

Make memories on a themed road trip

Narrow your focus for an interesting getaway

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Special to USA TODAY

There's something so special about taking to the open road: windows down, favorite playlist blaring and indulgent snacks at the ready. But what if you narrow your focus a bit? Perhaps you search out the best green chile cheeseburger in Albuquerque or go mural-hunting in Denver, then things get a bit more interesting.

Here are some ways to spice up your next getaway:

Try Mexican cuisine in San Diego

If your idea of foodie bliss involves taquitos and burritos, sunny San Diego is the perfect option for tackling as many taco joints as possible. There are plenty to choose from, including Tacos El Gordo, which serves up Tijuana-style tacos, including carne asada, adobada and cabeza. At Roberto's Taco Shop, big appetites will appreciate the rolled tacos with guacamole, chimichangas and breakfast burritos.

Lucha Libre Taco Shop, with locations in San Diego's Mission Hills and North Park neighborhoods, is another solid option with lots of personality. Chow down on the Surf & Turf Taco, Abo-Haba Piña Taco, or the Undeclared Seafood Taco.

Go a bit fancier at Casa Guadalajara where you can hear live mariachi music, sip a Birdbath Margarita (served in glasses the size of your face) and huge meals that ensure you'll have leftovers. Plan a trip for November so you can attend the Fiesta de Reyes Dia de los Muertos Celebration in Old Town, where Casa Guadalajara is located. This gathering is worth the trip alone.

Mix in some activities throughout to burn off those queso calories. Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve has hiking trails and paragliding. La Jolla Cove is great for kayaking and stand-up pad-

leboarding and Balboa Park is fabulous for photography.

Go whale watching in Hawaii

Play marine biologist on a road trip through Maui where whales are the main attraction from about mid-November to March, though whale season can last as late as May.

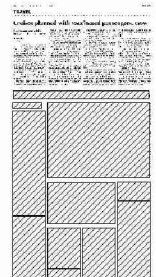
On the south side of the island, sign up for a whale-watching tour with Blue Water Rafting. Not only are you nearly guaranteed a whale sighting, but you will also get to snorkel Molokini Crater, a marine preserve that attracts lots of marine life.

Major bonus: It's possible to get some insanely good underwater photos since you'll be on a small zodiac boat with a small group of people that's easy to maneuver in the direction of the whales. (Pro tip: Put your GoPro on a long selfie pole to get the shot.)

If you're there outside of whale season, sign up to explore sea caves and lava arches along the rugged Kanaio Coast. Drive to the west side of the island to embark on a Sail Trilogy tour to Lanai'i where you'll be flipper-kicking

next to some of the tallest sea cliffs in the world. You'll get fed, learn about Hawaii's rich history and have a smile plastered on your face the entire time.

Of course, you're bound to see more than just whales. Sea turtles, manta rays, dolphins and candy-colored fish are not uncommon to find here. It's even possible to spot whales (and photograph them with a long lens) from above on a doors-off flight with Go Fly Maui. It's an entirely different perspective and gives you an even better idea of how massive these creatures are. It sure doesn't hurt that you'll see waterfalls and sea cliffs, too. If you're really brave, sign up to learn how to fly the chopper yourself.



See the sights by camper van

Before you commit to actually living the #vanlife, test one out by renting a camper van or RV from Outdoorsy, a company that rents Airstreams, Tear-drop trailers and Westfalia camper vans. It's certainly a popular way to see the country.

"Outdoorsy's RV bookings surged in 2020, leading to the company's best year on record, with more than a 4,500% increase in bookings throughout the course of the pandemic," says Jennifer Young, co-founder and chief marketing officer of Outdoorsy. "The beauty of RV travel is that opportunity is at your fingertips. There's plenty to see, do, and discover between point A and point B, and RV travel offers you the flexibility to change your plans, read that historical marker, and check out that hot spring that lies three miles off the beaten path."

When it comes to booking campsites, Young says the early bird gets the worm. "If you're eyeing a campground inside a national park, it's best to book a reservation as soon as possible, up to five or six months ahead of time in some instances," she says. "The more popular and visited the campsite is, the more likely it is to be completely booked out soon after the reservation window opens, so set a reminder on those dates."

Search for murals in Denver

Strolling through the streets of downtown Denver is like going on an Easter egg hunt; you never know what you're gonna find, but you know it's gonna be good. There are oversized works of art around every corner.

Kick-start the day with the 5-mile Denver Graffiti Tour to learn the story behind the murals, graffiti and street art that make the colorful RiNo (River North) neighborhood unique. On this walking tour you'll see at least 30 murals. Then, hop in your car to find even more. There are more than 150 works of art to discover, so it's impossible to be bored.

New Mexico chile pepper trail

Chile peppers have been grown in New Mexico for more than 400 years. So finding cuisine that incorporates authentic chile peppers, of course, is not hard to do. Take a road trip through Albuquerque for pit stops along the Burrito Byway (The Range Café, Frontier Restaurant and Sadie's should be on your short list) and the Green Chile Cheeseburger Trail where you can eat like a local at El Pinto Restaurant, Owl Cafe and Barel's Coffee House.

Plan out your stops and find tasty recipes at visitABQ.org. Plan ahead and visit during the National Fiery Foods & BBQ Show, typically held in February/March each year in Albuquerque.



Interested in exploring street art? You can take a 5-mile graffiti tour in Denver. DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP



Play marine biologist on a road trip through Maui where whales are the main attraction from mid-November to March. PROVIDED BY BLUE WATER RAFTING



No trip to New Mexico is complete without a green chile cheeseburger, as long as you've got the stomach – or antacids – for it. PROVIDED BY VISITABQ.ORG