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WESTERN LANDMARK

Colorado's Dunton Hot Springs brings together Old West romance and mountain high luxury

WRITTEN BY Rosemary Carstens



Legend has it that Butch Cassidy strode into the old Dunton saloon following a hard ride from his first bank robbery in Telluride and carved his name into the bar. You can still see it! Once only a small clearing in the Colorado wilderness, unincorporated Dunton's history is filled with tales of homesteaders, miners, Indians and ghost towns. Any old timer in the area

This page, clockwise from top: Legend has it Butch Cassidy carved his name into the bar of this historic dance hall and saloon after robbing a Telluride bank. | The outdoor hot springs is located in the meadow directly behind the luxuriously reappointed bathhouse. | The Wellhouse cabin, a favorite for honeymooners, features a private indoor hot springs tub and fireplace. **Opposite page, clockwise from top:** Surrounded by breathtaking wilderness views, the main hot springs bathhouse is easily accessible from all cabins. | The bathhouse interior is beautifully restored for maximum ease and relaxation. | The Major Ross cabin features the finest in contemporary comfort. Each cabin's décor reflects the region's historical significance.



can bend your ear with rumor, fact and fiction about this quaint cluster of log buildings situated at 8,600 feet on the West Fork of the Dolores River. Today, its cinematic Old West heritage has morphed into an award-winning five-star hot springs resort and spa.

This was raw country in the 1880s when homesteader Joe Roscio came out from Minnesota to mine and lay claim to a 260-acre parcel. He and his family survived by trapping, logging and filling the needs of other miners. They built and rented out cabins, operated a bar and lodge, and charged a nickel to use the hot springs. By 1918, what was once an active mining camp became a ghost town and then, for half a century, a dude ranch. Its first hot tub was a log-lined, 14- by 20-foot pit. Telephone service was almost nonexistent and it wasn't until the mid-1990s that television became available.

In 1974, a group of investors bought Dunton, but it remained essentially undeveloped. For more than 20 years,

the little-known settlement in the woods became a lawless hangout where locals, bikers and hippies partied in the hot pools, gazed at the stars in an inky sky and imbibed spirits as they dreamed of the old Wild West. The decrepit cabins, with weather pouring in through unchinked logs, were rented out for \$5 to \$25 a night.

By 1994, when Austrian Bernt Kuhlmann and his German business partner, Christoph Henkel, discovered Dunton, the town had become a morass of bullet-riddled tin roofs, falling-down cabins and skunks' nests. But Kuhlmann and Henkel, who shared an entrepreneurial spirit and a love of Western history, saw beyond the apparent to the possible and purchased it on the spot. Dunton still sports a rustic Western façade, but has become a unique destination, a springboard to an incomparable array of outdoor activities.

A dozen perfectly restored cabins, each hand-built and with its own distinctive character, dot the grounds

surrounding the saloon and dance hall. Each is luxuriously appointed and stands just steps away from the refurbished bathhouse. Dunton offers freedom from digital distractions and a chance to experience adventures in every season. Spring, summer and fall offer horseback riding in pristine wilderness, world-class fly fishing in private waters, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing and more. You can be as active or as daring as you please. For quiet relaxation, the spa facilities offer a broad menu of treatments that will bring you back to your best self and defuse the tensions of modern life.

One more thing has certainly changed from Dunton's early days. In a 1970s cowboy movie, John Wayne famously said, "Slap some bacon on a biscuit and let's go." Dining where the deer and the antelope play is now a series of memorable events. Executive Chef Carrie Eagle incorporates the finest organic, pesticide-free, mostly local "fixins" in her menus. "Most of the time, I get my hands on as many beautiful ingredients as I can and then just get out of the way and let the process happen. At a place like Dunton, the dignity and beauty of the surroundings influence the cuisine."

The romance of the region beckons even as its modern

incarnation continues to evolve. This summer, promises General Manager Edoardo Rossi, will be the best ever: "We have partnered with Sutcliffe Vineyards, south of us, to extend our ability to offer fine wines along with our stellar food services. On June 1, we open Cresto Ranch, four miles down the road, featuring eight luxury tents with king beds, en suite bathrooms with 6-foot soaking tubs, private lounging porches and the same high-level attention to personal comfort as in our cabins. In addition to individual stays, the whole of Dunton or Cresto may be reserved — your own private Wild West experience in an authentic historic setting!"

For more information, visit www.duntonhotsprings.com or www.crestoranch.com; 970.882.4800. ■

Rosemary Carstens is a Colorado-based freelance writer who explored Dunton for herself in the 1980s and loves roaming the wide-open spaces and infinite blue skies of the Western landscape by car and motorcycle. She is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors and writes for numerous national publications.

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