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In Northwest Colorado, the Workingman's Spa Town

By HELEN OLSSON

FOR many Coloradans driving west from Denver, Glenwood Springs is little more than an exit ramp, its landmark hot-springs pool signaling the turnoff for Aspen, 40 miles to the south. But G-wood, as young hip locals call the town, is worth more than a pit stop.

Situated in a T-shaped valley at the confluence of the Colorado and Roaring Fork Rivers, this workingman's town is rich in history and low on glitter. The Hotel Colorado, where both Al Capone and Teddy Roosevelt counted sheep, sits next to a KFC outlet.

In summer, outdoorsy types come for the rafting, fly-fishing and hiking. Winter enthusiasts come for the skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling at the Sunlight Mountain Resort nearby. Year round, visitors simmer in the pool (touted as the world's largest mineral bath), steam in natural underground vapor caves and explore the huge network of caverns that lace Iron Mountain.

Once known as Defiance, Glenwood Springs was founded in 1885. Entrepreneurs took note of the hot springs, which the Utes had long seen as healing waters, and envisioned a world-class spa. After the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad arrived in 1887, hotels and the two-block-long pool, which still dominates the city landscape, were built, and Glenwood quickly became a summer vacation enclave for the wealthy.

By the early 20th century, gambling halls, brothels and saloons had arrived, too. During Prohibition, the Chicago gangster Diamond Jack Alterie often came to Glenwood to fish and take the waters. Hank Bosco, a blue-eyed octogenarian, remembers taking a ride in the rumble seat of Diamond Jack's chrome-plated Model A Ford. "My mother had a fit," he said. "He always carried revolvers with pearl handles — and he was a mean one." After a whiskey-fueled argument over a poker game, Diamond Jack shot two men through a door of the Hotel Denver, across the river from the hot springs



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pool. (Decades later, another notorious killer would come through town. In 1977, Ted Bundy escaped from Glenwood's jail by removing a metal ceiling plate and starving himself enough to squeeze through the opening.)

Mr. Bosco's father, Mike, who had come to Glenwood from northern Italy in 1914 via Ellis Island, owned the hotel.

In 1956, the Bosco family and several others from Glenwood formed Hot Springs Lodge & Pool Inc., which now owns and operates the pool and its huge sandstone bathhouse, built in 1890. Hank Bosco is still the chairman. The bathhouse originally held a spa with Roman baths and a men's gambling hall. Later it served in turn as a hospital and a hotel, and it's now being renovated to include a spa again.

The 90-degree main pool measures 405 feet in length, with a diving section and Olympic-size swimming lanes; an adjacent 104-degree therapy pool is a mere 100 feet long. On a night last month, the pool glowed turquoise, steam rose 30 feet, and "Le Freak" by Chic played over the sound system.

WATERS AND LEGENDS

The Hot Springs Pool & Lodge, above, in Glenwood Springs, where the Hotel Colorado, right, once played host to Al Capone and Teddy Roosevelt. Doc Holliday's Saloon, far right, pays homage to another well-known visitor, who's interred in a local cemetery. Or is he?



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IF YOU GO

Hot Springs Always in Season

Glenwood Springs is a three-hour drive west of Denver or six hours by train on the California Zephyr (800-872-7245; www.amtrak.com). The main sites can be reached on foot or a free bus.

An all-day pass to the Hot Springs Pool (800-537-7946; www.hotspringspool.com) is \$18. Nearby, the Yampah Spa Vapor Caves (970-945-0667; www.yampahspa.com/caves.html) offers unlimited cave and solarium time (\$12) and a variety of spa services.

The basic cave tour at Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park (800-530-1635; www.glenwoodcaverns.com) costs \$20; the tram, \$10. If you need outdoor gear, try Summit Canyon Mountaineering (732 Grand Avenue; 970-945-6994; www.summitcanyon.com).

At the Hotel Colorado (526 Pine Street; 800-544-3998; www.hotelcolorado.com), built in 1893 and inspired by a 16th-century Italian mansion, rooms start at \$169. The Lavender & Thyme B & B (802 Palmer Avenue; 866-526-3822; www.lavenderthyme.com), in a 1903 Vic-

torian house, offers rooms starting at \$105 and European hospitality with warm glühwein from the Dutch owner, Peter Tijm.

Carnivores can't miss in Glenwood. Try the New York strip (starting at \$23.50) at Juicy Lucy's (308 Seventh Street; 970-945-4619) or the Rocky Mountain oysters (\$7.95) at Doc Holliday's Saloon (724 Grand Avenue; 970-384-2379). The small but boisterous night life scene starts at Doc's and ends at the Club Roxy (701 Cooper Avenue; 970-384-2262).

For regional libations, order the sampler plate (\$9) of eight brews in tiny jars at the Glenwood Canyon Brewpub (402 Seventh Street; 970-945-1276; www.glenwoodcanyon.com) in the Hotel Denver.

For breakfast, try Rosi's Little Bavarian (141 West Sixth Street; 970-928-9186), where the display case is filled with strudels (\$2), but locals come for the huevos (\$7.95).

Just 12 miles south of town, Sunlight (800-445-7931; www.sunlightmtn.com) is a folksy anachronistic ski area — with free parking and \$48 lift tickets.

Bodies appeared and disappeared as the mists tumbled over the water's surface. A self-described worker bee talked about his commute to the hive (Aspen) and described the pool as standing-room-only in the summer. Wintertime is lower key.

One good prelude to a soak is a trek above town to Linwood Cemetery to see the final resting place of Doc Holliday, the dentist turned gunslinger and gambler of OK Corral fame, who died at the Glenwood Hotel in 1887. After a big snow, you can snowshoe the half-mile to the graveyard, as my husband and I did; most days a pair of traction-enhancing Yaktrax over hiking boots will do.

Holliday came to the hot springs pools to ease the pain of tuberculosis, but the sulfuric vapors may actually have aggravated his condition. Ancient jumpers stand sentinel over a monument to Holliday that looks like a headstone framed by a petite wrought-iron fence. But the exact location of his body is unknown because cemetery plot records were lost over the years. Some theories hold that the body never made it to Linwood at all but is lying in somebody's backyard in Glenwood.

For the back story on Holliday and Glenwood's early days, history buffs head to the Frontier Historical Society Museum, which has a detailed walking tour guide (\$3) of the downtown. To hear about more recent history, we met up with a longtime resident and former mayor, Don Vanderhoof, over a breakfast of chicken-fried steak at the Daily Bread on Grand Avenue, Glenwood's main street.

During World War II, Mr. Vanderhoof's brother, a navy pilot, was shot down over the South Pacific and badly injured. He ended up in the Hotel Colorado, which had been commissioned by

the Navy as a convalescent hospital. In the late 1940s, the Vanderhoofs opened Holiday Hill, a ski area, where the Sunlight resort is now. "We rigged up a rope tow using the rear wheels of a 1930s truck," he said. "You can still see the chassis of the truck up there."

Since its glamorous long-ago heyday, Glenwood has grown considerably, and not always in the most picturesque ways. Route 82, the two-lane artery to Aspen, runs straight through the heart of town, down Grand Avenue. In the 1950s, shop owners fought against a bypass, fearing business would dry up. "The people won the battle," Mr. Vanderhoof said, "but they lost the war."

With an Interstate, two rivers and 30 or so mile-long coal trains running through town daily and mountains hulking in every direction, Glenwood splays

Gunslingers and gangsters once relaxed at this resort.

out like a tripod — with strip malls, fast-food joints and even a new half-million-square-foot mall. But it also has charming streets lined with red-and-yellow-brick Victorian buildings and neighborhoods filled with 100-year-old Queen Annes lovingly restored in bright purples, pinks and blues. Grand Avenue, once the site of three hardware stores, is now packed with ice cream and candle shops catering to tourists.

One of the newest attractions is the Glenwood Canyon Adventure Park, which runs tours of the limestone caves inside Iron Mountain, at the north end of town. In the late 1890s, visitors

dressed in their finest — top hats and floor-length dresses — rode burros up the mountain and clambered down into the caves. World War I effectively shut down the operation in 1917. The caves reopened in 1999.

Today a tram whisks you 4,300 feet to the park. In winter, most of the amusement-park fare (zip-line, gemstone panning, mechanical bull) is closed, but the tours run all year — the temperature inside the caves hovers around 52 degrees, regardless of the season. On the basic walking tour, we saw an otherworldly labyrinth of whimsical calcite formations: stalactites, delicate soda straws and, the most amusing, cave bacon — little wavy drapes marbled with iron oxide. Like Rorschach inkblots, the formations assumed recognizable shapes. Our guide pointed out King Kong, a tiny fairy, even a garden gnome.

The air in the caves is humid, but nothing like the hair-curling veil of steam in the subterranean grottos at the Yampah Spa. Inside the spa's dark and somewhat creepy vapor caves, we discovered contemplative types in the lotus position, deeply inhaling the mineralized vapors. As we sat on slick marble benches, a wiry, bearded man offered a sniff from his eucalyptus vial and spoke in hushed tones about politics and philosophy.

In the light of day, we drove east on the highway that was shoehorned into Glenwood Canyon in 1992. To lay down four-lane Interstate 70 where once a narrow wagon road barely wedged between cliff and riverbank, engineers designed an elevated highway reminiscent of "The Jetsons," with 4,000-foot tunnels bored through granite and 7,000-foot bridges high above the valley floor. If Glenwood is worth stopping the car for, this road is equally worth the driving.