

THE DURANGO FIELD GUIDE

Moving to Durango

*A field guide to the land, the towns, the water, the winters,
and everything nobody tells you before you sign.*





WHERE THIS BEGINS

Six thousand five hundred feet, and a river running through it

The Animas River cuts through the middle of town. Locals float it in July and ice fish the reservoirs above it in January.

THE DURANGO FIELD GUIDE

Moving to Durango

A practical, unsentimental guide to relocating to La Plata County, Archuleta County, and the Four Corners. Written for people who are done reading listicles and want to know what the well permit says.

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Read the parts you need. Skip the rest.

Most relocation guides are brochures with a table of contents. This one is built differently. It gets specific about the things that actually cost people money out here: water, access, fire, septic, and the difference between a road the county plows and a road you plow.

Part One covers the land itself. Geography, elevation, seasons, and the weather patterns that shape everything from your roof pitch to your commute. Part Two walks town by town, from the Animas Valley north of Durango down to Aztec and Farmington. Part Three is daily life. Schools, hospitals, work, groceries, and the sixty seconds of Highway 550 that will teach you humility.

Part Four is the one to read twice. Buying ground in Southwest Colorado is not like buying a house in a metro subdivision. Water is a property right, separate from the dirt. A well

permit can forbid you from watering a single horse. Wildfire code determines what siding you install. Mineral rights may belong to somebody you will never meet.

ONE HONEST DISCLAIMER

Nothing here is legal, tax, engineering, or insurance advice. Rules change. Codes get adopted. Well permits get re-examined. Verify anything that matters with the county, the state, and your own professionals before you write a check. Where a fact came from a public source, we say so.

Numbers in this guide are the durable kind. You will not find last month's median sale price here, because it would be wrong by the time you read it. What you will find is how the system works, which does not change much, and which is what most buyers get wrong.

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Before you go any further



Ashley Blackmore. Born and raised in Southwest Colorado.



Ashley Blackmore and Dave Bachman.

I grew up here. That is not a marketing line, it is the reason this guide exists. I have watched a lot of people fall in love with Southwest Colorado in September and try to leave in March.

The ones who stay tend to have a few things in common. They understood what they were buying. They knew whether their water came from a well, a ditch, a district, or a promise. They knew whether the county maintained their road or whether nine neighbors and a handshake did.

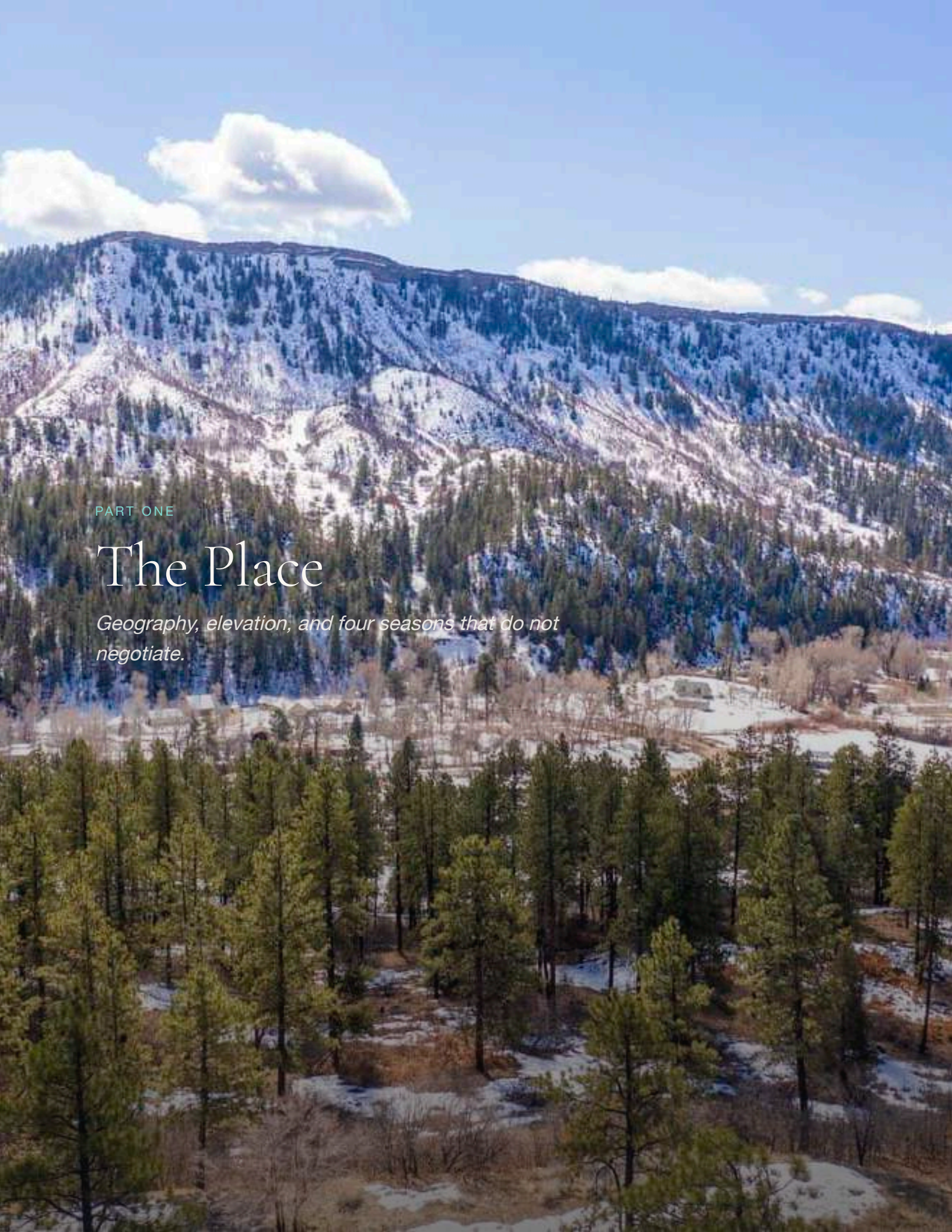
Here is the thing. This country rewards preparation and punishes assumptions. You can own forty acres and not be legally allowed to water a horse from your own well. That is not a loophole. That is Colorado water law working exactly as designed. Nobody tells you that on the listing site.

So this guide is mostly the questions Dave and I ask on our own listings, arranged so you can ask them too. It is deliberately light on branding and heavy on substance.

Come out in February. Drive 550 in a storm. Walk the property line in the snow, where the fence actually is instead of where the plat says it is. Then decide. The land will still be here. It always has been.

Ashley Blackmore

BROKER, BLACKMORE GROUP REALTY



PART ONE

The Place

Geography, elevation, and four seasons that do not negotiate.

ORIENTATION

Where you actually are

Durango sits closer to Albuquerque than to Denver, and that single fact explains most of the culture.

Look at a map of Colorado and put your finger on the bottom left corner. You are close. Durango sits at 6,512 feet above sea level along the Animas River, at the southern edge of the San Juan Mountains, about thirty five miles from the Four Corners.

The city had 19,071 residents at the 2020 census and serves as the seat of La Plata County, which counted 55,638 people across roughly 1,700 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Most of this county is not

town. It is mesa, river bottom, ponderosa, scrub oak, hayfield, and public land.

The distances that shape life

Denver is roughly 360 highway miles away, about a six and a half hour drive, longer in bad weather. Albuquerque is about 175 miles southeast. Everything gets trucked in over a mountain pass or up from New Mexico. That shows up in your grocery bill, your lumber quote, and how long you wait on a specialty part.



Ponderosa, scrub oak, and irrigated bottomland. The pattern repeats across La Plata County.

SAY IT RIGHT

The Animas is *AN-uh-mus*. Hesperus is *HESS-purr-us*. The Florida River is *Flo-REE-da*, not the state. And the correct answer to how long the drive to Denver takes is always "depends on Wolf Creek."

You are not buying a house with a yard. You are buying a position in a watershed, a fireshed, and a road agreement.

REFERENCE

By the numbers

Durable figures, sourced. We left out anything that changes month to month.

FACT	FIGURE	SOURCE
Elevation, downtown Durango	6,512 feet	Durango School District
City population, 2020 census	19,071	U.S. Census Bureau
La Plata County population, 2020	55,638	U.S. Census Bureau
County land area	about 1,692 sq mi	U.S. Census Bureau
Average sunny days per year	about 266	Durango School District
Purgatory Resort, north of town	25 miles	Purgatory press kit
Purgatory skiable terrain	over 1,600 acres	Purgatory press kit
Purgatory average annual snowfall	about 260 inches	Wikipedia
Mercy Hospital beds / trauma level	82 beds · Level III	CommonSpirit Health
Durango School District enrollment	about 4,500	durangoschools.org
Airport distance from downtown	about 12–15 miles	City of Durango
DRO year round nonstop cities	DEN, DFW, PHX	flydurango.com
Mesa Verde National Park	about 35 miles west	WorldAtlas
Exempt domestic well cap	15 gallons per minute	Colorado DWR
Acreage threshold, domestic well	35 acres	C.R.S. 37-92-602
416 Fire, 2018, acres burned	54,000 public acres	Durango Herald

WHY THERE ARE NO PRICES IN THIS GUIDE

Median price, days on market, and inventory move constantly. Ask us for a current market snapshot instead — it takes about ten minutes to pull, and it will be accurate the day you get it.

WATER AND ROCK

The San Juans, the Animas, and the water that leaves

Every drop that falls on these mountains is already spoken for by somebody downstream.

The San Juan Mountains are volcanic, ancient, and steep. They catch storms and hold snow high into summer. That snowpack fills the Animas, the Florida, the Los Pinos, the La Plata, and the Piedra.

Prior appropriation, in one paragraph

Colorado does not do riparian rights. You do not get water because you touch the river. You get water because somebody, at some point, put it to beneficial use and got a decree with a date on it. First in time, first in right. In a dry year, an 1892 ditch gets its full call while a 1978 well gets curtailed.

What this means for a buyer: the water on the property, under the property, and across the property may be governed by three different instruments. Part Four takes this apart properly.

The rivers, briefly

Animas. The big one. Runs through downtown. Whitewater park, trout, and the reason the town is where it is.

Florida. Dammed at Lemon Reservoir. Irrigates Florida Mesa.

Los Pinos. The Pine. Dammed at Vallecito. Runs through Bayfield onto Southern Ute land.

La Plata. Small, heavily appropriated.

Piedra. East toward Pagosa. Wild, undammed for most of its length.

FIELD NOTE

When you tour a rural property, ask to see the headgate. Then ask who operates it, who cleans the ditch each spring, and whether there is a written ditch agreement. The answer tells you almost everything.

Water rights out here are the difference between a hayfield and a very expensive lawn.



SEASON ONE

Winter is the audition

Come in February. If you still want it in February, you want it.

WINTER

The season that sorts people

Roughly November through March. Sometimes April. Occasionally into May up high.

Winter in Durango proper is milder than newcomers expect. At 6,512 feet in a river valley, town gets snow, it melts off south facing streets in a couple of days, and the sun comes back. Twenty five miles north at Purgatory, average annual snowfall runs about 260 inches. Same county. Different planet.

What winter actually asks of you

Plowing. On a county road, the county plows, eventually, by priority order. On a private road, you and your neighbors pay a contractor — or you own a plow truck.

Tires. Colorado enforces traction laws on mountain corridors during storms. Get real snow tires.

Heat. Out past natural gas service, you are on propane, buying it by the tank. Learn the fill schedule before your first January.

THE 550 RULE

Highway 550 north toward Silverton crosses Coal Bank and Molas passes. In winter it closes, sometimes for avalanche control. Never plan a flight, a closing, or a vet appointment around it. Plan around Highway 160 instead.

The first winter checklist

- ☐ Locate and label the main water shutoff and the well pressure tank
- ☐ Heat tape or insulate exposed pipe in the crawlspace and pump house
- ☐ Blow out irrigation lines and the ditch pump before the first hard freeze
- ☐ Confirm propane tank capacity and set up automatic delivery
- ☐ Heat cable north facing eaves if you see ice damming
- ☐ Snow tires on, chains in the truck, shovel and traction sand in the bed
- ☐ Know your county road priority level and your plow contractor's number
- ☐ Generator or wood stove backup if you are on a rural feeder line

Snow load is a structural number here, and it varies by elevation and jurisdiction. Look for adequate roof pitch, metal or Class A rated roofing, and managed eaves. Ice damming is not cosmetic — and neither is where a slide off a steep metal roof lands.

MUD SEASON

The one nobody photographs

Late March into May. The mountains are still closed and the valley is a sponge.

Mud season is the tax you pay for the other three. Snow melts, frost comes out of the ground, and every unpaved surface in Southwest Colorado turns into something between chocolate pudding and structural clay. It is also, quietly, the most honest time to look at property.

What mud season reveals

Where the water goes. Whether that gentle swale is actually a seasonal drainage. Whether the septic leach field is soggy in a way it should never be. Whether that charming little crossing floods.

ASK THIS QUESTION

"Does the county road turn to mud, and is there a spring weight restriction on it?" That matters if your moving truck, hay delivery, or concrete pour is scheduled for April.



Unpaved county road, spring thaw.

The mud season property walk

- Walk the driveway from the county road to the house, noting every low spot and culvert
- Stand where the septic tank and leach field are — unusually green grass in April is a conversation with an engineer
- Check the crawlspace for silt lines or a smell that arrives before you open the door
- Find the ditch, if there is one, and see whether it is running and where it goes
- Ask when the road was last graded, and by whom

SUMMER

Sun, thunder, and the monsoon

Long, dry, brilliant days, and then, if the pattern sets up, an afternoon rain you can set a watch by.

The Durango School District puts the local average at about 266 sunny days a year. Summer here is not humid. Mornings are cold enough for a flannel even in July.

Sometime in early July most years, moisture pushes up from the south and the monsoon arrives. Towering clouds build over the San Juans by noon, thunder by two, rain by three, clear by five.

Fire season, honestly

Between the end of runoff and the monsoon, this country burns. The 416 Fire in 2018 burned 54,000 acres of public land north of Durango, per Durango Herald reporting. No homes and no lives were lost, but it was a defining local event.



Summer runs long. Rivers, singletrack, alpine lakes, and lift served mountain biking within forty minutes of town.

What people actually do

Raft the Animas. The lower stretch through town includes a whitewater park. Ride. Horse Gulch and Overend Mountain Park sit inside city limits. Fish. Gold Medal water is within a couple of hours.

MONSOON ETIQUETTE

Be off exposed ridgelines by noon. Never drive through a flooded arroyo — that brown water is moving rocks.

FALL

The reason nobody leaves

Roughly the third week of September through the end of October.

See it once and you will understand.

There is a two week window when the aspen on the north side of Coal Bank Pass go gold, the scrub oak on the mesas turns rust and burgundy, the cottonwoods along the Animas go yellow, and the light comes in low and clean around four in the afternoon.

Hunting season is a season

Archery, muzzleloader, and rifle seasons run from late August into November. If you buy rural ground, you will have opinions about this quickly.

BUYING IN OCTOBER

Fall is when the country is at its most seductive, which is exactly why it is the worst month to make an emotional decision. Go back in March before you go under contract.

The fall checklist for a rural place

- ☐ Cord wood split, stacked, and covered by the end of September
- ☐ Hay purchased and under cover, or a delivery contract in writing
- ☐ Ditch shut off and headgate closed per your ditch company schedule
- ☐ Irrigation lines drained, pumps pulled, hydrants checked
- ☐ Generator serviced, fuel stabilized, transfer switch tested
- ☐ Snowplow contract signed — they fill up, sign in September

ALTITUDE

Living at 6,512 feet

Your body, your car, your oven, and your dog will all notice.

Six thousand five hundred feet is high enough to matter and low enough that most people adjust within a couple of weeks. Still, the first month is real. Expect shortness of breath on stairs, disrupted sleep, headaches, and much lower tolerance for alcohol.

The practical adjustments

Water. The air is dry. You will dehydrate without feeling thirsty. Drink more than you think, and put humidifiers in the bedrooms if you get nosebleeds.

Sun. Ultraviolet exposure climbs with elevation. Sunscreen in February is not paranoia, it is arithmetic.

Cooking. Water boils around 199 degrees Fahrenheit up here. Baking needs adjusting. Pressure cookers earn their keep.

Cars. Naturally aspirated engines lose power. Your brakes on a long descent are not a suggestion, they are a consumable.

IF YOU ARE COMING FROM SEA LEVEL

Take the first three days easy. If someone in your household has a cardiac or pulmonary condition, talk to a physician before you close, not after. Altitude is a medical variable.

Once you are adapted, going back to sea level feels like breathing soup. You will run a personal record on a trip to the coast and think you have become an athlete. You have not. You have just become a local.

A young boy with blonde hair, wearing a bright yellow t-shirt and light grey shorts, stands on a reddish-brown dirt path. He is seen from behind, with his arms outstretched horizontally towards the horizon. The background features a sprawling town with houses and trees showing autumn colors, nestled at the foot of a range of rugged, rocky mountains under a clear, vibrant blue sky.

Two

PART TWO

The Towns

One area code, a dozen different lives. Pick carefully.

IN TOWN

The grid, the avenues, and the mesas

Durango proper is walkable, historic, and small. That is the whole pitch, and it holds up.

Main Avenue runs north to south through a National Register historic district of brick storefronts, the Strater Hotel, and the train depot at the south end. East of Main, the numbered avenues climb toward Fort Lewis College on the rim.

The in town neighborhoods

The Historic District and East Third Avenue. Victorian and Craftsman homes, big trees, brick sidewalks. A historic designation can constrain what you change on the exterior.

Animas City and North Main. The original townsite north of downtown. Bungalows, alleys, and an easy walk to the river trail.

Crestview and Rockridge. West side, up the hill. Overend Mountain Park is at the back door.

Skyridge. East side, up against Horse Gulch open space, and squarely in the wildland urban interface.

THE IN TOWN TRADEOFF

Small lots, older systems, tight parking, and city stormwater. In exchange you get sidewalks, plowed streets, municipal water and sewer, and a five minute walk to a bar where somebody knows your name.

Older housing stock means older everything — have it inspected by somebody who has worked on hundred year old buildings. Short term rental regulation is an active policy area in the City of Durango; verify the current ordinance for a specific address before you go under contract.

NORTH ON 550

Animas Valley to Purgatory

Twenty five miles of river bottom, red cliffs, golf, and then the mountains take over.

Leave town heading north and the valley opens. Hayfields, horses, the river braiding through cottonwoods, and sandstone walls on both sides — the most photographed agricultural bottom in Southwest Colorado.

Animas View and Trimble. River access, older county subdivisions, Trimble Hot Springs at the crossroads.

Dalton Ranch and Glacier Club. Golf, covenants, HOA dues.

Falls Creek and Hermosa. Ponderosa, ridgelines, serious wildland urban interface — and years of organized fire mitigation.

Tamarron and Cascade / Purgatory. Higher, colder, more snow. Ski in ski out product twenty five miles from town.



Ponderosa country above the Animas Valley floor.

BEFORE YOU BUY NORTH

Ask three questions. What is the actual winter commute time on a snow day? Is the road county maintained or private? How much defensible space work is outstanding on this parcel?

EAST

Florida Mesa, Bayfield, and the Pine River

Where the working agriculture still works, and where a lot of families quietly decide to live.

Head east on Highway 160 and the country flattens into mesa — irrigated hay, cattle, long views back to the La Platas. Keep going and you reach Bayfield, about twenty miles from Durango, with its own school district and a genuinely different price posture.

North of Bayfield, Forest Lakes and the Vallecito corridor climb into ponderosa and aspen. Water and road questions get sharper the further up you go. Vallecito Reservoir has a summer cabin culture that goes back generations.



Bayfield and the Pine River valley — more land per dollar than anything closer to Durango.

Ignacio sits south of Bayfield, headquarters of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe. Property here can involve tribal land, allotted land, and jurisdictional questions unlike anywhere else in the county — title work matters, and so does a broker who has closed deals there before.

THE COMMUTE MATH

Bayfield to Durango is about twenty highway miles. Drive it at 7:30 on a Tuesday, in winter, before you decide.

SOUTH

Three Springs, Grandview, and the mesas below town

The newest part of Durango, and the closest thing to conventional suburban product in the county.

Drive south along the Animas and the valley opens onto the Grandview bench, where Mercy Hospital moved in 2006, and where the master planned Three Springs community grew up around it — sidewalks, alleys, parks, a metro district structure.

METRO DISTRICTS, BRIEFLY

A metropolitan district issues bonds for infrastructure, repaid through a mill levy on homes inside it. Ask for the district service plan and the current debt mill levy, in writing.



Three Springs, where the county's newest neighborhoods take shape.

Durango La Plata County Airport sits roughly twelve to fifteen miles southeast of downtown. DRO is served year round by American and United, nonstop to Dallas Fort Worth, Denver, and Phoenix — a better route map than most towns of nineteen thousand people have any business having.

WEST

Hesperus, Mancos, and La Plata Canyon

Cooler, greener, quieter, and about twenty minutes further from everything.

Highway 160 west of Durango climbs over a low divide and drops into a different feeling entirely — less traffic, more sky, the La Plata Mountains standing up on the right.

Hesperus. A post office, a school, a night-skiing ski area, and a lot of good ground. La Plata Canyon. Old mining country — cabins, patented claims, and access questions that require patience. Mancos. Artists, ranchers, a brewery, gateway to Mesa Verde.

A WORD ON MINING CLAIMS

You will encounter irregular boundaries, unrecorded access, and severed minerals in La Plata Canyon. Do not buy one without a survey and a title commitment you have actually read.



New construction west of town — cooler, greener, and quieter than the valley floor.

Mesa Verde National Park is about thirty five miles west. Internet coverage is patchy and improving — call the provider with the exact address before you count on fiber. Understand your ditch shares and priority date on the La Plata River before you plan a pasture.

PAGOSA SPRINGS

Over Yellow Jacket, into Archuleta County

Sixty miles east, another county, another market, and a great deal more snow.

Highway 160 east from Bayfield climbs over Yellow Jacket Pass into Pagosa Springs — roughly an hour from Durango, its own county, its own school district, its own weather. It sits at the foot of Wolf Creek Pass and gets considerably more snow than Durango in a normal year.

Hot springs downtown on the San Juan River, Wolf Creek Ski Area up the pass, the Weminuche Wilderness to the north, Chimney Rock National Monument to the west.



Large acreage east of the county line trades convenience for privacy and considerably more winter.

THE PAGOSA LOT TRAP

Thousands of platted lots in Archuleta County were sold decades ago in speculative subdivisions with no water, no year round access, no utilities. Get a well permit determination and a soils report before you fall in love.

ACROSS THE LINE

Aztec, Farmington, and San Juan County, New Mexico

Forty five minutes south. Different state, different rules, and a very different price per acre.

Highway 550 runs south past the airport, over the state line, into New Mexico. Aztec comes first, then Farmington — together the commercial heart of the Four Corners, and high desert rather than mountain.

Irrigated river bottom in the Animas and San Juan valleys, with established acequias and ditch rights, trades at a fraction of comparable ground north of the line. The San Juan Basin is also one of the most heavily developed natural gas fields in the country; severed mineral estates are the norm.

THIS IS A DIFFERENT LEGAL SYSTEM

New Mexico real estate practice and water law are not Colorado practice. Ask whether your broker actually holds a New Mexico license.

Longer growing season, different water law, considerably different price — this stretch trades at a fraction of comparable ground north of the state line.

THE POINT OF ALL THIS

You are choosing a life, not a floor plan

A place is more than a listing. Ask us what daily life actually looks like here.

The matchmaker

Find the row that sounds like you. This is a starting point for a conversation, not a verdict.

IF YOU WANT	LOOK HERE FIRST	THE HONEST TRADEOFF
Walk to coffee, no car	Historic District, East Third, Animas City	Old systems, small lots, tight parking
Trail out the back door	Skyridge, Crestview, Rockridge	Wildland urban interface, defensible space work
Horses and irrigated pasture	Animas Valley, Florida Mesa, Bayfield	Ditch schedules and well permit limits
New construction and a warranty	Three Springs, Grandview	Metro district mill levy, smaller lots
Golf and low maintenance	Dalton Ranch, Glacier Club	HOA dues and covenant control
Ski access above all	Purgatory, Cascade, Tamarron	Highway 550 in January, real snow load
More land per dollar	Bayfield, Marvel, Redmesa, Pagosa	Distance from hospital and airport
Quiet, cool, and green	Hesperus, Mancos, La Plata Canyon	Internet coverage, small stream water rights
Lowest price per acre	Aztec, Farmington, San Juan County NM	Different state law, severed minerals
Deep snow and hot springs	Pagosa Springs	Wolf Creek Pass, an hour from Durango

A NOTE ON SCHOOL BOUNDARIES

La Plata County contains Durango, Bayfield, and Ignacio school districts, plus Mancos and Dolores to the west. Confirm the assigned school with the district office using the exact street address before you write an offer.



PART THREE

Daily Life

Schools, doctors, work, groceries, and the long drive to everything else.

SCHOOLS

How education works here

Three public districts inside one county, and boundaries that surprise almost everybody.

Durango School District, formerly known and still widely called 9-R, serves about 4,500 students across seven elementary schools, a charter elementary, two middle schools, two high schools, and a shared school option.

Bayfield School District and Ignacio School District operate independently, each with their own elementary, middle, and high schools. To the west, Mancos and Dolores districts pick up.

The schools inside Durango

Park, Needham, and Riverview elementary schools sit inside city limits. Florida Mesa Elementary serves the mesa southeast of town. Fort Lewis Mesa Elementary sits out at Hesperus. Durango High School on Main Avenue is the large comprehensive high school, with

roughly 1,350 students; Animas High School and Durango Big Picture High School offer smaller, project based alternatives.

VERIFY. ALWAYS.

Elementary enrollment is determined by home address. Two houses on the same rural road can feed different schools, and in some cases different districts. Confirm the assignment with the district using the exact address, in writing, before you go under contract.

Private options include The Liberty School, Durango Montessori, and St. Columba. Homeschool and shared schooling arrangements are common and reasonably well supported. The single most common regret we hear from relocating families is the twenty two mile school run in a storm — ask about the bus route and pickup time before you sign.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Fort Lewis College

A public liberal arts college on the rim above town, and a quiet engine of the local economy.

Fort Lewis College sits on the mesa above downtown Durango with an outsized effect on the town below — students, faculty, athletics, lectures, and a rental housing market that ripples outward from campus.

The college has a distinctive Native American tuition waiver history and enrolls a notably high proportion of Native American students relative to most public colleges. Programs skew toward business, psychology, exercise science, and natural resources.

For relocating families, the practical upsides are real. Concurrent enrollment for high schoolers. A public library and a college library. Community

lectures. Division II athletics. A steady supply of young people who will work seasonal jobs.

A LOCAL PERK

Fort Lewis College has partnered with Purgatory to provide full time first year students with a ski pass, per the college admissions page. Terms change year to year; verify with the college.

If you are buying near the college, understand what your street looks like in September and in May. If you are investing, that same pressure is the reason you are there.

HEALTHCARE

What is here, and what is not

*Mercy Hospital is the regional referral center for the Four Corners.
Know its limits before you need to.*

Mercy Hospital sits on Three Springs Boulevard in the Grandview area, where the current campus opened in June 2006. It is an 82 bed, not for profit, full service acute care hospital designated as a Level III trauma center, part of CommonSpirit Health.

Trauma centers are designated by level. A Level III center provides prompt assessment, resuscitation, surgery, and stabilization, with transfer agreements to higher level centers. A serious multi system trauma or complex case may be flown to Albuquerque, Denver, or

Grand Junction — air ambulance membership programs are common here for exactly this reason.

ASK BEFORE YOU MOVE

If anyone in your household has a chronic or complex condition, call the relevant specialty practice in Durango and ask whether they are accepting new patients. Do this before you close.

If you run stock, line up a veterinarian and a farrier before the trailer leaves. Large animal vets book out fast in this county.

WORK

The local economy, without the spin

Tourism, healthcare, education, government, energy, construction, and an unusual number of remote workers.

Durango does not have a single dominant private employer. It has a stack of medium sized ones: Mercy Hospital, Durango School District, Fort Lewis College, La Plata County and the City of Durango, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Purgatory Resort, and the trades.

The remote work reality

If you work remotely, three things matter more than the view: internet, internet, and internet. Coverage maps lie. Call the provider with the street address and get the answer in writing, then ask the neighbor what they actually get.



Freight, labor, and propane are the annual costs that surprise people most.

THE WAGE GAP

Local wages have not tracked local housing prices — the central economic tension in this county. If you are moving here to take a local job, run the numbers hard before you list your house somewhere else.

GETTING AROUND

The airport, the highways, and the train

One regional airport with a route map that punches above its weight, and two highways that carry everything.

Durango La Plata County Airport, code DRO, sits about twelve to fifteen miles southeast of downtown. American and United fly year round nonstop to Dallas Fort Worth, Denver, and Phoenix, with seasonal nonstop to Houston.

Highway 550 runs north over Coal Bank, Molas, and Red Mountain passes — the Million Dollar Highway — and south to Aztec and Farmington. Highway 160 runs east to Pagosa Springs and west to Mancos and Cortez; it is your all weather route to almost everywhere.

TRIP PLANNING RULE

Check Colorado Department of Transportation road conditions before any winter drive over a pass. Then add an hour.



The Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, running the 1880s branch line behind a steam locomotive.

- Downtown to the airport: about 12–15 miles
- Downtown to Purgatory: 25 miles
- Durango to Bayfield: roughly 20 highway miles
- Durango to Pagosa Springs: about an hour
- Durango to Farmington: roughly 45 minutes
- Durango to Denver: about 360 miles, roughly 6.5 hours

CULTURE

Food, gear, music, and Snowdown

A tourism town with a genuine local culture underneath it, which is rarer than it sounds.

Durango eats well — breweries, coffee roasters, a farmers market, a serious food truck scene in summer. Gear shops outnumber banks, which should tell you what people spend money on.

The events that define the year

Snowdown. Five days in the dead of winter, a themed festival since 1983, with a Parade of Lights and competitions that defy explanation. Do not try to understand it. Participate.

Iron Horse Bicycle Classic. Memorial Day weekend, founded 1972, a road race toward Silverton that historically races the narrow

gauge train.

Durango has full service grocery stores, a natural foods co-op, and a Walmart. There is no Costco — the nearest are in Farmington and Grand Junction.

NEWCOMER ADVICE

Volunteer for something in your first year. Trail crew, the animal shelter, a fire mitigation day. It is the fastest way into this community, and the only way that actually works.

A recreation calendar

Approximate, weather dependent, and the source of every argument at the bar.

MONTH	WHAT IS HAPPENING
January	Deep winter. Purgatory is good. Snowdown. Ice fishing on Vallecito.
February	Best snowpack, coldest mornings. The month to visit if you are serious about moving here.
March	Spring skiing, corn snow. Passes open and close on the same day.
April	Mud season. Desert trips to Utah and Cortez. Property tours get honest.
May	Runoff peaks. Whitewater on the Animas. Iron Horse over Memorial Day. Town wakes up.
June	High water, long light, high fire danger. Alpine trails still hold snow.
July	Monsoon arrives, usually. Ride and hike early, off ridges by noon. Peak visitor season.
August	Wildflowers in the high country. Warm rivers. Archery elk season opens late.
September	Aspen turn. Best month of the year. Get your firewood and hay in.
October	Rifle seasons. Cold nights. First real snow up high.
November	The quiet month. Purgatory opens, conditions permitting.
December	Holiday downtown, parade of lights, the first storm cycle that matters.

THE TWO WEEK RULE

Every season here has about two perfect weeks and everybody argues about which two. April is nobody's pick, which is exactly why it is the best time to shop for a house.

WILDLIFE

You are the newcomer

Bears, elk, mountain lions, and the neighbor whose dog chases them all.

Black bears live here. They come down in the fall looking for calories before denning, and a garbage can is the easiest thousand calories in the county. A fed bear is eventually a dead bear — that is not sentiment, that is how it plays out.

The practical rules

- Trash goes out the morning of pickup, never the night before
- No bird feeders from April through November
- Clean the grill, and do not leave the cooler in the truck bed
- Lock the ground floor windows and doors — bears here open doors

- Electric fence around the chickens, the bees, and the compost

Elk migrate through the valley bottoms in winter and destroy fences, orchards, and gardens without remorse. Fence your fruit trees.

Mountain lions exist here and are almost never seen; keep small dogs in at dusk.

THE LIVESTOCK CONVERSATION

If you run stock, coyotes and lions are part of the operating environment. Guard dogs, lighting, and secure night pens work. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has a game damage program — talk to your neighbors, who have already solved this.

THE PART THAT MATTERS

Now, the hard part

Water, fire, access, minerals, and title. This is where deals are won and lost.

Four

PART FOUR

Buying Ground Here

Water, fire, access, minerals, title. Read this part twice.

WATER

Water is not part of the dirt

In Colorado, water is a separate property right. You can own the land and own nothing of the water that crosses it.

Colorado follows the doctrine of prior appropriation. Water rights are established by putting water to beneficial use and are administered by priority date — first in time, first in right. A senior right from the 1880s gets its full decreed amount in a dry year while a junior right from the 1970s gets nothing.

All Colorado groundwater is presumed hydraulically connected to a surface stream, and therefore administered under the same priority system, unless proven otherwise. Pumping a well depletes a river; the state treats it that way. Every well needs a permit from the Colorado Division of Water Resources. The exceptions are narrow, and they are what most rural buyers get wrong.

The two exempt wells that matter

Domestic well. Available on tracts of 35 acres or more. Generally permits water for up to three single family dwellings, watering of domestic animals and livestock, and irrigation of up to one acre of lawn and garden. Capped at 15 gallons per minute if drilled after May 1971.

Household use only well. Available on tracts under 35 acres, and only if the parcel was created before June 1, 1972, or through a subdivision exemption. Ordinary household purposes inside the dwelling only. No outdoor irrigation. No livestock watering. None.

READ THIS TWICE

A household use only permit means no horses on that well, no pasture, no lawn. Exceeding any exempt limit can void the exemption entirely. If a listing says "horse property" and the well permit says "household use only," somebody is about to have a very bad day.

You can own forty acres, drill your own well, and be legally prohibited from watering a horse. This happens constantly.

The well permit decoder

Pull the permit from the Colorado DWR well permit search tool using the address or permit number, then work down this list.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHY IT MATTERS
Permit number and issue date	Confirms it is a real, current permit and not an abandoned application
Statute cited (602 vs 137)	602 means exempt. 137 means non exempt and priority administered.
Permitted uses, verbatim	"Household use only" is not the same as "domestic." This one line governs your horses.
Permitted pumping rate	Exempt wells drilled after 1971 are capped at 15 gpm
Annual volume limit	Often expressed in acre-feet; household use only permits are tightly limited
Number of dwellings served	Determines whether a guest house or ADU is legal on that water
Irrigated acreage allowed	Commonly one acre maximum on a domestic exempt well, or zero
Reference to an augmentation plan	If cited, confirm compliance with the Division 7 Engineer
Well construction and yield report	Filed by the driller — actual measured yield, not hoped for yield
Depth and aquifer	Neighbor wells do not predict yours. Aquifers do not follow plat lines.

ALWAYS DO THIS

Order a well yield test and a water quality test during inspection. Test for coliform, nitrates, and, given the mining history in this basin, heavy metals. If you can test in late summer, do — yield in April is not yield in September.

SURFACE WATER

Ditches, shares, and augmentation

If the property has irrigated ground, somebody somewhere holds a decree, and you need to know who.

Irrigation in this county mostly moves through ditch companies — mutual corporations. You do not own the water directly, you own shares, and the company delivers water pro rata according to its priority. Shares are personal property; they do not automatically convey with the deed unless somebody makes sure they do.

What to verify, in order

- How many shares, in what ditch company, and are they in the seller's name today
- What the shares actually delivered in the last three years, not what they are decreed
- Whether assessments are current, and what they run annually
- Whether the shares are being conveyed by the contract, explicitly
- Where the headgate is, who turns it, and the rotation schedule

THE CLASSIC MISTAKE

A buyer closes on a hay meadow, then discovers the water shares were never assigned and the seller sold them to the neighbor two years ago. Title insurance does not cover this. Read the contract.

Augmentation, in plain language: when a new well would injure senior rights, the owner replaces the depletion with other water under a plan decreed by water court.

Ask us for the fuller septic, wildfire, insurance, and title sections of this guide — a broker conversation covers more ground than a page limit ever will.

BEFORE YOU WRITE AN OFFER

Talk to someone who has actually stood on the land

Every question in this guide is a question we answer for clients every week. If you are considering a move to La Plata County, Archuleta County, or the Four Corners, arrange a private conversation before you fall in love with a listing.



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