

Time to see Rocky Mountain National Park

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(Kyle Wagner, The Denver Post)

From Denver, take U.S. 34 from Loveland or U.S. 36 from Boulder through Estes Park, 970-586-1206, nps.gov/romo.

Why visit now: The hordes have pretty much cleared out, which means you might have the drive through the 416-square-mile park all to yourself. The animals like that, so get your camera ready — you'll find elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep and even the occasional moose out looking for food, and the snow provides a gorgeous contrast to the dense forests. Most of Trail Ridge Road is closed, but many roads remain open year-round, and if you bring your snowshoes, cross-country skis or ice-fishing equipment, the backcountry here is an endless source of quiet escape. Stop by Kawuneeche Visitor Center for trail maps; Tonahutu Creek Trail is a great place to start.

Stay: Della Terra Mountain Chateau (3501 Fall River Road, Estes Park, 970-586-2501, dellaterramountainchateau.com) sits right at the edge of the park and has some of the prettiest, most comfortable rooms you'll ever see. Each one is designed around a theme — snow, dusk — and offers an oversized soaking tub, a waterfall and a fireplace, as well as plasma-screen TVs and DVD players with MP3 hookups and memory-foam beds. They also offer cabins and hot tubs, daily free wine and cheese hour at 5 p.m., and breakfast is included. Rates start at \$175 a night (higher for one night only).

Dine: On the way into the park, Smokin' Dave's BBQ and Taphouse (820 Moraine Ave., 866-674-2793, smokindavesbbqandtaphouse.com) has more than

a dozen brews on tap and serves up an impressive variety of 'cue, including bison babybacks, St. Louis-style and an ever-changing wild game ribs, with a tangy, mustardy sauce. Check out the tender brisket and the hearty chicken-fried steak, and the chocolate peanut butter pie is worth saving a little room for.