

# Precious metals tour



We drive southwest Colorado's gold and silver country in the new 2016 Ford Explorer Platinum

by Joe Sage



Rimrock Drive climbs dramatically into Colorado National Monument, overlooking the Grand Valley. • Animal art in the streets of Grand Junction. • Our Explorer's 18.6-gallon tank, at an estimated 22 MPG highway, could take us over 400 miles. Our total trip was just over half that. • Though Dinosaur National Monument is farther north, along US 40, the Grand Junction area is also major dinosaur country.

The Ford Explorer is in its fifth generation, 25 years into its segment-defining and -dominating lifetime. We dubbed the current version, when introduced as a 2011 model, Ford's "crown jewel" in our original launch report. Gen five was a complete rework, moving the Explorer from body-on-frame to unibody construction and adding a wide-ranging complement of advanced technological handling aids, some you would find on any high-end modern roadgoing vehicle and some very specific to the Explorer's very serious off-road capabilities.

**EXPLORER 2016** • The Ford Explorer has had incremental changes over the prior six model years, adding technology and creature comforts. The 2016 Explorer can be recognized by its new grille and fog lights in a new lower front fascia that evokes the style of a new F-150. In the rear are LED taillights and dual exhausts.

The newest Explorer is already continuing the model's trophy-bagging heritage, having recently captured the SUV of the year title at the influential Texas Truck Rodeo (see elsewhere in this issue).

There remain three engine options—a standard 3.5L V6 and a 3.5L EcoBoost V6, while this year's upgrade from 2.0L to 2.3L EcoBoost four provides a 40-hp, 40-lb-ft bump (to 280 and 310) and 28 MPG highway fuel mileage.

Towing and 4WD are now available for base four-cylinder models, although they tow just 3000 lb (Class II), compared with 5000 (Class III) for the V6. Highway fuel mileage varies from 22-24 for the six-cylinder engines with either AWD or FWD, to the four-cylinder EcoBoost, rating as high as 28 MPG highway.

**PLATINUM** • Two Explorer models, base and XLT, start the lineup at just under and just over \$30,000. Limited and Sport versions come in at just under and just over \$40,000. For 2016, Ford adds a line-top-



KEEP RIGHT >>



Cones? Mud? The well-suspended Explorer seemed capable of taking on either. The power of a hundred locomotives? Not by the numbers, but the 365-horse V6 EcoBoost hauls its 4890 lb around powerfully and efficiently. • A tunnel on US 550 as evening approached. • Colorado's dry high country climate has preserved the historic Smith cabin.



ping Platinum trim level to Explorer, starting just a hair above \$50,000.

The first Platinum F-150 showed up in 2010, Platinum Super Duty pickups shortly thereafter, then the big Expedition SUV last year. We drove the 2015 Expedition Platinum last winter and fell for it in a big way, calling it the penultimate Ford—short of ultimate not in style or features, but only because it had been a 4x2 and because you can buy a longer Expedition EL.

Explorer Platinum adds enhanced active park assist, adaptive cruise control, lane-keeping, hands-free liftgate and intelligent 4WD with terrain management.

Front and rear 180-degree cameras with washers—great for backing out of parking (and seen earlier in the year on the new

Ford Edge)—are available at the Sport level and are standard on Limited and Platinum

Platinum includes a new 10.1-inch digital instrument cluster, a real wood heated steering wheel with leather wrap, ash wood, brushed aluminum and leather wrap surfaces throughout, and much faster smart-charging USB ports.

The Platinum model also claims an industry first, as Sony brings its home audio theater acoustics to the road in a 500-watt, 12-speaker system.

**HEADING SOUTH** • In line with Ford's current "Go Further" slogan, our spin in the 2016 Ford Explorer Platinum was part of a successive-leg road event that started in British Columbia, worked its way north into Alberta, down through the Rockies, and ultimately into New Mexico.

Our leg would take us through some of the best of what Western Colorado road tripping has to offer, starting in Grand Junction and finishing just north of Durango, at the Purgatory Resort.

The Colorado River feeds from Grand Lake, in Grand County, down to Grand Junction in the Grand Valley, where it joins the Green River and continues as the Colorado through Utah, then cutting the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona before feeding ultimately into the Sea of Cortez in Mexico. Why all the Grand names? The Colorado River was indeed once the Grand River, or at least a long stretch of it was. As western expansion congealed, the Rio Grande—which also starts in Colorado—called dibs on the river name, but all the other names remained Grand—although Grand Junction is known to many as simply Junction.

We had pretty free rein between our start and finish points, with one primary route laid out for us but the option of taking any number of stated or unstated alternatives.

We began the day with our first side trip, into Colorado National Monument, a spectacular 20-plus-thousand-acre park just outside Fruita, west of Grand Junc-

tion, where the river has spent eons cutting through layers of sandstone, granite and other minerals. A ranger presentation detailed each rock layer and where else each layer crops up throughout the West. We drove back into Grand Junction, a small city of 60,000 (or nearly 150,000 including its fringes) at 4593 feet above sea level, and from there headed south on US 50 to Montrose.

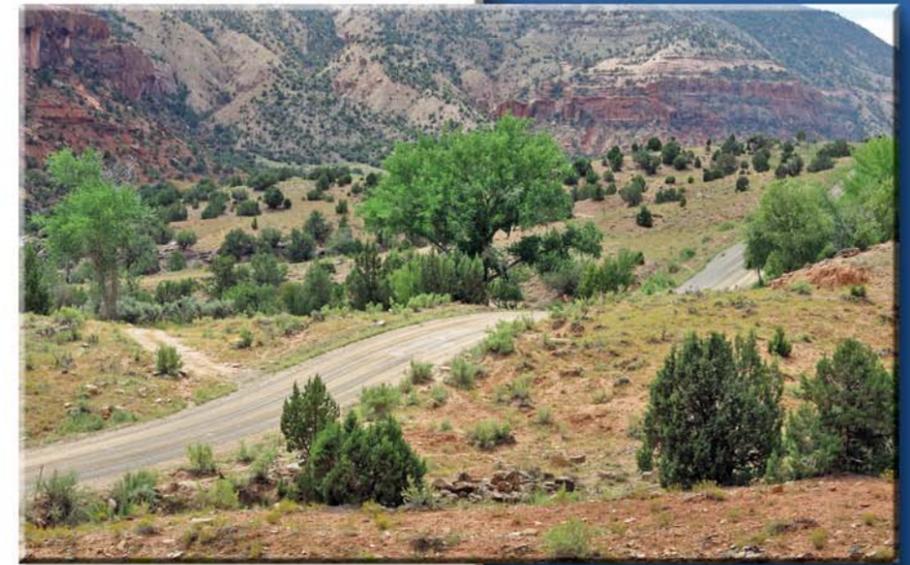
**TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME** • Side trips and alternatives turned out to be a good idea, as US 550 between Ouray and Silverton—the historic Million Dollar Highway—had experienced a major washout last winter, reducing it to one cliff-hanging lane (at best) for miles and completely closing it to traffic for six hours a day.

Knowing we had time to kill before that most challenging stretch of road reopened for the night, we grabbed a random gravel road winding its way in the general direction of Utah, a great chance to see how our Explorer Platinum did on unpaved curves at free-spirited rancher pickup speeds. It was powerful and sure-footed at all times.

We discovered historical cabins preserved in the high desert climate of the Escalante State Wildlife Area—one where bricklayer Harry Walker raised four sons, and the cabin and corral of Civil War Captain Henry A Smith, a frontier tombstone carver who also carved his initials into the local red rocks. Then back to the highway.

At Montrose, US 50 heads back northeast, wrapping around Grand Mesa, while our route, US 550, originates there and heads due south. US 550 originally went as far as Durango, but has long since been extended to Bernalillo NM, north of Albuquerque (where in fact the following legs of the overall drive would be headed).

East-west mountain passes conquering the Rockies are dominant in Colorado. US 550 is one of only two major north-south highways on the Western Slope. Highways often follow rivers in Colorado, as those have already found (or created) the paths of least resistance, and that would be the case with much of our route. (A



downside to this is the hazard of deer and elk crossing to their water source, particularly around dawn and dusk, when driving visibility is at its worst.)

Ouray, Silverton and Durango bracket the most spectacular part of the drive, the Million Dollar Highway—a driving and sightseeing destination in its own right, reaching an elevation of 11,018 feet.

At Ouray (elevation 7792 feet), we would be stuck at the northern end of these Million Dollar passes until road rebuilding let up for the day. That was more opportunity than problem, as this charming historic Western town has plenty of dining and browsing options even in



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Downtown Ouray was our last stop before climbing up Red Mountain Pass as US 550 reopened for the day (or more accurately for the night). • Our last stop with any lingering light was in Silverton, a benchmark on the Million Dollar Highway and north end of the Durango and Silverton narrow gauge.

the off season. We stopped for a bite.

We had bounced around various plans to circumvent the highway with off-road routes, some of which are notoriously the toughest anywhere. The Explorer could tackle the majority of these handily, but was shiny and new, and we wanted to return it that way. More to the point, these were “shortcuts” that would take far, far longer. US 550 would still be our best bet.

Flag crews on US 550 went into action at about sundown, with miles of backed-up traffic crawling through, one way at a time, as a bit of rain mixed with snow spattered our windshield. The last of Colorado's spectacular but brief high country fall colors faded with the light.

The Million Dollar nickname bemuses today, when one mile of two-lane road can cost one to five million—or twenty or more million in terrain such as this. Legend suggests the name may have nothing to do with road building costs, but rather how much gold ore and dust is scattered through the highway's cuts and fills.

The ore idea sounds reasonable, since this is one of the heaviest areas of mineral extraction in Colorado. In fact, we were here just weeks after a retaining dam had burst, sending millions of gallons of highly toxic, vivid orange, tailing-tainted water down the normally scenic and wildlife-rich Las Animas River, on into the Navajo Nation in Arizona, en route to Lake Powell through a succession of tributary feeds.

By the time we rolled through, the river was much clearer (if not actually cleaner), although several creeks feeding it were just as toxically colorful on a normal day.

Silverton (elevation 9320 feet) was our next stop, a town with so much character it has been designated a National Historic Landmark District. This is the northern terminus of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. Less romantically, it claims mine pollution remediation as one of its major modern industries.

Our final 22 miles threaded over Molas Pass (10,910 feet) in the dark, as we vowed to return someday in daylight. Our destination was Purgatory Resort (base elevation 8793 feet) for a quick bite before bed.



In the morning, we grabbed a shuttle through Durango (elevation 6512 feet) to the airport for the 50-minute-or-so flight back to Phoenix, so quick it made us realize why so many friends and colleagues dash off to Durango regularly in summer.



**TOP FLIGHT** • This was a trip we would love to repeat and expand upon. And for a combination of capability, comfort and style suitable for rough road to mountain town to resort, it would be hard to beat the Explorer Platinum as a chariot of choice.

Choosing the Explorer Platinum over the \$30-40,000 models would only depend upon your budget. But would you choose it over a luxury SUV at \$60 or \$80 or even \$100k? You very well might. ■

