

TRAVEL

Colorado's canyons provide ideal vacation

By DOUG JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

Writer Kent Haruf describes Colorado's Front Range as a "faint jagged blue line low on the horizon a hundred miles farther away" in his recent best-seller, *Plainsong*.

He's talking about that first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains as you come in from the east on I-70 or I-76. The Front Range is the destination that drove Zebulon Pike and inspired America *The Beautiful*. Those purple mountain majesties are what the *Rocky Mountain News* describes as Colorado's "boon and bane."

If you haven't visited the area recently, you will be amazed at the growth. The populations of about eight Livonia have moved into the Denver-Boulder area since 1980. They joke that in 20 years you will be able to walk on rooftops from Fort Collins in the north to Pueblo in the south.

Even with the population boom it's not hard to find quiet spots just moments away from the urban areas.

Take US 285 and drive to the Pine Junction turnoff, go to Deckers (it's just a single stop, no gas) and turn either left or right and travel along the south fork of the Platte River. As the crow flies, you are a few minutes from Denver. But in location and in spirit you are far away, behind the first wall of the Rockies, traveling along a dirt road, the Platte roaring beside you. You pass a ranch or two, some trout fishermen, and a handful of college kids up for a picnic. At one point the road narrows; the river runs deeper because a boulder the size of a house blocks a stream. No population boom here.

It's these places that draw you to the mountains.

If you stay in Boulder to avoid the traffic and noise of Denver, it's the jumping off point for trips up one of several canyons: Coal Creek up to Nederland; Boulder Canyon where locals inner tube, hike and cool off in the spray from easy-to-reach Boulder Falls; or up South Saint Vrain Canyon or Big Thompson Canyon to Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park just

If you go

- A great source for information on Colorado is *The Colorado Guide* by Bruce Caughy and Dean Winstanley.
- Four-wheeler guides like *Charles Wells' Guide to Colorado Backroads and 4-Wheel-Drive Trails* offer useful maps and sound advice.
- Also Peter Massey-Joanne Wilson's *4WD Adventures Colorado*.
- A November 1998 issue of *National Geographic* has a detailed article on the problems and the lure of Front Range communities.
- Boulder Web sites include www.ci.boulder.co.us/comm/ty/ Index Also: www.mio.com/bic.htm#Visitor
- The Royal Gorge train number is (888) 844-5444.
- The NORAD Web page offers many details if you wish to visit: www.cheyennemountain.af.mil/cmoc/cmocout.htm
- The *Denver Post*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Boulder Daily Camera* and *Colorado Springs Gazette* all run very good Web sites for detailed, up-to-date information.

beyond.

Big Thompson is spectacular and famous. In 1976, 139 died and many were injured in a rain-induced flash flood. When you see the sheer rock walls and the river, you'll see how eight inches of rain produced the disaster.

Boulder

Boulder often makes the "best places to live" top 10 lists. This month, *Modern Maturity* magazine called Boulder the best "clean and green" city for retirees. Home of the University of Colorado and the National Center for Atmospheric Research, as well as computer companies such as IBM, Boulder is like Ann Arbor. Two-thirds of the population holds some kind of college degree. Smaller companies such as Celestial Seasonings Tea make Boulder their home.

The city's plan for outdoor recreation should be the model for the nation. A local sales tax has allowed the city to surround itself with huge tracts of open space lands that cannot be touched by developers.

Most people living in Boulder can look out one of their windows and see the Front Range and the low Flatirons. Municipal water comes from the city-owned glacier. Downtown is easy to reach, highlighted by the tree-lined Pearl Street mall, full of shops and places to eat. Just

blocks from downtown you can hike mountain trails.

No wonder the residents have built a green enclave with open spaces, spending more than \$100 million to gain control of 30,000 acres.

North of Boulder out of Fort Collins is Cache la Poudre River, a designated Wild and Scenic River. The rocky canyon goes on for miles and miles deep into the Front Range. The Forest Service has been refurbishing the extensive string of picnic areas, turnouts, campgrounds and fishing bridges along the river. Kayakers enjoy the white water, and trout fishermen have many choice spots to cast a line.

The canyon is quiet during the week but gets busy starting Friday afternoon. Locals like the Mishiwa Inn on the Canyon Highway at supper time, watching the river for bighorn sheep looking for fresh water.

The Poudre is the last unblocked river along the Front Range, hence the bumper sticker: "Don't Damn the Poudre." The intense force of the white water rushing along side the road for miles can best be felt if you drive slowly with the windows down.

South along the front range many people end up at Colorado Springs, drawn by Pikes Peak, the Air Force Academy and several other tourist destinations.

Some of the recent changes in this area include a new visitor center at the Garden of the Gods opened in the mid-Nineties and the end of tours at Cheyenne Mountain.



Photo by Doug Johnson

In the soup: Whitewater rafters tackle the Arkansas River in Colorado's Royal Gorge near Canon City.

The government used to take visitors into the mountain to see the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), made famous in the movie "War Games."

Last April the Air Force stopped the tours; you can still hear a hour-long presentation given outside the mountain in a building nearby. "Briefings" are Fridays only; call (719) 474-2238 two months in advance. There are many rules and regulations, and you will want to review them by looking at the NORAD Web site.

Garden of the Gods

The Garden of the Gods is the nearest city park (it's owned by Colorado Springs) in America. You get a great view of Pikes Peak from the balcony of the visitors center. Another Front Range community, Canon City, is the setting for a new tourism venture launched last May. For the first time in almost 35 years, you can take a train ride into the Royal Gorge, the 1,000-foot-deep canyon of the Arkansas River.

Riding the Canon City and

Royal Gorge Railroad takes about two hours for a round-trip into the canyon, including a trip over a hanging bridge that is secured to the granite walls. The only other way to see this section of the Front Range is by raft or kayak on the churning Arkansas.

The other big draw in Canon City—besides the 13 correctional institutions—is the Royal Gorge Bridge, where you can get a view on a suspension bridge above the gorge. The bridge, aerial tram, incline railcars, restaurants and children's attractions are all part of a commercial venture, and it costs to enter the bridge area; you can walk over or go by car. The view is spectacular and perfect, but you will have to decide whether the admission charges are worth it, especially for a large family.

North of Canon City you can visit Cripple Creek, one of the towns in the mountains that offers casinos. The trip to Cripple Creek can be made several ways, including High Park Road, a normal route, or up two ominous-sounding roads: Phantom

Canyon Road, or Shelf Road. Both contain narrow sections of gravel-only surfaces. Last summer Shelf Road was closed, but it reopened this spring, according to the Canon City Chamber of Commerce office.

Check locally to see if the vehicle you are driving and your expertise behind the wheel are suitable for these roads.

That's what it is like up and down the Front Range.

Out on the plains, you'll find more people and a booming economy. A revamped Denver, with its Historic Lower Downtown Districts (LoDo) is bringing people back downtown. All Front Range cities struggle with more and more growth.

But close by—up the trails and roads and rivers and canyons—exists the other Colorado.

Doug Johnson, a Colorado native, is a retired Livonia teacher who lives with his wife in Plymouth. Their son Tom, a 1988 grad of Plymouth Salem, works as a research chemist for Amgen, a biotech firm in Boulder.

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