The result was major destruction along the main street.

The community used the disaster as a catalyst for major renewal of the downtown core and earned the nickname "The Gutsiest Little Town in Colorado." Today, visitors are greeted by a main street lined with Victorian lights, trees, mountain flowers and sidewalk benches, walkways alongside the riverfront and lakefront and a landscaped riverside sculpture garden.

The entrances to Rocky Mountain National Park are 10 minutes west of Estes Park. Now more than 80 years old, "Rocky" stands as one of the crown jewels of the nation's national park system. With its alpine tundra, rugged mountain grandeur, cascading waterfalls, tranquil meadows, massive glaciers, towering peaks, thousands of species of wildflowers, birds and wildlife, it is hard to imagine the area as anything else but a national park.

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