

Aquarium guide Shane Taylor and diver Lorenza Sloss get a close encounter of the toothy kind at the Denver Aquarium.



Doug Sloss

Stay-cations!

Close-to-home travel ideas for these tough economic times

Economy got you down? Perk up with the following adventures that can be found close to home. From renting a cabin with a crackling fire to soaking in hot springs and even riding a train to Glenwood, these close-by vacations let you stretch both your legs and your dollar and can have you back in Steamboat Springs Sunday night ready to greet the week anew.

Snow Sharks Scuba diving in Denver

By Jennie Lay

Snowbound and aching for a shark encounter? Denver's Downtown Aquarium offers a bubble fix without the financial hurdles of traveling to Tahiti. Venture inside the exhibits to scuba dive or snorkel with an international collection of sea life you'll never find cohabitating anywhere else.

The shark tank is for scuba divers only. Get behind the 11-inch aquarium glass with a couple dozen sharks while landlubbers in ski jackets gape from the hallway. Talk about defying nature: not only are you 1,000 miles from the ocean, but you're lapping a 400,000-gallon tank with fierce-looking sand tiger sharks, Pacific green sea turtles, barracudas, zebra sharks, guitar fish and a prehistoric-looking pair of 12-foot green saw fish. The awe-inspiring sharks are curious, but content to merely flash you close encounters with their toothy grins while you lurk at the perimeters of their tank.

If you'd prefer to skip the sharks or snorkel, try a dip in the 200,000-gallon Under the Sea exhibit. It features a human-adoring, 300-pound Queensland grouper, turtles, fat green moray eels and more than 25 other tropical fish species.

Water temperatures are in the mid-70s in both exhibits and visibility is crystal clear from wall to window. Top-quality wetsuits, dive and snorkel gear are provided on site so as to avoid any contamination of the exhibits from your last dive adventure. Either option is far toastier than an icy, desperation dive in Steamboat Lake this winter.

Info: Denver's Downtown Aquarium is located at 700 Water St. in LoDo. Maximum groups of six dive Saturdays and Sundays, year-round. \$175 per dive includes aquarium admission for you and a guest, guides, all equipment, validated parking and more. Snorkeling (\$75) is for anyone 6 and up. For reservations, visit www.divedowntown.com or call (303) 789-2450.

Mineral Bath Over the pass, Hot Sulphur Springs has what heals you

By Jennie Lay

Get to know your Grand County neighbors. In the tradition of Routt County residents who regularly flock to Strawberry Park Hot Springs for some R&R, head to Hot Sulphur Springs Resort and Spa to mingle with the ski bums, Shred Betties and exhausted construction workers who inhabit the east side of Rabbit Ears Pass. They may all know each other; but the joy of the getaway is that no one here knows you.

Hot Sulphur Springs Resort has been healing tired bodies with its mineral-thick waters since 1864, but the Utes and Arapahos had named these hot springs right on the edge of the Colorado River "big medicine" long before that. With 24 individual pools, there's ample space for socializing or solitary soaking in mineral waters known to enhance your skin, bones, muscles and tranquility. More than 200,000 gallons of fresh, warm water flow through the pools each day – each containing sodium, sulfate, chloride, silica, potassium, calcium, fluoride, magnesium, lithium, iron, manganese, zinc and arsenic.

When you slide into the milky waters that fill a natural grotto at the Ute Cave Pool, dunk under the waterfall for Mother Nature's high-pressure massage. Try a cozy dip for two in the bitty Columbine tub. Then enjoy quintessential Colorado views from Lupe's Pool, where you'll sink up to your earlobes in the rectangular stone tub and peer over the historic Hot Sulphur Springs downtown and sandstone cliffs that rise above the meandering river.

Info: Hot Sulphur Springs is a 1 1/2-hour drive east of Steamboat, past Kremmling on U.S. 40. Soak all day for \$17.50 – pools are open from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. – or spend the night in one of the simple, rustically appointed motel rooms for \$108 and up. Full spa services are available. Call (970) 725-3306 or visit www.hotsulphursprings.com.