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2026: Cortez, Colorado Celebrates 140 Years with a Year of History, Heritage, and “Stories in the Sky”

Cortez, CO – As Colorado celebrates its 150th statehood anniversary and Mesa Verde National Park turns 120, the City of Cortez invites visitors to experience a year filled with history, culture, and sky-high celebration. 2026 also marks Cortez’s 140th anniversary of being platted, making it a milestone year for this vibrant community at the crossroads of the ancient and the adventurous.

From the ancestral cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde National Park to the art-filled streets of downtown Cortez, this year’s calendar is full of ways to connect with the stories that shaped the American Southwest.

May: Celebrate History and Nature

May is National Historic Preservation Month and the City of Cortez honors its heritage – and the return of warmer weather – with free historic walking tours hosted by the [Cortez Historic Preservation Board](#). Visitors can stroll through time, discovering stories behind century-old buildings and the people who built them.

May also brings the return of guided walking tours hosted by [Cortez Tours](#). Adventurers can choose from early-morning sunrise tours that showcase the natural beauty of the surrounding area as daylight breaks over the iconic plateau of Mesa Verde, or join the chillingly popular Wild West Ghost Tour that reveals the darker side of Cortez history. Visitors can immerse themselves in history, art, and outdoor adventure, discovering why Cortez remains one of Colorado’s most authentic destinations – where the past is always present.

This month features the [Ute Mountain Mesa Verde Birding Festival](#) (May 6 – 10, 2026), a favorite among nature lovers for its guided birding trips across the region’s diverse landscapes. With lectures and guided tours for all skill levels, this is a festival any nature enthusiast will want to experience. The [Cortez Cultural Center](#) will also host a bird-themed art show in honor of the festival. In conjunction, Cortez Tours will offer free First Friday Art Walk & Mural Tours on May 1 and 8, showcasing local art galleries and the creative spirit and colorful murals of downtown Cortez.

Adventurers can cap off the week with the [12 Hours of Mesa Verde Bike Race](#), hosted annually the second Saturday in May. This beloved endurance event draws riders from across the West.

August: Balloons, Drones, and Stories in the Sky

The skies above Cortez will come alive the first weekend in August, during the annual Cortez Balloon Rally, featuring a breathtaking addition to celebrate 2026 – “[Stories in the Sky](#),” a drone light show celebrating America 250, Colorado 150, and Cortez 140.

Part of a statewide initiative by the America 250 – Colorado 150 Commission, the Colorado Tourism Office, and Visit Denver, this dazzling series of nearly 150 community drone shows will illuminate skies across Colorado from September 2025 through December 2026. Cortez’s “Stories in the Sky” event promises to be one of the most scenic – set against the backdrop of Mesa Verde and the Sleeping Ute Mountain.

In addition, August is the perfect time to experience Colorado’s remarkable **dark skies**. Both [Mesa Verde National Park](#) and [Hovenweep National Monument](#) are certified International Dark Sky Parks, and Canyons of the Ancients National Monument is actively pursuing designation. [Southwest Colorado Canyons Alliance](#), the official Friends group of Canyons of the Ancients, will hold four dark sky events throughout the year including a full moon hike in July, a stargazing party in September, a luminaria night in December, and a TBD night sky photography workshop.

About Cortez, Colorado

Located in the heart of the Four Corners region, Cortez offers a perfect blend of outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, and small-town charm. It is the crossroads to the canyons and mesas that house ancient stories and cliff dwellings and the high-country fun to be found in the San Juan Mountains.

Visitors can experience the crossroads of southwestern life through guided tours, cultural museums, art walks, outdoor adventure, and local events that celebrate the enduring stories of the southwest.

Key Milestones in 2026

- Colorado 150 – Celebrating 150 years of statehood
- [Cortez 140](#) – Platted in 1886, Cortez celebrates over 140 years of community and culture
- Mesa Verde 120 – Honoring 120 years since the creation of the national park

Story Angles & Highlights

1. **Stories in the Sky – Drone Light Show at the Cortez Balloon Rally (August 2026):** Cortez’s night sky lights up with hundreds of drones choreographed to music, illuminating stories of Colorado’s past, present, and future. Part of the America 250 – Colorado 150 statewide celebration series. Journalists can explore the contrast between and beauty of the area’s natural view of the stars and the technology that is designed to entertain.
2. **May is for History and the Birds:** Celebrate Historic Preservation Month with free downtown walking tours hosted by the [Cortez Historic Preservation Board](#). Pair it with the [Ute Mountain Mesa Verde Birding Festival](#) (May 6 – 10) and First Friday Art Walks (May 1 & 8) led by [Cortez Tours](#), featuring downtown murals and local artists.

Bonus: Don’t miss the [12 Hours of Mesa Verde Bike Race](#) on May 9 – a favorite regional endurance event.

3. **Mesa Verde Turns 120:** This UNESCO World Heritage Site continues to captivate travelers with its ancient cliff dwellings and vibrant culture thriving in descendent communities. Journalist can explore how Mesa Verde’s stories and the struggles of ancient peoples remain vital and relevant to Indigenous and local communities today.
4. **Cortez at 140: A Living History:** From homesteads and trading posts to a thriving arts and food scene, Cortez’s evolution tells the story of the American Southwest. Historic tours and preservation projects reveal a city that honors its past while embracing the future.

Pitch idea: “72 Hours in Cortez: A Weekend of History, Culture, and Sky-High Spectacles.”