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Colorado's Golden Opportunities

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Q. My niece wants to go gold panning in New Mexico. The trip would last three or four days, with a day or two of gold panning and the remainder of time horseback riding, swimming and other activities.

David Casella, Washington

A.

New Mexico, known for silver and turquoise, didn't experience the same rush as its gold-digging neighbors in the West. To strike it rich, head north to Colorado, the state that nuggets built. "The mining of gold and other ores is really what jump-started the state," says Emily Schepis, international tourism representative for the Colorado Tourism Office. "It's Colorado's history."

In the 1800s, prospectors swarmed Colorado's hills for gold; today, the mountains still contain the precious metal, but, due to economic and environmental issues, the mines had to close. Then they reopened – for tourists. The Mollie Kathleen Mine Tour (888-291-5689, <http://www.goldminetours.com/>), for example, takes guests 1,000 feet down a shaft to see the inner workings of a mine, one of 500 in the Cripple Creek area. For a historical view of "the richest gold camp on Earth," take a walking tour of town through the Cripple Creek Welcome Center. Cover more ground on the Gold Belt National Scenic Byway, which ribbons through old mines and ranches. Horseback riding is popular in the backcountry and in such parks as Mueller State Park, home of Dome Rock.

Cripple Creek does not have gold panning, but various operations across the state do. In Breckenridge, the Country Boy Mine (970-453-4405, <http://www.countryboymine.com/>) lets visitors dig for gold in Eureka Creek. The excursion includes a mine tour and a 55-foot ore shoot you can slide down. In Black Hawk, Vic's Gold Panning (http://www.coloradopro prospector.com/Vic's_Gold_Panning/vics.html) arms visitors with a sluice and hope. And at the Phoenix Gold Mine in Idaho Springs, miners accompany amateur panners. Info: 303-567-0422, <http://www.phoenixmine.com/>.

If you prefer to stay in one area and fan out for day trips, make Colorado Springs your home base. The Ghost Town Wild West Museum has gold panning, and Cripple Creek is only about 45 miles away. Garden of the Gods offers horseback riding, and you can swim in mineral waters at the Indian Springs Resort (303-989-6666, <http://www.indianspringsresort.com/>). The Ute Indian reservations are five to six hours away by car, but the Manitou Cliff Dwellings (800-354-9971, <http://www.cliffdwellingsmuseum.com/>), at the foot of Pikes Peak, display Indian artifacts. For info on Colorado Springs: Colorado Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-888-4748, <http://www.experiencecoloradosprings.com/>.