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Go and Do: Bair Ranch adventures, other rec outfitters adapt to Glenwood Canyon closure

Good time for locals to check out area escapades

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Visitors take off for an ATV tour with Glenwood Adventure Co. at Bair Ranch on Wednesday.

Chelsea Self / Post Independent

Jenn Hoban and her family were hoping for one last adventure to top off their first-ever summer visit to Colorado while basing out of Beaver Creek this week, but they weren't sure if their dream horseback tour would happen after mudslides closed Glenwood Canyon.

Fortunately for them and scores of other thrill-seekers, the Colorado Department of Transportation was able to clear a path into the east end of the canyon to Bair Ranch on Wednesday.

That's where Glenwood Adventure Co. and its companion company Lakota Guides out of Avon runs horseback and ATV tours, as well as clay shooting and even an authentic western dinner package.

"It's very exciting," said Hoban, who is from St. Louis. "This has been an adventure that the family was looking forward to since we got here."

"We heard nothing but great things about this ranch, so to be able to come here is such a blessing for us."

Ditto for Doug and Doris Dunlap of Tallahassee, Florida, who set out for a guided ATV tour up into the ranch that same afternoon.



Visitors gear up and get a safety talk before going on an ATV tour with Glenwood Adventure Co. at Bair Ranch on Wednesday.

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“This is one of the reasons we came here,” Doug Dunlap said.

“It was a little bit of an adventure just coming through the mess,” he said of the shuttle ride from Dotsero Landing and along a section of the still-closed Interstate 70, where CDOT crews were busy clearing mud and debris from last weekend’s heavy rains.

“I guess that will be part of the story to tell when we get back home,” he said.

Visitors gear up and get a safety talk before going on an ATV tour with Glenwood Adventure Co. at Bair Ranch on Wednesday.

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Jenn Hoban of St. Louis and her family got to try out horseback riding at Bair Ranch Wednesday after CDOT allowed access for Glenwood Adventure Co. to run tours at the ranch located on the east end of Glenwood Canyon.

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Outdoor industry adapts

"CDOT has been very communicative and just extremely awesome to work with to allow us in here to do our tours," said Ryan Williams, operations and activities manager at Bair Ranch, which contracts with Glenwood Adventure Co. to run tours on the ranch.

Even though guests can't come in from Glenwood Springs on the west side of the canyon while I-70 remains closed, about 40% of the outfitter's clientele comes from the Vail area.

"We're just trying to do anything to think outside the box and do what we can," Williams said. "Like (ranch owner Jim Bair) said the other day, this still is the Wild West. It'll throw a punch at you, but you just have to take it and move on."

Though the numbers are down from the typical 150 people a day who come to Bair Ranch, it's just one way Glenwood Adventure Co. owner Ken Murphy has maintained operations during what's expected to be a weeks-long closure of the interstate while CDOT cleans up and assesses the damage from last weekend's slides.

Glenwood Adventure Co. ATV guide Kiah Andersen gives the safety talk before leading the group out on a tour at Bair Ranch on Wednesday.

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"Because of its proximity in the canyon, we capture both markets (Glenwood Springs and Vail) there, so it's been really popular with our clientele in that area," Murphy said. "It's an incredible experience, because you're not only doing something fun in the outdoors, you're visiting a real working ranch with cows and sheep and all the ranch hands."

Murphy also runs the reservation and permit system in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service and the city of Glenwood Springs for people to hike the popular trail to Hanging Lake in Glenwood Canyon. The area is [currently inaccessible](#) due to the interstate closure.

To make up for that, Murphy has offered some of the Hanging Lake reservation holders the option of joining a trip to the Maroon Bells near Aspen. He also runs the reservation and shuttle system for that area.

Murphy and other river outfitters based in Glenwood Springs have also had to make due without being able to offer rafting down the popular Shoshone Rapids section of the Colorado River in Glenwood Canyon.

A boat full of rafters float down the Roaring Fork River with Glenwood Adventure Co.

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"Shoshone is our mainstay, so it has had a pretty huge impact," said Erik Larsson, owner of Whitewater Rafting LLC.

Instead, they've been running the section from Glenwood Springs downstream toward New Castle.

"It's class 2 (rapids) instead of class 3, but it's still a lot of fun, and there's plenty of water in the river now," he said.

Patrick Drake of Blue Sky Adventures and Canyon Bikes said Glenwood Springs is fortunate to be positioned at the confluence of two rivers, the Colorado and the Roaring Fork.

"The recent rains have kept things fun and enjoyable on the Fork," Drake said. "There is some different scenery and some fun rapids."

Blue Sky has been adjusting its bicycle tours since late June when the recreation path in Glenwood Canyon closed for safety reasons due to the threat of flash floods and hadn't reopened even before the most recent slides.

"We've been sending people out on the Rio Grande Trail (toward Carbondale and Aspen) since that time, and people love it," Drake said. "We're very fortunate with what this valley provides, and that we have the ability to adjust."

Defiance Rafting, located at No Name just inside Glenwood Canyon, has probably been the most impacted during the on and off I-70 closures and weather alerts this summer, said owner/operator Heather Montross-Cowan.

"We definitely have had to be adaptive and flexible to the changes related to closures, afternoon monsoons and mudslides," she said. "Currently, we are operating trips from No Name to South Canyon, which offers guests some of the beautiful views of Glenwood Canyon with a splashy wave train in South Canyon."

Marketing shift

The canyon closure has also meant a shift in marketing efforts for area outfitters and other tourism businesses.

Not only has there been a concerted effort to let people know that Glenwood Springs isn't shut off (no, I-70 is not closed between Rifle and Glenwood Springs as indicated on CDOT's cotrip.org and GPS navigation apps). It just takes a bit longer to get here from the eastern side of the state via the northern detour route.

And it's all clear from points west.

CDOT shows the section as closed to cross-state traffic going east to Denver, directing those travelers to the northern alternate route. Those headed to Silt, New Castle, Glenwood Springs or the Roaring Fork Valley do need to exit at West Rifle but can get on U.S. Highway 6 and get back onto I-70 at the main Rifle interchange.

The canyon closure is also an opportunity to market to local residents, since they're kind of stuck here without a quick outlet to points east.

"I think all the local tourist-driven businesses are reaching out to locals to say, 'Hey, it's a great time to come out rafting or whatever, because it's not as crowded,'" Larsson said.

Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park declared in a Thursday email blast that, despite the Glenwood Canyon closure, "businesses, tourists and locals alike are finding ways to adapt ... Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park is open as usual."

Added Murphy, "The canyon has made us stop and look and realize how important I-70 is to us. But we do live up in the mountains, and things happen. You just have to roll with the punches."

Local tourism officials have been in discussions about rebranding Glenwood Springs as worth the extra time it now takes to get here.

"I-70 does not dictate whether companies operate in Glenwood Springs or not," Drake said. "We're still open."

Glenwood Springs Tourism Director Lisa Langer said the city doesn't do a lot of marketing in the summer because it's naturally busy. But with the I-70 closure, her tourism promotion team has also been thinking outside the box.

They've worked with state tourism officials to put together a road trip package for families coming through Colorado to Glenwood Springs from the east.

"The focus is on making the most of and enjoying the trip," she said of CDOT's suggested northern detour via U.S. 40 and connecting routes Colorado highways 9, 131 and 13. "There are lots of things to do and see. It also includes road trip games, a road trip playlist and of course directions on how to get here."

"It's all aimed at making it a fun journey instead of, 'Oh, we have to go this way,'" Langer said. "It's not the road less traveled, because there is going to be traffic. But it can be fun, too."

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