

The Garden of the Gods
at Colorado Springs

*I guess we'd
rather be in*
Colorado

Norman Wright travels through a state steeped in
history and tradition that represents the very
essence of America

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

The main street of Georgetown with mountain view



Buffalo Bill's Grave on Lookout Mountain



Log cabin rooms at the Zapata Ranch

A HUGE bull buffalo rolled over in the dusty wallow then with surprising agility rose to survey his domain – the seemingly endless high plains of Colorado to the east and, to the west, the snowy peaks and grey crags of the Rocky Mountains. We had just driven through the Rockies up over Wolf Creek Pass where we crossed the Great Continental Divide. Now we were seeing for ourselves the country we knew only through Western films and books, the land of Indians, cowboys, waggon trains and, of course, buffalo. The herd we saw, grazing amongst the

sagebrush or taking their own dust bath, number only a couple of thousand where once millions roamed. Our giant bull matched the landscape, and with the mountains and huge wide sky as a backdrop, both beast and vista are truly magnificent. Buffalo, or more correctly American Bison, were a bit of a theme during our tour of Colorado. We dined on Buffalo steaks in Denver, stood on Lookout Mountain and shared the view Buffalo Bill chose for his grave. We also walked in the footsteps of native Americans and the white pioneers who depended on hunting those massive herds to survive and then

exploit America's West. It's not the Wild West any longer, although the bull looked like he could get pretty angry if his peace and his harem of wives were disturbed any more. The herd was built like Spike the bulldog in Tom and Jerry cartoons or an American football linebacker – broad shoulders and huge muscular chest but with a small backside. It is a bit of an illusion as they can leap 12 feet in the air and get up to 40mph for short periods but they do look all head and front end. This herd roam as wild on 50,000 acres of the Zapata Medano Ranch owned by the Nature Conservancy. The ranch also

has a beef herd and offers holidays where you can ride out with the cowboys and join in the working ranch. Accommodation is in log cabin lodges (but with all mod cons). The horses are brought up from the stables in a long trailer pulled by a four-by-four with 12 individual boxes. Riders and their mounts are then driven off to the part of the ranch they will be working on. We took the buffalo tour in a four-by-four with a very knowledgeable guide in her first job after graduating in conservation. We skipped the horse bit as we are too dude for even a dude ranch and joined the riders, who were families and couples

of all ages, in the dining room for an excellent meal. Towards the end of the meal we all went outside to witness the most spectacular sunset imaginable. The ranch nestles close to one of America's most unusual national parks, the Great Sand Dunes National Park, some 30 square miles of enormous sand dunes, as if you had suddenly come across the Sahara desert. Behind the dunes the Sangre de Cristo mountains rear up. We didn't have time to explore the park and I would love to go back for a longer look at this big country. On the buffalo tour we drove to find the herd then visited the Buffalo Barn – a

system of alleys and pens topped by catwalks that are designed to filter the herd down into a hydraulic chute so the animals can be vaccinated and selected. Every one of the herd goes through the round-up every November and the incredibly powerful big bulls take some managing. Conserving the herd is made financially viable by sending some for slaughter. I sampled a Buffalo steak and elk meat at Colorado's oldest restaurant, The Buckhorn Exchange in Denver. No vegetarian's paradise this. You eat overlooked by more than 500 stuffed hunting trophies and the photographs of



Not the restaurant for vegetarians. Some of the 500 trophies at Buckhorn Exchange, Denver



The State Capitol in Denver. Its 13th step is exactly a mile above sea level



Buffalo graze on the high plains with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the distance

hundreds of celebrities who have dined there, including four Presidents, film stars, astronauts, even our own Princess Anne.

The founder of the restaurant was Henry H Zeitz, who met Buffalo Bill Cody as a ten-year-old in 1875 and by the age of 12 was riding with him as a fully fledged hard-riding, straight-shooting member of his band of scouts. During those years the Indian leader Sitting Bull gave him the nickname of Shorty Scout.

Zeitz founded the restaurant in 1893 in Osage Street and it has Colorado State liquor licence number one. Now it is an atmospheric although tranquil place to

eat and drink, almost a museum with collections of weapons and historic pictures and documents. Then it was one of the colourful legends of the Old West, on occasions it was properly Wild West.

After several years as a scout for the US Cavalry Buffalo Bill founded his Wild West show and toured with it all over the world including Britain in 1887, 1891, 1903 and 1904. On the website (www.buffalobill.org) everywhere the show visited is detailed. I was amazed by how many places it performed over here; it must have caused a sensation in those days.

Sadly, Cody died suddenly while

visiting his sister in Denver in 1917. He was buried on Lookout Mountain a few miles outside the state capital and you can visit the grave and that of his wife Louisa. The website gives the exact location.

There's a café, museum and visitor centre and a superb view over Denver and the plains.

Mile-high city

We started our tour of the state in Denver, known as the mile-high city. There's a mark on one of the steps of the State Capitol building that tells you when you

are exactly a mile above sea level. Much of the rest of our trip was at this altitude and higher. You should take account of the fact that oxygen is a bit harder to come by and not try to operate at the same speed and intensity as normal. Drink plenty of water as you lose more fluids at altitude.

In Denver we stayed at the Patterson Inn in the heart of the Capitol Hill district on Millionaire's Row. Once the home of US Senator Thomas Patterson in the early 1900s it has been restored with each historic room unique.

The inn is also perfectly placed to explore the "Hill" and its museums and

galleries. It's an easy walk to the Capitol building and also to the start of 16th Street, the main downtown shopping street. There's an excellent free bus service that runs up and down the street every five minutes with frequent hop on, hop off stops.

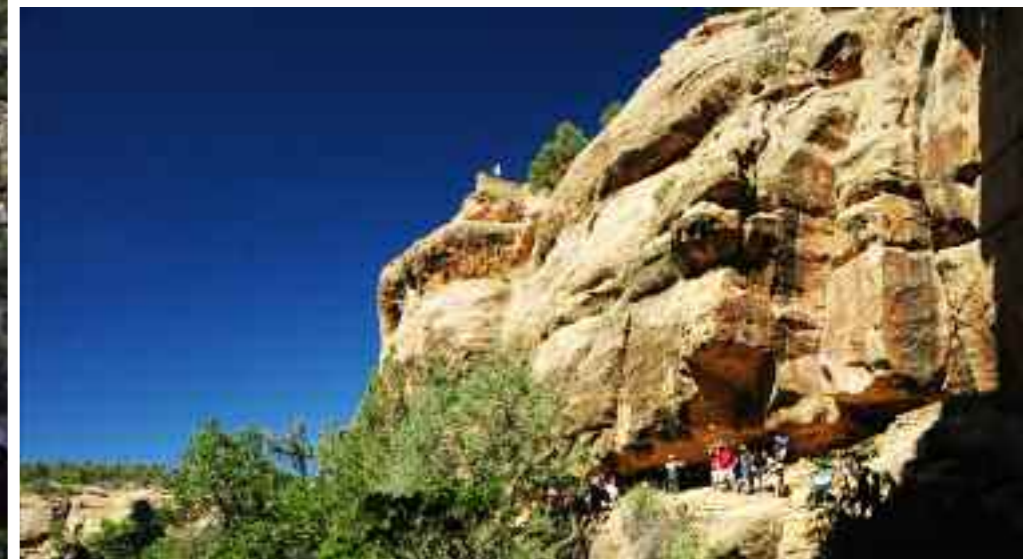
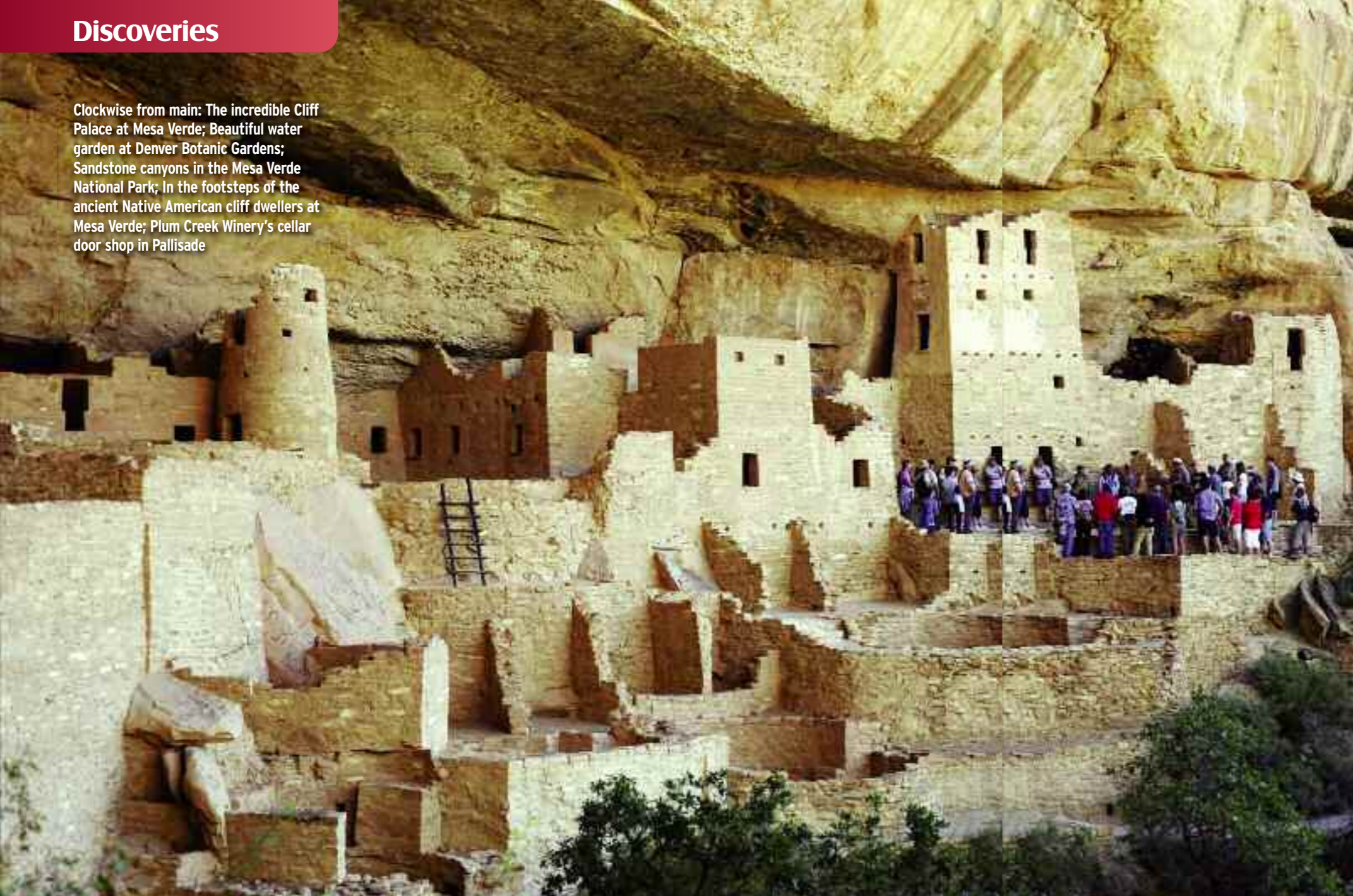
Among the highlights of the mile-long street is Denver's Union Station, which has undergone a massive restoration and re-development. The 1881 Beaux Arts station is a transportation, dining, shopping and entertainment hub with 112 hotel rooms, four new Colorado chef-owned restaurants, two quick service

restaurants, local shops and a Colorado beer hall. For more details go to: (www.denverunionstation.org).

Rockmount Ranch Wear is a fantastic western clothes shop founded by Papa Jack Weil, who at 106 was the oldest working CEO in America until he passed in 2008. Jack invented the snapbutton western shirt worn by everyone from Ronald Reagan to Elvis to Eric Clapton, the latter of whom is a frequent shopper. There's a little museum in the shop as well. (www.rockmount.com)

Tattered Cover is one of the nation's largest independent bookstores. It's

Clockwise from main: The incredible Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde; Beautiful water garden at Denver Botanic Gardens; Sandstone canyons in the Mesa Verde National Park; In the footsteps of the ancient Native American cliff dwellers at Mesa Verde; Plum Creek Winery's cellar door shop in Pallisade



heaven for any book lover with lots of nooks and corners with tables and chairs and settees for browsing. For details go to: (www.tatteredcover.com).

Larimer Square is a restored section of Denver's oldest street where the beautiful Victorian buildings have been restored to house a collection of art galleries, clothing stores, restaurants, cafes and nightclubs. Larimer Square is a focal point of downtown Denver. Website: (www.larimersquare.com).

One of the highlights of the city is a million miles from the hustle and bustle of 16th Street or its wild heritage. Denver Botanic Gardens is an oasis of colour and

texture with quiet, flat walks through specialist gardens past tranquil water features as well as a huge conservatory. It's a lovely way to spend a day despite the competition for your time from other attractions. Website: (www.botanicgardens.org).

After Denver we headed for Grand Junction, a four-hour drive away. It took us a bit longer after we diverted to Buffalo Bill's gravesite and to the historic Georgetown and ghost mining town of Silver Plume. The two are connected by the Georgetown Loop scenic steam railway.

Georgetown is a Victorian era town nestling among some spectacular peaks

including Mount McClellan. It has a historic Main Street with places to shop and eat as well as the railway.

It is a beautiful mountain drive from Denver, dropping down alongside the Colorado River to a wide valley between huge grey cliffs as you approach Grand Junction. This is Colorado wine country and you can take your pick of some cellar door tasting and eating opportunities in towns like Pallisade.

If the scenery as you drive is wonderful, further down the valley is the entrance to Colorado National Monument, 32 square miles of the most spectacular canyon and

plateau wilderness. The stacked rock formations in the canyons are colourful and often stand proudly in the high country with the backdrop of the Grand Colorado River Valley spread out below.

The Monument is run by the parks service and many use the hiking trails to more remote canyons. But one of the best ways to enjoy this jewel of the American West is to take the Rim Rock Drive that winds its way 23 miles from the valley floor up through the canyons to the plateau and then back down from the high country to Grand Rapids below.

Throughout the route there are places

to pull off and park to enjoy the many wonderful views.

Mesa Verde

There were more spectacular canyon country drives on the way to Mesa Verde our next stop tucked into the south west corner of the state where it meets with Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. We spent a night in the Far View Lodge in the middle of the Mesa Verde National Park and the next morning took the park's 700 Years tour.

The bus takes you around the Mesa

(the Plateau) and the guide takes you on short walks to illustrate the history and lifestyles of the ancient Puebloan people. The trip culminates with a walking tour of the Cliff Palace, the complex of cliff dwellings built by Native Americans during 700 years of cliff occupation ending in around 1300. This civilisation farmed the Mesa tops and lived there until 600 when they began to build and move into the vertical homes accessed by wooden ladders.

Cliff Palace contained 150 rooms and 23 rooms for religious ceremonies known as kivas and had a population of



Clockwise from main; Steam up for one of the locos at Durango station; Beautifully customised Harley Davidson in Durango. Some of the riders weren't quite so well preserved!; Cabaret time at the wonderful Strater Hotel in Durango



approximately 100 people. Sandstone, mortar and wooden beams were the three primary construction materials for the cliff dwellings. The Ancestral Puebloans shaped each sandstone block using harder stones collected from nearby riverbeds. The mortar between the blocks is a mixture of local soil, water and ash.

Driving out of the park and heading east provided more incredible landscapes with views to the San Juan Mountains. The road wasn't busy but the nearer we got to our overnight stop at Durango the more customised Harley Davidson motor bikes we saw, ridden mostly by

men with grey beards and pony tails and pirate-style headscarves.

Durango's main street was lined with bikes and Harleys patrolled up and down it. It was the weekend of a major bikers rally but there was nothing downmarket about it, the bikes were lavished with care and attention and ridden by successful professionals.

"They are either dentists or lawyers," one local told us. "Most have their bikes shipped out to within a few miles then fly out to ride them into town."

Transport of a different kind is one of the main attractions of this fascinating

town. Durango was founded by the Denver and Rio Grande Railway in 1881. The railway arrived in Durango on August 5, 1881 and construction on the line to Silverton began almost immediately. By 1882, the tracks to Silverton were completed. The line was originally constructed to haul silver and gold ore from the San Juan Mountains.

Now the three-and-a-half hour train journey on an historic, coal fired, steam-powered train travels through some of the most breathtaking scenery Colorado has to offer – the backcountry wilderness of the San Juan Mountains.

You can take a round trip or a one-way journey, the train runs all year. A museum at the station explains the history of the line and the route. Website: (www.durangotrain.com).

Strolling along Main Avenue towards our hotel the town was buzzing with people browsing the little shops and restaurants.

Built in 1887, the historic Strater Hotel is one of Durango's prominent downtown landmarks two blocks north of the station. A Cleveland pharmacist named Henry Strater believed Durango would prosper and therefore need a hotel. He was right, and the hotel continues to prosper,

filled with antiques and reminders of that Victorian era.

Back on the road and we drove up through Wolf Creek Pass with its ski resorts and mountain grandeur. It was a good moment when we passed the sign marking the Great Continental Divide. On the western side of the divide the rivers run down to eventually find the Pacific Ocean. On the eastern side where we were now driving their destination is the Atlantic.

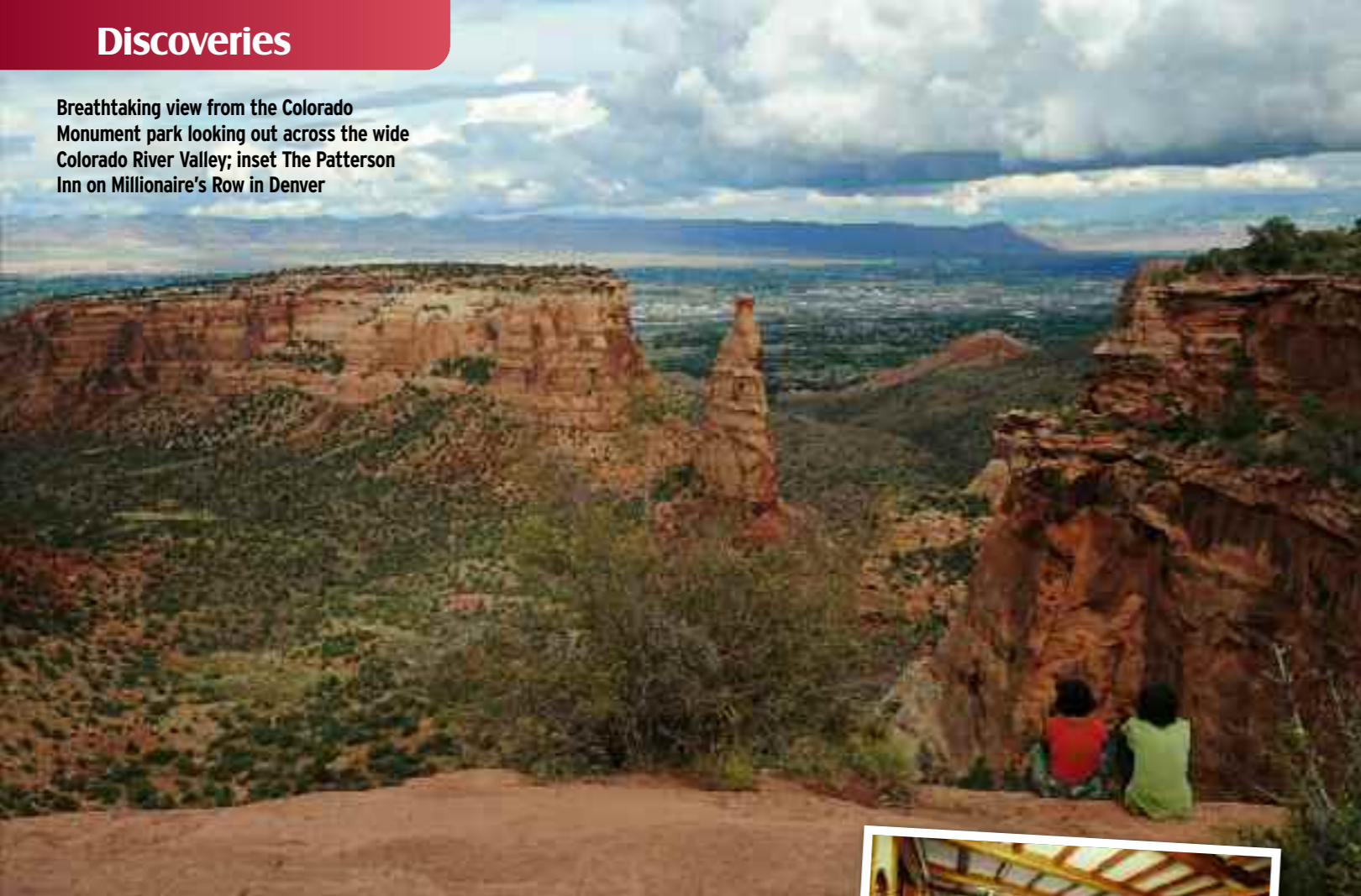
As we reached the plains and headed towards Zapata ranch and the buffalo herd we made a small diversion to the

little town of Saguache. Its wide Main Street with coffee shop, gallery and craft shop was sleepy in the warm summer sun.

In the window of the Saguache Crescent the local weekly paper for the San Luis Valley owner, publisher, reporter, editor, printer and typesetter Dean Coombs is seated at the keyboard of his Linotype machine setting stories in hot metal.

"The Linotype machine arrived here brand new – in 1935," said Dean. "My grandparents bought it." In its 135th year as a family business the paper is a four-page broadsheet format and covers every

Breathtaking view from the Colorado Monument park looking out across the wide Colorado River Valley; inset The Patterson Inn on Millionaire's Row in Denver



◀ happening of the town and its rural outposts across the prairie. It's the sort of community paper that has died out almost everywhere but that many of us would love to still have.

After our night at the ranch our last stop was at Colorado Springs after a drive on the high plain skirting the Rockies on our left as we headed north.

Garden of the Gods Park is the city's star attraction with dramatic views, 300ft towering sandstone rock formations against a backdrop of snow-capped Pikes Peak (14,115ft) and brilliant blue skies. You can drive through the park with lots of pull-offs for photo opportunities and areas where you can walk the trails. Website: (www.gardenofgods.com).

Mountain scenery dominates a tour of Colorado but it has plenty more to back that up. Ancient civilisation heritage, Old West memories, great food, some excellent wine and hundreds of micro breweries serving up the locals' favourite beers. If you are thinking of a USA trip Colorado comes highly recommended.

Passport to Colorado

Getting there

■ There are direct flights to Denver from Heathrow, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Flying time is between 12 and 13 hours. You may get a better deal if you fly via a hub airport like Dallas/Fort Worth or Atlanta but it does add several more hours to your journey. We flew British Airways direct from Heathrow.

Where to stay

- In Denver we stayed at the historic Patterson Inn, Website: (www.pattersoninn.com)
- SpringHill Suites By Marriott, 236 Main St, was our hotel in Grand Junction
- Far View Lodge, 1 Navajo Road, Manco in the middle of Mesa Verde National Park
- In Durango we had another incredible historic hotel, The Strater Hotel, website: (www.strater.com)
- Zapata Ranch near Mosca, website: (www.zranch.org)
- For our visit to the Garden of the Gods we stayed at Hotel Elegante, website: (www.hotelegante.com).

Where to eat

- Civic Center Eats at Civic Center Park, Denver: 11am to 2pm Tuesdays and Thursdays (May to

October) gourmet trucks offer a wide range of styles in the open air

- The Buckhorn Exchange 1000 Osage St., Denver, website: (www.buckhorn.com).
- Palisade Café, 113 W. 3rd St., Palisade, website: (www.palisadecafe.com)
- El Moro Spirits & Tavern, 945 Main Avenue, Durango, Website: (www.elmorotavern.com)
- Bristol Brewery, 1604 South Cascade Avenue, Colorado Springs in an old school, website: (www.ivywildschool.com)

Find out more

- State Tourist Office: (www.colorado.com)
- Denver: (www.denver.org)
- Colorado Springs: (www.visitcos.com)
- Durango: (www.durango.com)
- Grand Junction: (www.visitgrandjunction.com)
- Mesa Verde: (www.mesaverdecountry.com).