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Taking the Rocky Mountain Way

Denver, Colorado — gateway to the Rocky Mountains — is one of America’s coolest cities and a haven for musicians, artists and outdoor enthusiasts, writes Domhnall O’Donoghue



Rocky Mountain National Park © Rocky Mountain National Park

Red Rocks Amphitheatre



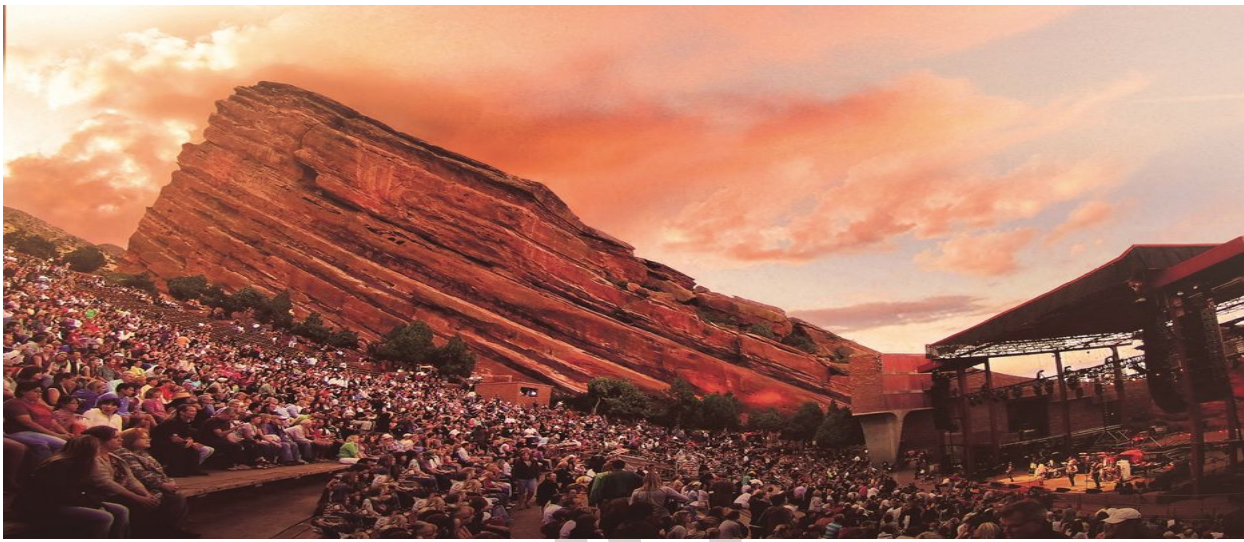
Domhnall O’Donoghue

Sat 6 Jan 2024 at 09:00



It’s late September in Denver, and as the day passes the baton to night, I emerge from a bus into a mountain carpark. Sudden wind results in my flimsy anorak dancing with abandon, momentarily preventing me from seeing one of music’s most iconic sites: Red Rocks Amphitheatre.

Since arriving in Colorado, America’s eighth largest state, I’ve proudly boasted to anyone who’d listen that my week’s itinerary includes a concert at this open-air venue, beautifully crafted into a dramatic, pinkish rock structure, and evidence that Mother Nature is often our greatest architect. In response, my Uber driver, restaurant server and hotel receptionist — regular attendees — used words like ‘emotional’, ‘magical’ and ‘spiritual’ to describe their previous experiences here. For now, I’m opting for ‘cold’.



Red Rocks Amphitheatre

Formed over 200 million years ago, Red Rocks — with natural acoustics that would impress the most fastidious sound engineer — was developed into a performance venue in the 1940s and, since then, has welcomed an avalanche of international musicians, including Fleetwood Mac, Eric Clapton, R.E.M., Bille Eilish and Whitney Houston, as well as U2 in the dawn of their career. Tonight, the headline act is the Arctic Monkeys, their second of two sold-out nights, with support from another Irish band, Fontaines D.C.

After finally getting the upper hand with my free-flying outerwear — and making peace with the fact that despite Denver claiming 300 days of sunshine annually, tonight, it's chilly and gloomy — I wade through the crowds, avoiding the lure of beer, synonymous with the region. Another local explained earlier that the altitude in both Denver — the Mile High City — and Red Rocks means one drink equals 1.6 at home.



Denver Central Market © James Florio

These lofty heights have proven challenging not just on the livers of concert-goers but also the lungs of performers like Paul McCartney, who serenaded the masses here with the Beatles in 1964.

“We were all told it was high above sea water, altitude,” McCartney recalled. “We thought, ‘Well, so? What’s the difference?’ We got there, and we started finding it a little hard to breathe. I remember singing ‘*Long Tall Sally*’ and thinking, ‘Hey, this is great – hyperventilation of the highest order! I was sweating, but I got through it. It was an interesting experience, physically.

“It was a lovely arena, beautiful at night.”

As I take my seat, I reflect on the accuracy of Paul’s praise for the venue. The anticipation grows as the winds die down, thanks to the protection provided by the massive, jagged rocks surrounding us. And it’s not just on stage where the stars shine; when the clouds eventually clear, the skies also sparkle.

Later, when Alex Turner croons ‘*I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor*’, he’s clearly not directing this compliment at me, looking ruddy and dishevelled while tripping the light fantastic with my fellow music lovers.

It turns out, those descriptions I’d previously heard about Red Rocks – ‘emotional’, ‘magical’ and ‘spiritual’ – perfectly sum up the night.



Denver Union Station

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The Rocky Mountains

The following morning, I exchange arctic monkeys for elk, moose and mountain lions and venture to the Rocky Mountains National Park – the fourth largest of its kind in the country, welcoming 4.6 million visitors each year. Along the way, my guide, Gentry Catlett, reveals that spotting certain wildlife in the park involves “being in the right place at the right time”.

“There are no grizzly bears in Colorado,” she explains, much to my relief, “you’d have to go further north for those. There are black bears here, though.”

I take my focus off the surrounding mountains, the peaks lightly dusted in snow, and ask Gentry to repeat herself. Black bears?

“Don’t worry,” she says with a smile, “they aren’t aggressive, and there aren’t many of them – I usually only spot one a year.”

“How many have you spotted so far this year?”

“None – so maybe today is the day.”



A sign in the Rocky mountains

Registering my terror, Gentry changes the topic, mentioning that the locals' love of outdoor activities – hiking, cycling, skiing and snowboarding – means Colorado claims the country's lowest rates of heart disease. Gentry, a Master's graduate in geology, adds that September is her favourite month as the aspen trees indulge in a wardrobe change, switching from green to yellow and gold.

While she reveals that it's also mating season for elk, fittingly, we hear an ear-piercing bugle near a motel. As vehicles whizz along the adjacent road, a bull with an eight-piece antler – the number an indication of his vintage – pursues his female counterparts, who seem exasperated by the attention. It is only ten in the morning, after all.

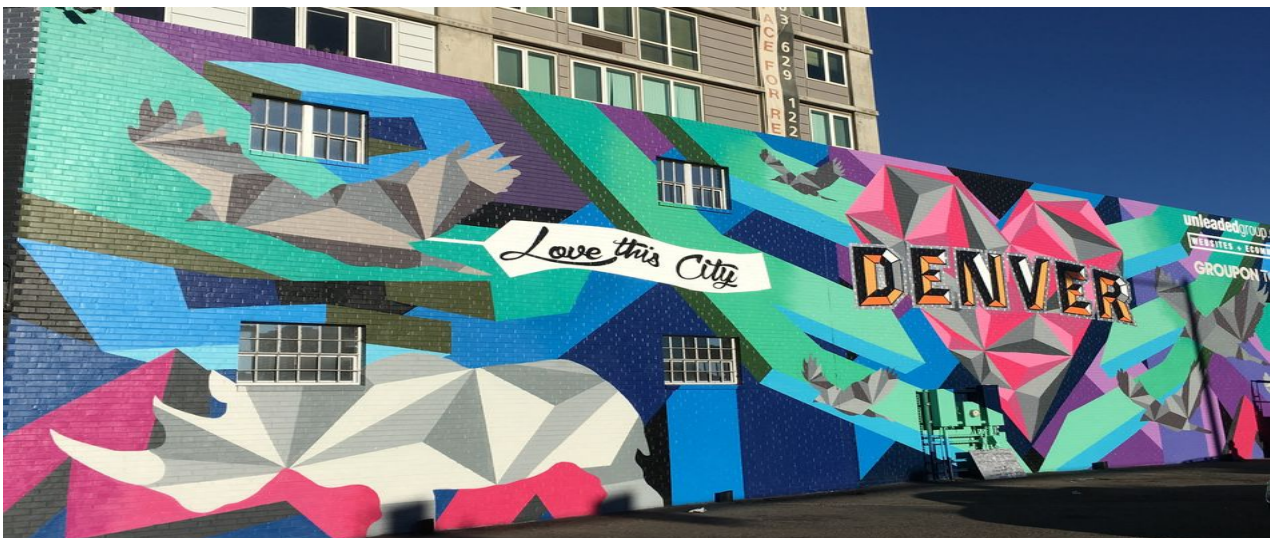
Throughout the day, inside and outside the park, we spot prairie dogs, deer, a snake and, overhead, an osprey. The elusive black bears keep their distance, however. Maybe they're avoiding the hordes of film fanatics visiting the nearby Stanley Hotel, which inspired former guest Stephen King to write his horror masterpiece, *The Shining*.



The Stanley Hotel

Art Attack

Before leaving Denver, I explore the city's art scene, which is robustly supported by public funds, with north of 500 outdoor sculptures activating the streets and green areas. The masterful graffiti, strewn across the walls of the RiNo district, serves as a galvanising outlet for minority voices and a defiant criticism of the establishment.



Love This City Mural

Denver's punky, anarchistic approach to art continues at the mind-boggling Meow Wolf, the large-scale apocalyptic installation that has welcomed a million visitors since launching in 2021. Elsewhere, the Denver Art Museum's extensive international collection is housed in a facility inspired by the Rocky Mountains, created by architect Daniel Libeskind, also responsible for Dublin's Grand Canal Theatre.



'I See What You Mean' - Denver's Blue Bear

And that's when I finally see what eluded me in the National Park — I even take deep breaths to ensure the altitude isn't playing tricks on my mind. In the heart of the city, there's a 40-foot bear — blue, not black — peering into the Convention Centre.

"It's called I See What You Mean," says my guide, Jill Collins of Discover Denver Tours. "Local artist Lawrence Argent created it, and I think it injects playfulness into the city."

"Ah, yes," I reply, "I see what you mean."



Domhnall in Denver

Fact Box

Domhnall stayed at The Maven at Dairy Block Denver; rooms start from \$396. From May 2024, Aer Lingus will fly directly between Private Dublin and Denver.

Highlights from the city's renowned culinary and beer scene include El Five, Linger, Leven Deli, Tavernetta, Denver Central Market, Mister Oso, Nocturne, Sunday Vinyl, Denver Milk Market and Oakwell Beer Spa.

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