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Prop. 64: How has legalized pot changed Colorado 4 years later?

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As we crossed the mountainous border into southeastern Colorado, our rented Mitsubishi Mirage didn't descend into a cloud of smoke.

But the first business my husband and I saw when we exited I-25 in the small town of Trinidad was CannaCo, a recreational pot shop and cultivation facility that sits next door to a Wal-Mart.

Coloradans voted to legalize marijuana for adults in 2012 under Amendment 64.

Washington also approved recreational pot that year, with Oregon, Alaska and Washington, D.C., soon to follow. Colorado was the first state to open shops in January 2014, though, making it ground zero for the nation's growing legal cannabis movement.

It's early for definitive answers on how legalizing marijuana impacts serious issues such as teen use and drugged driving. For now, most studies suggest little change. But with California weeks from voting on a similar marijuana legalization measure, coincidentally called Proposition 64, my husband and I dedicated a portion of our anniversary road trip to surveying life in a state with legal weed.

We found that marijuana is now part of the Rocky Mountain landscape, with shops, grow sites and tours scattered throughout the state. But it also isn't as prevalent as we expected, with public consumption illegal and alcohol still the more common intoxicant of choice.

We heard how legalization has boosted tax revenues and breathed life into struggling areas, with polls showing the majority of Coloradans viewing the change as mostly positive.

But legal marijuana is an ever-evolving experiment. New regulations kicked in even in the days before we arrived. And, four years into their experiment, some Colorado communities remain conflicted over the controversial plant.

EVIDENT, BUT NOT EVERYWHERE

The fact that we were about to visit a legal weed state was evident before we left California in late September.

As we searched for accommodations, some Colorado spots stated they don't allow "smoking of any kind." Others labeled themselves as a "bud and breakfast," the accepted term for cannabis-friendly lodging.

Just as Prop. 64 proposes, Colorado's law allows local cities to choose whether to welcome shops. So we toured a few "dry" communities, such as Colorado Springs. Then we stayed in Durango, where we heard a radio ad for an area pot shop, and Denver, where it's easy to find the trademark green crosses as soon as you look for them.

We popped into downtown Denver's Cannabis Station, one of eight shops in the Rocky Mountain High Dispensary chain. After flashing our driver's licenses to a receptionist, we were greeted by two budtenders who said they believe legal weed has made Denver a happier, friendlier place to be.

Carrie Griffo, 22, moved to town from upstate New York to attend college and be part of the legal pot industry. Meghann St. Nolde, 29, came from Wisconsin in search of "cannabis freedom."

"It's like we're living history every day," St. Nolde said.

Their shop is in the shadow of Coors Field, where the Rockies play baseball, but in an area that St. Nolde said tourists wouldn't have visited a few years ago. Now, roughly 98 percent of their customers are tourists, she said, with large numbers of shoppers from Florida, Texas and Illinois.





Many customers buy cannabis-infused foods, she said. It's trickier for newbies to regulate their intake with edibles, which take effect more slowly than smoking. But tourists often have no choice, since smoking is banned in public and in most hotels, while state law doesn't allow for Amsterdam-style weed clubs (though there's an initiative on the ballot to change that).

"People don't have a place to smoke," Griffo said. "I don't think it makes any sense."

We were offered edibles along with wine during a private dinner party. But we never encountered anyone smoking pot on the streets.

We did smell marijuana a couple of times during a concert at Red Rocks Amphitheater, just outside Denver. But that happens at many California concerts. What was unusual was the reminder, on an on-stage screen, that public consumption of pot remains illegal.

We saw harsher admonishments as we drove into Mesa Verde National Park in southwestern Colorado, eager to check out the ancient cliff dwellings.

A sign near the park's entrance cautioned visitors that marijuana possession is prohibited on federal land. It can result in a fine of up to \$5,000 or six months in jail, highlighting Colorado's ongoing conflict with federal law – a conflict California might face if voters approve Prop. 64.

IN FLUX

Four years after Colorado's historic vote, state and local marijuana laws are still evolving.

On Oct. 1, the state began requiring that all edibles be stamped with "THC," the main compound in marijuana that makes consumers high. The goals, lawmakers say, are to ensure consumers know what they're getting and to keep edibles out of the hands of kids.

Rocky Mountain High Dispensary had a license to make edibles, but St. Nolde said the company couldn't afford the equipment it would need to stamp the THC label and comply with the new law. Now, they're relying on outside vendors.

An estimated 30 percent of the state's supply of marijuana is grown in Pueblo County. The area, in southeastern Colorado, once was known for its production of steel.

The county made headlines last November when it opted to use marijuana taxes to help fund college scholarships. But as we drove through, we heard a radio ad about a local ballot measure that aims to shut down all recreational marijuana businesses in the county by Halloween 2017.

The measure is backed by a group called Citizens for a Healthy Pueblo, which points to the county's crime rates and homeless issues. But it faces an uphill battle against the better-funded group Growing Pueblo's Future, which says some 1,300 jobs and \$3 million in tax revenue would evaporate if pot businesses were banned.

UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

As in California, medical marijuana was legal in Colorado for many years before the vote on recreational use.

Denver native Alex Torres has been a medical marijuana patient since 2009, using the plant to stimulate his appetite as he battles stage 4 cirrhosis.

Torres, 59, walks his dog, Spencer, to keep up his strength. But he's made plans for his budtender, Brittany, to care for Spencer when he's gone.

Legalizing recreational marijuana has had little impact on his routine, Torres said. The main difference is that pot is cheaper, which he said is helpful since he survives on Social Security and cash from selling his artwork and handmade burritos.

But the building he's lived in for years just banned smoking. While he can still use edibles, he said that's a struggle for people who rely on marijuana to make food palatable.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked. "How can they just disregard us?"

Over breakfast burritos in Colorado Springs, our friend Papi Sorrels explained he supports people's right to use marijuana.

But he's concerned about how tourists who come to get high don't respect the land the way locals do. And he said property values have skyrocketed as people have flooded the state – good news for owners, but bad news for renters increasingly priced out of communities.

He's one of several people we spoke to who hopes California passes Prop. 64 if for no other reason than to take pressure off Colorado as the weed capital of the nation.

"Once it's legal more places," he said, "it won't be such a big deal."

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