

Hike, cycle or simply admire the scenery in awe-inspiring Colorado

by Frances Hardy

THE QUIRKY town of Boulder in the foothills of the snow-capped Colorado Rockies was colonised by hippies in the Sixties. And it retains that kickback charm. Many stayed — you see them in parks, practising yoga and meditation.

But Boulder has reinvented itself as a centre for the cultured and affluent outdoorsy and is ranked high in U.S. surveys for health, well-being, quality of life, education and art. It is also a wonderful place for a family holiday.

We are here listening to the world's first classically trained garage band in a concert hall made entirely of wood. The band is called Time For Three — an idiosyncratic mash-up of Radiohead and Brahms; Led Zeppelin and Beethoven.

The vast and lofty barn-like auditorium, set on the verge of a meadow flanked by mountains, is part of a Chautauqua. In Britain we are unfamiliar with Chautauqua, but the former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt called them, 'the most American thing in America'.

Named after Chautauqua Lake in New York State, where the first one was held in the late 19th century, they began as an adult education movement, bringing entertainment, culture and an ethos of self-improvement to remote rural communities. To start with, they were held in tents. Then buildings sprang up to accommodate them.

We had flown in to Denver — the 'mle-high city'; hip, historic and full of independent shops — and made the hour's journey to Boulder by car.

FIRST stop is the Chautauqua, with its neat little avenues of clapboard cottages, auditorium and handsome refectory.

You can rent a cottage here, each one furnished with faithful attention to historical detail. There are iron bedsteads, hand-quilted coverlets and wooden rocking chairs on porches to encourage evenings of conversation. Televisions, computers and mobile phones are banned.

Invigorating walks are positively encouraged and a stroll through a flower meadow takes you to the five sandstone peaks of the Flatirons. There you can choose your trail path (there are maps at the warden's cottage) and pick a route through pinewoods on whose verges yarrow, woolly cinquefoil and prairie sage bloom.

Downtown Boulder is only a couple of miles away. Its citizens

bought the 45,000 acres of natural land that surrounds it and have preserved them for hiking, cycling and wildlife. Boulder boasts the highest properly surfaced road in the world, too, which is why Olympians are drawn to it: 70 live and train here; cyclists predominate.

There is a spirit of independence about the town, which has largely resisted the onslaught of chain stores and fosters the unusual and individual.

The labyrinthine Boulder Book Store is furnished with rugs, runners and armchairs. Cheery sales assistants wear claret-coloured aprons; there is no prohibition on browsing.

University Bicycles, a cavernous warehouse of a shop, stocks 1,100 cycles. Buy one and it's 30 per cent cheaper than in the UK — 'but you have to figure out how to ship it back,' says the owner.

You can hire a bike from the shop or borrow a municipally-owned one for an hour for nothing; there are banks of them at strategic points in the town, on

which to potter around. The weekly farmers' market on 9th Avenue is a flamboyant horticultural spectacle.

Vast panniers of mis-shapen heritage tomatoes sit alongside bunches of papery crimson hibiscus, buckets of saffron-coloured sunflowers; swags of beetroot tops and bales of kale. You can buy gluten-free fruit pies, cinnamon pretzels or bacon and turkey muffins.

In the outdoor food area — mercifully bereft of McDonald's — there are take-away stalls. An elderly Vietnamese grandmother in a woolly hat presides over a deep fryer at the Savoury Saigon. Her daughter dishes Saigon slaw and egg rolls into cardboard containers.

We buy some for a picnic and walk up the Boulder Creek Path to the University of Colorado — almost one third of this town's population are students — where

the Colorado Shakespeare Festival is staging its production of Macbeth. There is an incongruity about the setting: the Scottish play is performed in an outdoor amphitheatre flanked by university buildings with Italianate red-tiled roofs.

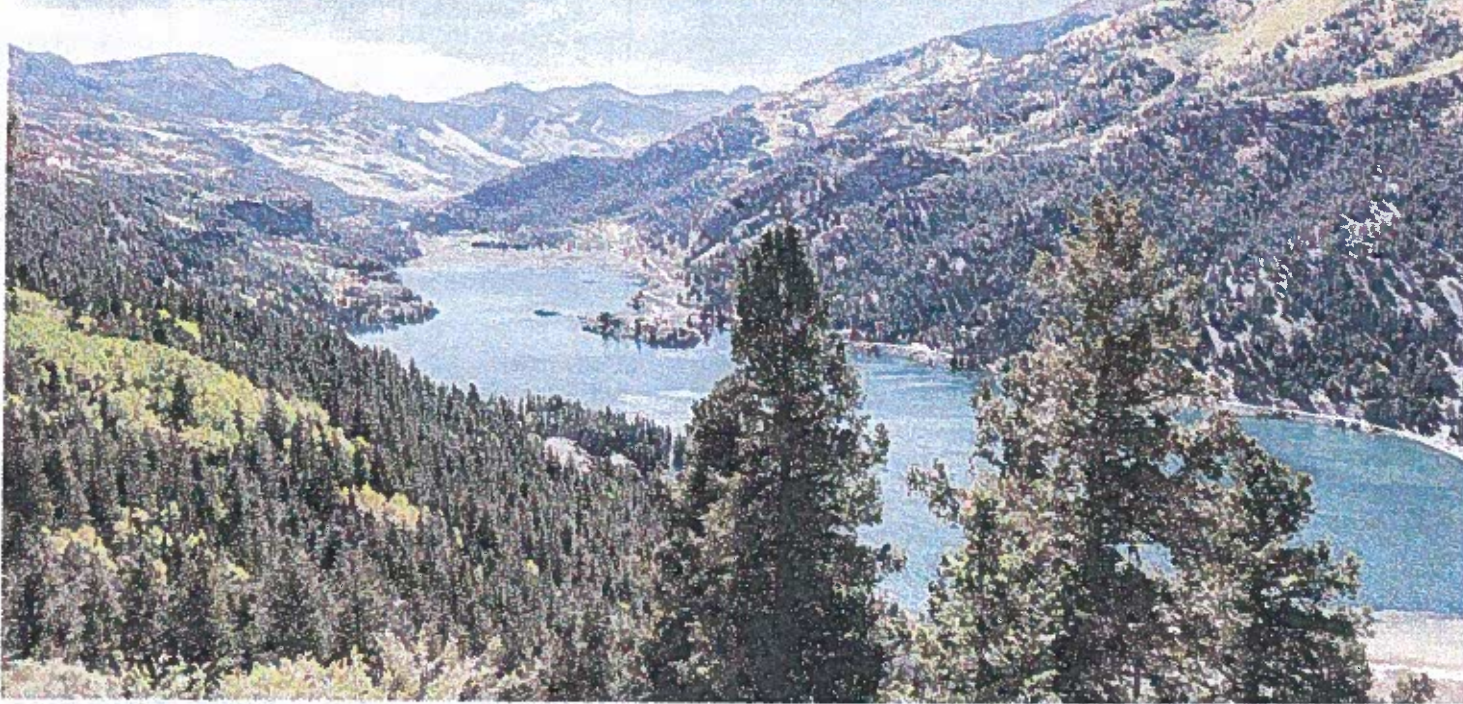
WE SIT on stone seats in the heat of a summer evening and hear familiar words declaimed in American accents. There is no sense of a windswept moor; it is more Roman palazzo than Highland castle. But we enjoy it, nonetheless.

Afterwards, we walk back along the creek path where early prospectors panned for gold, and reach Pearl Street which, on a balmy Wednesday night, is thronging with street entertainers: buskers, jugglers and joke-tellers; poets and a pianist.

By American standards, Boulder is historic. We stay in its most venerable downtown hotel, the Boulderado, which was opened in 1909 to great fanfare.

The Boulderado had lights that

BOULDER BEAUTY



Picture: ALAMY

Peak attraction: Lake San Cristobal in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado, where walkers will be rewarded with soaring views

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Boulder's Third Flatiron mountain is more than 1,400ft high — but has been scaled by a climber in eight minutes