

FORBES

Real Escapes

Golden Triangle

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The best-kept secret in Colorado's second-home market? Delta County.

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At the southern edge of the world's largest flattop mountain, the Grand Mesa, lies an area about the size of Rhode Island known more for its high-desert climate and organic farms than ski resorts. Delta County, two hours north of Telluride but lacking any downhill skiing of note, has long been the poor stepchild of Aspen, Beaver Creek and Vail. But as a growing number of locals and second-home owners from those areas leave--because of overcrowding, an exorbitant cost of living or just general unease with explosive growth--they're looking southwest and bringing to this agricultural and mining area the cultural and social atmosphere, plus that uniquely Western lack of pretension, that made their former hometowns so attractive in the first place. Think Marin County 30 years ago, substitute mountain views for rolling fog and sea spray, throw in a nascent food-and-wine scene, and you've got Delta County.

"We have some people here who moved into ski areas in the '70s for a lifestyle that isn't there anymore," notes real-estate agent Bob Pennetta, who's lived in the area since 1976. "The joke is that the billionaires chased out the millionaires," he says. By comparison, "This community is pretty much classless and nobody cares whether you drive a pickup or a Mercedes SUV, but if you come in here as a smug rich person, you'll be treated like a jerk. Nobody cares here what you wear."

Land in Delta County is still relatively cheap by Colorado standards. Its most trendy area--a triangle formed by the towns of Crawford, Hotchkiss and Paonia--is called the North Fork Valley, so named because of its proximity to the Gunnison River, one of the finest fly-fishing rivers in the West. The number of farms and ranches with large acreage is significant; if owning a ranch has been a dream, this might be the place for you. Recent listings have included a 135-acre irrigated, hay-producing farm in Crawford with views of the West Elk Mountains for \$1.35 million, and a 32-acre artist-owned ranch in Hotchkiss for \$894,000. Among potential commercial properties, a year-round guest ranch and cattle operation on 506 acres (with about 12,000 additional acres in permits for hunting, recreation and grazing) is up for \$4.25 million in Paonia.

Who's buying these properties? Some are retirees, who tend to settle in the Cedaredge area. "We have couples who've gotten their kids through college who are selling their Eastern Slope [Denver-area] properties and buying places where they can grow a little something," says Pennetta. There are the requisite studio types from Hollywood jetting to nearby airports in Montrose or Grand Junction, and still others who just know a good

bargain when they see it. “At this point, we have an emerging market in the North Fork Valley. We have a number of speculative buyers who are purchasing lots and acreage, and they’re just sitting and waiting for it to happen,” says Kelli Hepler, Delta County tourism coordinator.

Affluent East Coasters partial to the West’s wide-open spaces have sussed out the county’s potential as well. “Colorado was always very attractive, and then I saw the prices in Aspen and Telluride and I just said no. For part-time, it didn’t make any sense,” says Dan Malloy, a New York–based reinsurance broker who recently purchased a 200-acre property adjacent to the Gunnison. (He will not disclose the selling price, but notes that “I’ve heard that \$7,000 an acre here is a good price for land where you could potentially have fruit trees from one end to the other.”)

Malloy and his wife decided to buy in the area after a trip last summer. “We stayed at Leroux Creek Inn and were having breakfast in their vineyards and pointing to a herd of buffalo in the distance, and the weather was spectacular.” In the space of a weekend, the couple was hooked. “It’s totally different from Aspen and Telluride in that you’re not in the mountains; they’re not in your face. You have these great vistas and you don’t have a headache,” Malloy chuckles. He plans to rehab some of the existing buildings on his property and use about half for pastureland; what exactly he’ll grow or graze remains up in the air for now, although like many newcomers to the area, he’s intrigued by its agricultural possibilities. “For me it’s a fun project because there are all these resources and talent available locally to help improve these 200 acres,” he says.

Buying and renovating an existing property is, in fact, a great way to get to know the neighbors--after all, there are only about 30,000 of them in the entire county. Linda Hodgson, owner of the luxury Smith Fork Ranch in Crawford, purchased the property in 2000 with her family and converted it to a guest ranch. “The people in the area were so worried about what would happen to [the property] and they were pleased to work on [the renovation],” recalls Hodgson. “There are a lot of craftsmen who live in the area, and there’s no place for them to live in Aspen or Telluride; we’ve got everything from watercolorists to potters to sculptors and glassblowers.”

And then there’s the food, highlighted by local game (pheasant, elk, duck, bison). “We don’t deal with big food purveyors because we don’t need to--but they probably wouldn’t drive to where we are, anyway,” Hodgson says. But the area’s pride is its produce. “The Valley is really the garden center of Colorado, and there are all these organic farmers and growers and produce is incredible--cherries, cantaloupes, peaches,” she notes. Because the high and low temperatures are so varied, the sugar content in the fruit is high, and the amount of water in the area allows for easy irrigation. Vineyards are everywhere, and the county recently celebrated the opening of its first brandy distillery. In summers, the Leroux Creek Inn in Hotchkiss, a 54-acre property with its own winery, hosts a seven-course outdoor dinner called Dine in the Vine. “Outdoor farm parties under moonlight with a string quartet playing and food and wine” are commonplace, says Kelli Hepler, “but the snobbery is missing.”

Since there isn't much nightlife to speak of, these kinds of gatherings cement the bonds between locals, newcomers and would-be residents. "They all want to be involved in a community where they can make a difference," says Joanna Gilbert, a former New York and Vail resident who, with her chef husband, Yvon Gros, purchased Leroux Creek in 2000. As the area teeters precariously on the edge of being discovered, Gilbert takes heart from what a local resident told her when she first moved in: "The people don't choose the Valley; the Valley chooses the people."