



Source: Scotland on Sunday {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Sunday 24, March 2019
Page: 34,35
Area: 1210 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 16289 Weekly
Ad data: page rate £12,983.04, scc rate £38.04
Phone: 0131 620 8620
Keyword: Colorado

My oh my – it's river deep, mountain high in Colorado

You've seen the Wild West in Technicolor, but a visit to the Centennial State's national parks is so much more breathtaking, writes Sean Sheehan

When colour came to the making of Western movies in the 1950s, the films understandably exulted in the big outdoors of America's western states. The wild landscapes they celebrated are still there, waiting for new travellers. You're unlikely to travel on horseback, although that is still possible, but a road trip to Colorado's national parks is a journey through untamed landscapes and towering peaks – the state has 58 “fourteeners” (elevations over 14,000 feet).

Colorado's population is around the same as Scotland's, making it one of the least populated states in the US, and Denver, its capital city perched a breathless mile above sea level, is now affordably accessed by Norwegian Air. It is worth spending a day or so in the city, acclimatising to the thin air and enjoying the benefits of this civic-minded metropolis. There are good museums

and art galleries and a year-round mild climate is making Denver increasingly popular with Americans; areas once tatterdemalion are becoming hip.

Larimer Square, where gold prospectors established the city in the mid-19th century, is now home to rooftop bars, bijou boutiques and stylish eateries. At Death & Co, on the corner of 25th and Larimer Street, drinkers spill out on the street – but in a most civilised manner – and the scene is similar further down Larimer Street at Il Posto, where illuminated pedal hoppers wait to transport revellers back to their hotels. Nearby Rioja restaurant, with bare brick décor and innovative Mediterranean-style food, is typical of the city's urbane attractions.

But Colorado is above all an outdoorsy destination, and it only takes a 90-minute drive to reach the town of Estes Park and the Rocky Mountains National



Park. Estes Park roars with life, selling chewy taffy and T-shirts, crafts and hiking gear while self-catering cabins at places like Streamside on Fall River are set in secluded woodland areas. The trick is to get up and out with the dawn, packed lunch in your backpack and into the National Park before the crowds. Hundreds of walks, from half an hour to several days, are possible; the longer ones need a guide and advance planning. The pristine mountain scenery is soul-stirring, made more gorgeous in autumn by the golden colour of aspen trees breaking up the green of lodgepole pines.

Two hours driving from Estes Park, moving south along the dramatic ridge of the Rocky Mountains, brings you to the mountain ski resort of Vail. It's very upmarket during the winter but fun for non-skiers off-season when rooms are less expensive and the pistes transform into scenic walking routes. Paragon Guides organise a wide variety of walks and camping trips.

Still in the Rocky Mountains but 250km further south is one of America's most terrifying sights of raw nature: Black Canyon of the Gunnison Park is not a spot for the vertiginously challenged. From the visitor centre it is possible to peer down 800 or so metres of sheer rockface to the river below and, if unfazed, take the path leading around the rim of the canyon. There are walking routes into the canyon itself but more

manageable is a tarmac road which follows part of the rim, with stopping points where you can peer over and test your vertigo factor.

Montrose, the local town for Black Canyon, is a window into Americana: drive-in banks, rare sightings of pedestrians, heart-challenging fast food, liquor stores, wacky billboards outside churches, stars and stripes behind a home's picket fence. On Main Street, family-run Canyon Creek B&B is a delight and not just because a stranded Quentin Tarantino stayed here when he missed a flight after filming *The Hateful Eight* in the area.

From Montrose you take US Route 550, called the "million dollar highway" because gravel used to create parts of the road was waste from gold and silver mines in the area. This is little comfort while negotiating the Red Mountain Pass, a hazardous route which thoroughly deserves – yes, it must be used – the word awesome. Your car hugs guardrail-less edges of sheer

precipices and hairpin curves, meeting recreational vehicles more capacious than most two-room flats. Scenery of lakes and waterfalls looks alpine, were it not for a 19th-century mining town that is pure American.

From the sublime to reassuringly familiar images, the 550 brings you to Durango, a town revelling in its cowpoke origins to judge by shops retailing stetsons, leather chaps, embroidered boots and jackets with tassels on the arms. The Rochester Hotel is filled with photographic stills and information about the many Westerns that were made in this area.

From Durango, the Mesa Verde National Park is a short drive away. A very different experience to the other parks, its arid expanse has prehistoric cave dwellings of the Native American Puebloan people and rambling cliff-edge walks with marvellous views of the surrounding plateaus.

Colorado is huge and beautiful, the big outdoors (ignoring the Red Mountain Pass) feels comfortingly safe and urban centres like Denver, Montrose and Durango are fun places to visit between the National Parks. If you like driving, Colorado is a road trip not easily forgotten.

FACT FILE

Norwegian flies direct to Denver from London Gatwick, with fares from £175 one way/£309 return in economy and £585 one way/£1,075 return in Premium: www.norwegian.com/uk; cars at Denver airport with Rhino Car Hire cost from £21 a day: www.rhinocarhire.com; I used National Geographic's individual maps of the National Parks and Colorado Road & Recreation Atlas (Benchmark Maps).

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At Streamside on Fall River (streamsideonfallriver.com), between Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park, cabins with kitchens are from £87. Canyon Creek B&B in Montrose (canyoncreekbedandbreakfast.com) has rooms from £65. Rooms at The Rochester Hotel (rochesterhotel.com) in Durango are £135. Paragon Guides (paragonguides.com) for hikes and camping around Vail.
For further information, see www.colorado.com



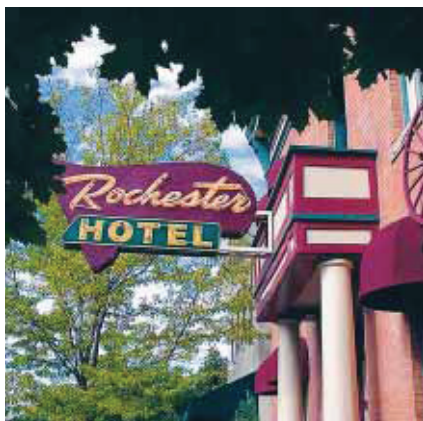
***'The gravel
used to
create parts
of the road
was waste
from gold
and silver
mines'***



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Clockwise from above: the Rochester Hotel; Denver at twilight; an elk at Estes Park; on a precipice in the Rocky Mountains; the million dollar highway.

Photographs: Getty/iStockphoto

