





In Colorado, play hard by day and choose comfort at Royal Gorge Cabins by night

Christine Loomis Special to USA TODAY 10Best

Published 9:01 a.m. ET Sept. 13, 2021

Luxury lodging and adrenaline-ignited outdoor adventure aren't mutually exclusive. Like fried chicken elevated by the effervescent elegance of Champagne, outdoor adventure finds a sublime pairing in upscale lodging.

Royal Gorge Cabins, located in Cañon City, Colorado, are proof you can challenge Mother Nature and devilishly conceived man-made thrills by day, then tuck into an elegant, amenity-filled cabin by night. It's a best-of-both-worlds thing.

The one- and two-bedroom cabins sit across the road from Echo Canyon River Expeditions, a partner property with glamping tents and a campground. Echo Canyon has been running whitewater trips on the Arkansas River since 1978.

We can thank the Arkansas for the spectacular gorge 13 miles from Cañon City, the result of a persistent river forcing its way through granite over millions of years, creating a narrow passage framed by shear walls rising over 1,000 feet. From the top, the Arkansas snaking far below hardly seems big or wild enough to have carved such a humbling landscape. But experienced from a raft bucking over rapids, the frequently roiling river makes its power known.

Happily, the Arkansas has multiple personalities. Some sections offer a mostly scenic journey interspersed with class III thrills, while others provide the kind of serious, heart-stopping action served up by class IV and V rapids.

On a blue-sky day, I chose the section flowing through Bighorn Sheep Canyon, a family-friendly stretch of river with easy moments of photo-op scenery. Possible sightings of bighorn sheep are punctuated by nearly a dozen class III rapids with names like Maytag, Wake Up, Sharks Tooth and Spinner – just the right amount of wild to get us wet, cool us down and make a half-day trip exhilarating.



The indoor-outdoor restaurant is conveniently just steps from the changing rooms, with interesting historic signs to read between the two. The best tell stories of the Arkansas River Valley's early days and long-gone characters who left their mark here.

Satisfied after our afternoon rapid riding and cold craft beer, we headed to our cabin. It's almost misleading to call them "cabins." Sleek and contemporary in design, they exude an upscale sophistication and provide the quintessential spot – two perfectly placed outside chairs and a hammock – to sip a beverage and watch the sun sink over Colorado's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Add family games, a well-equipped mini-kitchen, supremely comfy beds and a glorious shower. What more does one need?

Just down the road, Royal Gorge Dinosaur Experience pays homage to Colorado's paleo past and the prehistoric giants that once roamed here. Check out the museum, then head outside. You can walk a short dino trail, dig for "bones" or accept the challenge of a ropes course menacingly guarded by two animatronic behemoths. The T-Rex seems particularly inclined to pick off puny humans making their way around the course, though I'm told most survive.

A few miles south, Royal Gorge Bridge & Park spreads across the top of the gorge, presenting visitors with multiple ways to scare themselves silly crossing back and forth. If heights are no problem, all the fun options are in play.

Take the gondola from the Visitor Center side and walk back across the sky-high bridge slung between gorge walls. Or you can strap into hands-free Cloudscraper Zip Line and be catapulted back in the direction of your car. Whichever you choose, stand below the zipline for a moment to hear grown men scream as they're launched into nothingness, legs dangling over the river 1,200 feet below.

If swinging at 50 mph in a free fall and hanging momentarily over the yawning chasm sounds fun, there's Royal Rush Skycoaster. And no need to be an experienced rock climber to take on the Via Ferrata – but it might make scrambling around the near-vertical walls less terrifying, though you're securely harnessed to a cable.

The park has dining outlets, but we booked dinner at 8 Mile for its excellent salads and



breakfast.

If you crave still more adventure, Skyline Drive is three harrowing miles of one-lane road with anxiety-inducing drop-offs on both sides. Look for dinosaur tracks along the way – but not the driver, who shouldn't take eyes off the road until safely coasting into Cañon City.

Fried chicken and Champagne? Yes, please. Ditto heart-pounding adventure paired with the upscale comforts of Royal Gorge Cabins.

10Best is a part of the USA TODAY Network – providing an authentically local point of view on destinations around the world – in addition to travel and lifestyle advice.