



EASY PICKIN' Poets and singers perform all weekend long at Durango's Strater Hotel and other locations.

COLORADO ESCAPES

How the West Was Sung

Durango's Cowboy Poetry Gathering is a paean to the Old West—stagecoaches, fiddles, horse jokes and all

BY ALISON GWINN

Why are cowboys so fun? Because they're always horsing around.

That old joke may be corny but it's true. And if the Wild West is your thing—if Gene Autry and Roy Rogers make your heart swell with happiness—then Durango's annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering is for you.

Cowboy poetry? It might sound like a strange fit, but it's actually a unique form of American verse that began on the frontier when cowpokes on long cattle drives would pass the time around the campfire at night by telling extemporaneous tales, singing trail songs and reciting rhymes they'd made up during their long hours in the saddle.

Today, there are cowboy poetry gatherings all over the West, and the four-day Durango event, now in its 29th year, is one of the granddaddies of them all, paying homage to life (both historic and contemporary) on the range, with an assortment of activities—

from a poetry trail ride to a poetry train, plus a parade and chuck-wagon breakfast. But the heart of the event is really the music and poems. Notable for its rhymes and humor, cowboy poetry is performed by real cowmen and women of today, talking about range ridin', calf pullin', bronco bustin' and unrequited romancin' (often of a horse).

This year's celebration kicks off on a Thursday evening (October 5), when visitors can bust a gut at a Western variety show dubbed "Saga of the Dead Man's Hand" or at the "Laughing Stock" cowboy comic revue. The next day, visitors can ride and rhyme on either the Cowboy Poet Train (a special run on the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad that includes live poetry performances and a lunch stop along the Animas River) or the Cowboy Poet Trail Ride at the Rapp Corral (rent a horse or bring your own). They're followed by evening poetry and singing performances at the Strater Theatre, the epicenter of the weekend's

DURANGO COWBOY POETRY GATHERING

ADVENTURE

performances. In between, you can stroll Durango's art galleries, which will feature Western paintings, historic photos, saddle makers and wildlife photography.

On Saturday morning, fuel up like a buckaroo at the Cowboy Chuckwagon Breakfast on Durango's Main Street—biscuits, gravy, eggs, oatmeal and steaming pots of coffee, all cooked over open fires (yum!)—then watch the motor-less Cowboy Parade, complete with horses, wagons, walkers and even Longhorns. (It starts out



SPREADING THE WORD “Like horse manure, I’ve been all over the West,” says award-winning cowboy poet and songster Gary McMahan, top, who will be back this year in Durango. The weekend includes a motorless Cowboy Parade down the town’s main street.

with an OK Corral-worthy gunfight near the historic Strater Hotel, and awards are given for such things as “most impressive mule entry.”) Then all day long, and into the evening, there will be poetry and music performances at the Strater and other downtown locations.

Sunday starts off with “A Cowboy and His Creator” and ends with an evening barn dance and picnic (cowboy poet Lindy Simmons performs) at River Bend Ranch, four miles north of Durango.

In the cowboy poetry tradition, we’ll round this up with a little ditty of our own:

Come for the cowboys and stay for the rhymes. All in all, it’s a buckin’ good time. **DLM**

WHILE YOU’RE THERE
More Durango sights

EAT LUNCH UNDER THE TREES. For an out-of-the-way, truly farm-to-table experience, visit the James Ranch, a half-hour north of Durango on Highway 550, where you can dine at picnic tables on a Harvest Burger that’s about as local as local gets: made from the ranch’s own beef, topped with cheese from their own Jersey cows and accompanied by a salad from their own gardens. jamesranch.net



WET AND DRY River trippers on the Animas (above) and visitors to Mesa Verde (below)

CHANNEL BUTCH AND SUNDANCE. Take a drive up the road from the ranch, about 25 miles north of Durango, to Baker’s Bridge, the site where Paul Newman and Robert Redford filmed the famous cliff-jumping scene for “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”

TAKE A GEOTHERMAL SOAK. Indulge yourself in a rubdown (we recommend the Western, which includes a blue corn salt scrub, a 60-minute massage and a hot oil scalp rub) at Trimble Hot Springs, seven miles north of Durango on Highway 550. trimble-hot-springs.wordpress.com

VISIT MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK. Climb down into the cliff dwellings that were once home to ancestral Puebloans at this historic site, only 40 miles west of Durango. Tip: Book your tour in advance. nps.gov/meve

WALK THE STREETS OF DURANGO. Though small, the town has a number of charming restaurants (try Jean-Pierre for morning coffee and a pastry—and Eolus, Seasons or Ken & Sue’s for dinner), galleries (Diane West Jewelry & Art, Toh-Atin for Native American Art and Scenic Aperture for photography) and clothing (we like Blu Boutique).

RIDE THE RAPIDS. Durango Rivertrippers offers two-hour “Splash and Dash” trips, as well as four-hour half-day adventures, on the nearby Animas River. (You can add a zip line tour too.) durangorivertrippers.com



DURANGO COWBOY POETRY GATHERING; MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK; DENISE CHAMBERS/MILES; DURANGO RIVER TRIPPERS; TRIMBLE HOT SPRINGS