

HI COLORADO, USA 2002

Sunday 30th June

Yes, Colorado is definitely high, since our destination of Denver is otherwise known as Mile High City, at an altitude of 5,280ft (1,609m) above sea level. This can apparently cause altitude problems, but the only altitude problem I experienced was my usual fear of flying (though not in the Erica Jong sense and come to think of it, not in the mile-high sense).

Checking in at Gatwick Airport had been very tedious, waiting in a queue for almost two hours. This had apparently been partly due to current stringent American security, but I guess I'd rather feel secure in that sense of the word, as I certainly battled with my personal sense of insecurity while sitting on the Boeing 777 for a massive ten hours. Please note, that for anyone suffering from aerophobia, ten hours is irrefutably massive. However, we landed in a mercifully alive condition, after a lot of bumping and swaying and a particularly messy touchdown. Alan said it was one of the worst touchdowns he's ever experienced.

My first impression of Denver was that it's big, flat and not green. After I'd unclenched myself and we left the plane, the heat hit us and I was glad I still had some water in my bag as we joined the Immigration queue. Our turn eventually came and all four of us were assessed and allowed into the country by the same guy. All four of us meant Alan, myself, our son Daniel and our daughter Rachel. Due to a very successful house sale, Daniel had paid for our air fare as an exceptional Christmas present six months previously.

I should also say at this point that we had ended up in Denver airport, because I had been writing to my American penfriend, Denise Hmieleski, for almost 40 years. Last year on a business trip, Daniel had met her and her family and the desire for us all to meet had thus been intensified. Therefore, it was quite an occasion as we walked through a security-conscious airport and saw Denise, her husband Michael and their daughter Heather waiting outside.

After a relatively self-conscious greeting of old but newly met-in-the-flesh penfriends and their families, we all made our way to the Avis shuttle bus, which took us to the Avis headquarters, where a pre-booked rented Chevrolet van was waiting for us. Alan then drove the van, following Michael's car in front, to the Hmieleski home in Lafayette, Boulder.

There were no accidents from driving on the right as we drove past lots of open spaces and even caught sight of some nodding donkeys (a device used for drilling oil inland) like we had seen on a visit to California in 1973. A sign outside a local school caught my eye: *Summer's here, Warriors – stay cool!* Cool? The temperature was nudging 99 degrees Fahrenheit at one point, but Denise had thoughtfully provided us with several bottles of water to avoid dehydration.

Around 50 minutes later, we arrived at the family home and met their black Labrador dog, Shadow, who was gentle and very friendly. We drank lots more water and after being shown around the two-level house, sat outside on the deck to eat sandwiches and nibbles. The garden below was dry, but there was a beautiful tree overhanging the deck and the air was fragrant with pine and the ethereal presence of the distant mountains.



Semi-prone with exhaustion on the deck

Denise and Michael's son Josh, who was living nearby with friends, arrived to join the transatlantic throng. Rachel and Josh had been penfriends for a number of years and their first meeting was slightly awkward, as Denise's and mine had been. However, they soon relaxed and sat talking like old buddies. The American lingo was infiltrating quickly! I felt I was being very quiet, but it would have been past 03:00 if we'd still been in England, so I was surprised we didn't all fall into a stupor of exhaustion and start to lose consciousness on the spot.

A short while afterwards, I fell into a stupor of exhaustion and began to lose consciousness on the spot, so it was definitely time for bed. Alan and I were in the spare bedroom, Rachel was sharing Heather's room and Daniel was in the study with the candlestick and Miss Scarlet (although maybe not the candlestick and definitely not Miss Scarlet). Therefore, after approximately 21 hours awake, it was an exhausted but relieved goodnight from Colorado.

Monday 1st July

Happy 21st birthday, Rachel! I hope you slept better than I did. Sleep had eluded me to begin with as I was finding it hard to breathe, possibly because of the tree pollen. I then awoke with a stinker of a headache at 04:50, but managed to doze for a while. Alan was also dozing when Shadow slipped into our room and licked his arm – Alan came to with a start and an expletive.

My headache was more or less bearable by the time we convened for breakfast, when Daniel admitted he'd fallen asleep last night while waiting for the bathroom to be free to have a shower. So we were all still rather tired, but Rachel opened her birthday cards (she'd had a pre-birthday celebration at home) and then we sat on the deck for most of the morning in hazy sun.

Josh arrived a short while later, followed by Michael, who came home from work at 10:45 for lunch after having started work at 06:00. After a sandwich and salad lunch inside the house, we took it easy for another couple of hours until Michael returned home for the day at 15:00. The lower level of the house (where we are all sleeping) is reasonably cool, which is a most welcome respite from the onslaught of the heat outside.



A sandwich and salad lunch hits the spot

To celebrate Rachel's birthday, Denise and Michael took us out to *Dave and Buster's*, a kind of very posh amusement arcade, complete with restaurant. Although I'd resorted to drugs for my insistent headache, it became a lot worse as we all piled into the rented Chevrolet. The temperature outside was 104° Fahrenheit at one stage (although the van has air-conditioning) and when we got out, it felt rather like the blast of hot air when you open the oven door.

It was thankfully much cooler inside *Dave and Buster's*, although the bright lights and loud noise didn't help the banging inside my head. However, Michael kindly bought us all a swipe card that we could use to play video games.

After I wandered around dazed and disorientated for a while, like an alien just having landed on the planet Arcadia, Rachel and then Daniel walked around with me. I even managed to play some games and win a few vouchers that could be exchanged for prizes, which I gave to Rachel as it was her birthday – she ended up with a mug and Daniel with a shot glass.

We availed ourselves of a drink at the bar and shortly afterwards moseyed along to the restaurant for Rachel's birthday meal. I was annoyed that my headache was still banging away, so there seemed no option but to resort to drugs again and I therefore tried to score surreptitiously while the others were chatting.

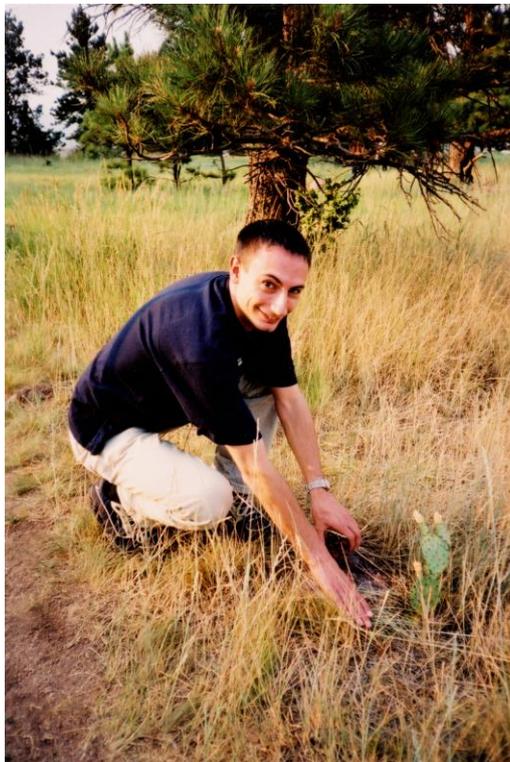
Maybe I was feeling unusually vulnerable because of the insistent headache, but the waitress actually scared me a little, as she was so overtly American and rather loud with it. I was glad that I was sitting beside Daniel, who helped me with my menu choice and I thus managed about two-thirds of a Caesar salad.

Denise had mentioned to the waitress that it was Rachel's birthday and her first time in America. It was therefore no great surprise when the waitress returned with a green cocktail called *Alien Secretion* for Rachel and said, "Have this one on me." She put her arm around Rachel, who looked a little bemused, having just drunk a pint of lager that she said had gone straight to her head. The waitress also gave Rachel a pile of swipe cards for some free games, so I was happy that she'd had a little fuss made of her for her birthday.



Rachel prepares to down the alien secretion

When we were finished, we all piled once again into the Chevrolet (where I noticed that the temperature outside was 103° Fahrenheit at 19:40) and Michael drove us to a place in the mountains that gave us a good view of the city. It was a little hazy up there because of the smoke from forest fires that had been in the news back in England, burning millions of acres of exceptionally dry forest areas.



And here we have an indigenous prickly pear...

Daniel and I had become quite excited to see the mountains, trees and flowering prickly pears. Daniel even posed for me to take his photo! I felt 100 times better out in the natural, beautiful surroundings, even though my nose had become blocked as soon as I'd stepped out of the van, presumably because of the tree pollen. I was also aware of the high altitude when I became a little breathless walking up a slope, but presumed I would soon acclimatise.

After a short while, we reluctantly left the mountains and Daniel opted to drive us back to the house, which was an enjoyable challenge for him. We then spent an hour or two sitting out on the deck in the fragrant evening air. At one point, Michael appeared with a cake that Denise had made and Heather had iced, so we naturally all sang *Happy Birthday* to Rachel!

I realised that Michael was reminding me of someone, namely the wise and laid-back Dr Mark Greene in *ER*, played by Anthony Edwards. I felt I was being very quiet, as always, but at the same time, felt completely unable to be someone I'm not. I was surprised that we were all still remarkably laid back by 22:15, when exhaustion finally overcame us and we wisely said goodnight.

Tuesday 2nd July

After a slightly restless night, I woke at 06:10 and perused a book on Rocky Mountain birds of the feathered variety, until Alan woke an hour later. Rachel came in when she knew we were awake and told us she'd gone over to Josh's place last night and hadn't returned until around 01:00, causing Shadow to bark. She'd left her nightclothes in our room and hadn't wanted to disturb either us or Heather, so she'd slept in her clothes on the downstairs sofa.

After another lazy morning sitting around on the deck and enjoying the hazy sunshine, Josh arrived at 11:00, whereupon Alan drove us in the Chevrolet to collect Michael from work and go out to lunch. Denise had wanted to take us to one of her and Michael's favourite haunts, a Chinese restaurant (the name of which has eluded me). Our inclusive menu began with egg drop soup.

Not wishing to seem ungrateful, I nevertheless have to confess that I'm not a fan of Chinese food and found myself silently renaming it egg throw-up soup. Broccoli, straw mushrooms and rice was next, followed by watermelon and a fortune cookie. My cookie fortune read: *A friend is a present you give yourself.*

It was then time for Michael to return to the office and to my surprise, he asked us all inside to meet his colleagues. I found this rather daunting, as I was introduced individually to people as Denise's penfriend for nearly 40 years. At this information, a pair of eyes would rest on me in curiosity, whereupon I would shrink with embarrassment and not be able to speak a word, let alone a few witty words, as befitted a longstanding penfriend from little old England.

I dread to think what they thought of me, but the ordeal ended and we drove back to the house. Daniel and Alan wanted to go for a walk along the local creek and as Denise had mentioned this walk several times in her letters, I decided to go too. It had seemed a good idea, but merely being outside was incredibly hot. As for actually walking outside, this caused us all to sweat profusely. To be honest, it was just a creek (albeit a creek in faraway Colorado) and we turned around fairly soon to head back and have a most welcome shower.



Coal Creek Trail – hot and dry!

After drinking a gallon of water and a lie-down in a shady room, I managed to recuperate enough to join the others at 16:30 for a drive in the van to Flagstaff, a picnic site in the mountains. Michael drove us up the scenic mountain road to a beautiful space amid many pine trees with their warm, fresh aromatic smell and spectacular views over the surrounding foothills – plus a flagstaff.

Denise and Michael had prepared a picnic and we spent the next couple of hours eating, walking around and taking photos. Rachel accompanied Josh, while Alan, Daniel and I looked for a trail. We found an amphitheatre and a monument, but no trail. It didn't matter, the beautiful trees and spectacular views were great.



Beautiful trees and spectacular views



I photograph Daniel who photographs Alan who photographs a tree

This might be a good place to mention a few facts about Boulder, which is the 11th most populous city in Colorado and home of the main campus of the University of Colorado. Boulder is 25 miles from Denver at an elevation of 5,430 ft (1,655m) and sits at the base of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

In the early to mid-19th century, the Southern Arapaho Native American tribe often wintered in the Boulder area, as well as the Cheyennes, Sioux, Comanches and Utes. Gold prospectors arrived in 1858 and gold, silver and coal mining was a significant part of the local economy until the mid-20th century.

After we had reconvened and returned to Lafayette, Rachel went to Josh's place, while the rest of us went out on the deck to enjoy a final hour or so of the warm, fragrant, evening air. Once again, I felt I was being very quiet.

Wednesday 3rd July

Breakfast a l'Americaine this morning, courtesy of Denise, was pancakes with maple syrup out on the deck under a blue Colorado sky. Afterwards, the four of us went to a mall named Dillard's for a shopping experience a l'Americaine.

Alan was driving the Chevrolet but unfortunately, after cruising around for quite a while, he most unusually lost his sense of direction. He stopped by a gas station and bought a map, but even this failed to solve the problem. Eventually, he was forced to go back to the house to ask Denise for directions.

On finally locating the elusive Mall, which looked to our British eyes like an exclusive undercover shopping centre, we walked around it at some length. I've no idea how long it actually was, but we spent a couple of hours or more inside.

Daniel and Rachel obviously wanted to be parent-free and went off on their own for a while, so Alan and I were left to our own devices to peruse a few shops. The trouble (to me) was that the shops themselves were conspicuously empty – of customers, not goods – and the shop assistants had the alarming (to me) habit of approaching to ask if help was needed, or simply to say hello. I say *hello*, but of course it was actually *hi*.



The Mall

I became somewhat despondent with my lack of American-type shopping skills, so was relieved when we met up again with a much more successful Daniel and Rachel for lunch. We somehow ended up at McDonald's, consuming French fries, burgers and Coca-Cola – the American fast-food habit was an alarmingly easy temptation. After leaving the Mall, we dropped in at Safeway to buy bananas and Ibuprofen, before driving back to the ranch, I mean house.

Denise and Michael were preparing for a Pot Luck supper they were having at their place. Denise had to pop out to deliver something and asked if I'd like to go along with her for a 10-minute drive. I did so and quite enjoyed the experience of Colorado roads, as driven by a Colorado driver in a Colorado automatic (and there my automobile knowledge ends). Denise told me she didn't want me to worry about the Pot Luck supper and it was perfectly OK to be quiet. I felt a bit better, but was still dreading the Pot Luck supper.

As the early evening arrived, it brought along with it the people who had come to take Pot Luck. We were introduced each time someone arrived and most of them asked a number of penfriend-related questions. I have to confess that I became very overwhelmed by being the focus of this extrovert American social scenario and I committed a very introvert British act – I left them to it and escaped into the blissful silence of the spare bedroom. Oh dear.

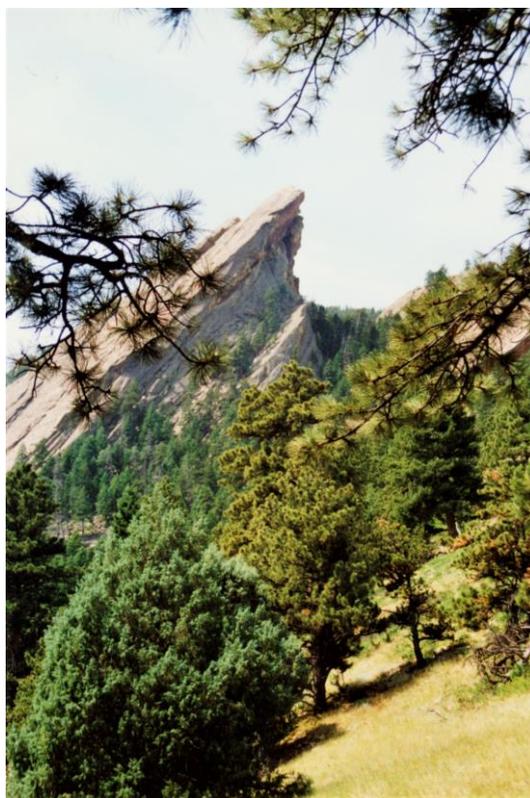
Thursday 4th July

Independence Day in America! I apologised to Denise this morning for escaping to the bedroom, but when she asked me if I'd ever sought help for my condition, I realised we are social worlds apart and we went our separate ways for the day.

Daniel fancied revisiting a trail he'd walked with Josh on his previous year's visit. Rachel was still asleep, so the three of us set out for Chautauqua Park, gateway to the Flatirons. I should explain that the city of Boulder is situated in Boulder Valley, where the Rocky Mountains meet the Great Plains. Just west of the city are imposing slabs of sedimentary rock tilted up on the foothills, named Flatirons by pioneer women because of their strong resemblance to the flat irons they used in the days before the electrical steam variety hit the market.



Gateway to the Flatirons...



...which resemble flat irons

From Chautauqua Park, there were several trails up the mountain, so we simply chose a likely-looking one. It turned out not to be the trail that Daniel had previously walked with Josh, but it was still a good trail. I really enjoyed looking at the flowers and the views on the first part of our walk, but as we climbed ever upwards, I began to suffer from the heat.

I even felt momentarily faint a couple of times, despite drinking plenty of water – but the fact remained that we had climbed hundreds of feet in high altitude in hot weather. Fortunately for me, there were several relatively flat areas to enjoy exploring and in which to recuperate between bouts of climbing.

However, we turned back before we'd reached our hoped-for destination, as apart from being very hot and tired, I'd planned to ring home. My father had been in hospital after a heart attack when I'd said goodbye to him, so I was very anxious to find out how he and my mother were. Denise kindly let us use their phone when we got back and I spoke to both my parents, as Dad had been allowed home to await his second bypass operation. I felt quite homesick after speaking to them, but also determined to make the most of our time in this remarkably beautiful area of the world.

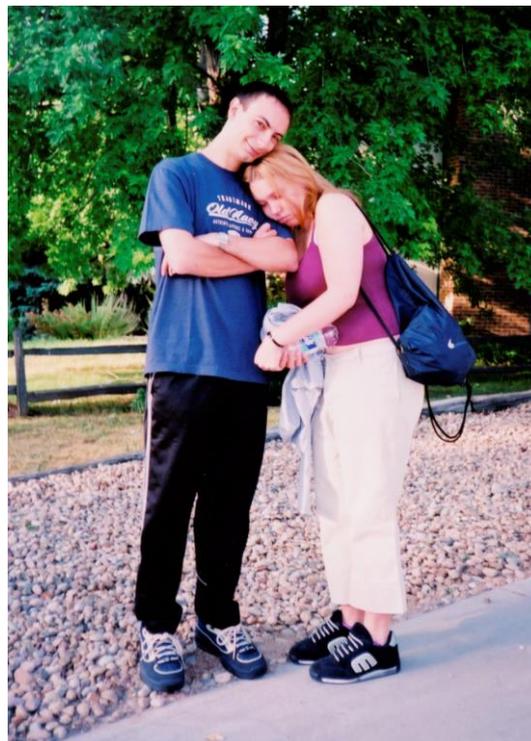
After a much-needed shower, we had a bits and pieces lunch from last night's leftovers. Rachel was upset that we hadn't woken her to go on the mountain trail and I was sorry too, as I'd been missing her company a great deal. However, the afternoon was spent preparing for a forthcoming four-day trip to South Dakota, which everyone seemed to be looking forward to very much indeed.

At around 18:00, a friend of Denise and Michael called and we all enjoyed a cheeseburger out on the deck, courtesy of Michael and the rather large barbecue that was in the garden below the deck, along with the table tennis table. I felt I was being very quiet. Some of the younger element (and Alan) played table tennis on the table tennis table, which is a strangely repetitive sentence to write.

Following this, we all transferred inside to watch the film *Weekend at Bernie's* on the widescreen TV in the relatively cool, downstairs room. This gentle, slightly insane comedy was just right to keep the mood raised until bedtime at 22:30.

Friday 5th July

The alarm rang precisely at 06:00, although I was already awake. The same could not exactly be said for Rachel, who appeared more asleep than awake, as did Josh when he managed to arrive at 07:10 for a 07:20 departure.



Sleeeep!

Denise and Michael had decided to take their Buick car as well as the Chevrolet, because of all the luggage and food we were taking. For the first part of the journey, Daniel drove four of us in the Chevy, though not to the levee, which may or may not have been dry. We passed the state sign as we entered Wyoming, so were duty-bound to stop and have a photo taken.



Just passing through Wyoming...

As we drove along the motorway, we often saw overhead warnings proclaiming *Extreme Fire Danger*, which I wasn't surprised at one bit, in view of the temperatures we'd been experiencing. Our first stop was at a rest place, where we had a picnic breakfast in a sort of shelter used as protection from the heat.

Alan drove us to another 'rest room', whereupon Daniel drove the Chevy again. Soon after, we stopped for a sandwich lunch and then were on the road again, with Daniel still at the wheel. He said he loved the driving, whereas Alan found it quite tiring. As time wore on, the temperature rose, reaching 101° Fahrenheit when we got out of the Chevy at South Dakota, the heat hitting us like a wall.



Hot South Dakota

Throughout the journey, the scenery had changed from flat expanses of grass, to rocky outcrops, to small towns, to forests and hills and flat expanses again. At one point, we passed by huge expanses of burned trees, which was a sad sight, although we were later assured that the forests would recover well. It was changeable, wonderful scenery and I enjoyed the drive very much indeed.

It wasn't very far to our destination of Custer, which is generally regarded as the oldest established town of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. I had previously wondered at the name of the Black Hills, an isolated mountain range rising from the Great Plains in west South Dakota and reaching into Wyoming.

The Black Hills, translated from the Lakota *Pahá Sápa*, were so named because of their dark appearance from a distance, due to the fact that they are covered with trees. Set off from the main expanse of the Rocky Mountains, the region has been described as an island of trees in a sea of grass and is rather a geological anomaly. The Black Hills encompass the Black Hills National Forest and have the tallest peaks of North America east of the Rockies.

We finally arrived at the *Dakota Cowboy Motel* in Custer about mid-afternoon in a thunderstorm. After we'd all checked in, Alan and I gazed at the two large queen beds in our room with amazement, while Daniel sat out on the balcony in the rain, watching the lightning with its impressive accompaniment of thunder as it rumbled around the surrounding mountains above us in the distance.

At around 17:00, we all went to a local eating place that also had a gift shop. I consumed a veggie burger with French fries, followed by a hot fudge sundae and was sure I'd gained several pounds in weight. Further evening activity was to follow, though, to burn off a small percentage of the excessive calorie intake.

After looking around the gift shop, Michael drove us in the Chevy to Mount Rushmore, which I have to say I never thought I would see. The car park was full of number plates from many different states, which indicated the importance of this place to the American population. An impressive walkway up to the monument, lined by flags of the various states, was also interesting.



A sacred mountain?

I must confess that the sight of the four massive 60ft (18m) granite heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln carved into Mount Rushmore (a sacred mountain originally known to the Lakota Sioux as Six Grandfathers, but renamed after a New York lawyer, Charles Rushmore, during an expedition in 1885) was an impressive, but insidiously disturbing sight in the strange evening light.

We were led to a gift shop, then went to sit in an amphitheatre, as there was a video show at 21:00. It felt surreal, sitting in the warm air of a South Dakota evening and staring up at the four presidential faces. As expected, the show was patriotic and for this reason, I didn't enjoy it. I couldn't help wondering about the American ideal of liberty and how they applied this to the Native Americans from whom they had stolen the land. Then I thought about the English...

At the end, we were asked to rise and sing the American National Anthem, whereupon the English contingent rose in order to be polite to their American hosts, but we didn't sing. I don't mind different group identity, but I don't agree with the way that Americans seem almost to worship the flag. However, it was an experience to see the four granite faces light up as the show ended, before we made our escape and Michael drove us back to the motel in the Chevy.

Saturday 6th July

We slept quite well in the queen bed – just the one, which seemed a waste with two queen beds in the room. We'd arranged to convene at 09:00 and thus had a leisurely start to the day. It was cool in our room with the air-conditioning, but plenty warm enough to sit outside on the balcony for a picnic breakfast.

We then set off for a drive along the Wilderness Trail, with Michael once more in the Chevy's driving seat. Soon we came across a couple of buffalo among the trees near the road and then a little later on, we saw a whole herd of them, babies and all – it was an exciting sight and Michael stopped the van for us to gaze upon them. He then became extremely agitated when Alan jumped out of the van and approached one of the huge, enormously heavy buffalo to take a photo of what was essentially a magnificent, but lethal beast:



Buffalo!

Further along, there were deer, prairie dogs and some friendly donkeys that came up to cars. Michael stopped the van and this time we all got out for a while, so Heather could stroke the donkeys and we could look around. The grassland scenery that stretched away into the distance for miles was typical Wild West and had been the site for several famous films.

Michael then drove us along some very bendy roads, past Mount Rushmore, to a town called Keystone. This town had started off as a mining town in 1883, but now caters to tourists. It seemed to be basically one street with shops and eating places done up in the style of the old Wild West of the movies.



Keystone

For lunch, Denise and Michael led us to an eating place that looked like a saloon bar from a film. There were two non-meat meals on offer, one seafood and the other vegetable wraps. I chose the latter and they were delicious, with a glass of iced Coca-Cola to combat the headache I'd been fighting all morning. Daniel had a coffee cup refilled twice, saying he was suffering from caffeine withdrawal!



The wild west?

Feeling replete, we wandered around Keystone, among wagons, cowboys and a sitting Indian chief. Gunshots occasionally punctuated the air – air that suddenly became very wet, as large, warm raindrops fell upon us. We took refuge in several of the fascinating shops, one of which Alan and I had to be practically dragged from to embark on the next part of our itinerary, Crazy Horse Mountain.

Crazy Horse had been a respected war leader of the Oglala Lakota tribe. He fought against the US federal government to preserve the land and traditions of his people, taking part in the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. In defeat, he was asked by a white man where his lands were now. He replied, "My lands are where my dead lie buried." The next year, after surrendering to US troops, he was fatally wounded by a military guard while allegedly resisting imprisonment.

Mount Rushmore had been seized from the Lakota tribe after the Great Sioux War of 1876-7, despite the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 that granted the Black Hills to the Lakota people in perpetuity. When the carving of Mount Rushmore had begun in 1927 to promote tourism, one of the sculptors was a Polish-American named Korczak Ziolkowski.

In 1939, Chief Henry Standing Bear of the Lakota Sioux wrote in a letter to Ziolkowski: "My fellow chiefs and I would like the white man to know the red man has great heroes too." The two of them met and made the decision to build a memorial to the Native American heroes, with work starting in 1948 on the sacred Thunderhead Mountain, about 8 miles (13km) from Mount Rushmore. Crazy Horse was the chosen figure, sitting on his horse with arm outstretched, as if indicating his lands, where his dead lie buried.



"My lands are where my dead lie buried"

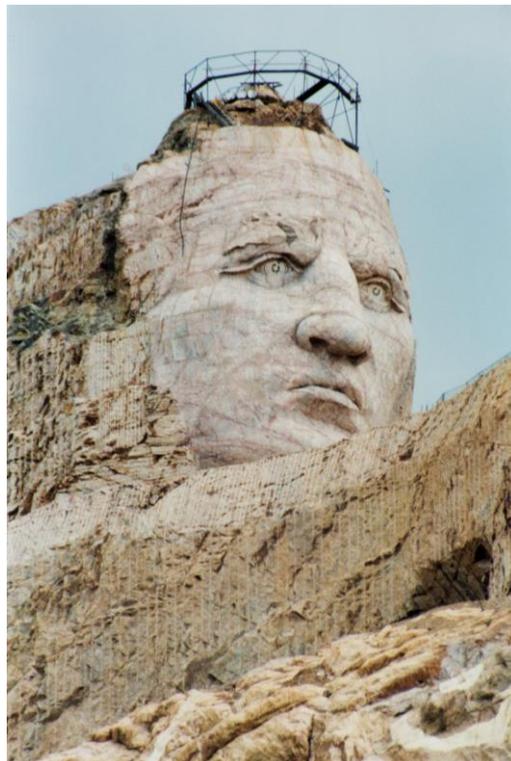
The Crazy Horse Memorial Welcome Center was light, airy and interesting. After an explanatory film, we walked around taking in the Native American ambience, which displayed many fascinating artefacts. A visit to the Native American Educational and Cultural Center, where Native American artisans were selling their unique products was intriguing. I was a bit embarrassed when Denise went and stood next to a Native American selling CDs of his music so that Michael could take their photo, but the Native American didn't seem to mind at all.

The next item on the agenda was a short bus tour that took us closer to the actual monument. It looked gigantic when we got out of the bus to stand and stare and take rather a lot of similar looking photos. The sky was remaining stubbornly cloudy, although the air was still very warm.



Two crazy tourists pose in front of Crazy Horse

I was pleased to hear that the whole Crazy Horse venture is non-profit making and receives no federal or state funding. In fact, two federal offers of \$10 million have been turned down, for fear that federal involvement would jeopardise the broader cultural and educational goals of the place. Interestingly, though, there is dissension from some people whether a sacred mountain should be carved in the first place and I have to say that I see their point.



Even closer

Following this closer viewing, Denise and Michael led us to a fairly busy nearby pizza parlour, where we all partook of some excellent and freshly-made pizzas, after seeing the chefs tossing the pizza bases behind the counter (but not to discard them). It was extremely hot in the parlour, so we all very gratefully shared two large jugs of blissfully cool Coca-Cola and Dr Pepper.

Thus fully fed and watered, we went back to the motel to freshen up and then at about 19:00, returned to the Crazy Horse Center to see the main man all lit up, which was, I have to say it, an enlightening sight. We had another walk around and succumbed to a few more souvenirs before going back to the motel. Daniel came into our room for a while to have a drink and show us the photos he'd taken on his digital camera. It had been a very good day.

Sunday 7th July

We'd arranged to meet in the *Dakota Cowboy* café for breakfast at 08:00 – this had been Daniel's request, as he had a hankering to order an egg sunny side up. His hankering was fulfilled. Denise and Michael ordered eggs easy over, while the rest of us ordered pancakes that were delicious, but no doubt calorific.

We then set off in the trusty Chevy with Daniel driving us on a rather long trip to Devils Tower in Wyoming. Devils Tower (Lakota name *Mato Tipila*, meaning Bear Lodge) is in fact a monolithic igneous intrusion. That is one seriously impressive description, but to normal people, it's a very weird rock that looks like a gigantic sawn-off stone tree trunk. It rises 1267 feet (386 m) above the surrounding land and was used in the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.



The monolithic igneous intrusion

When we arrived and left the air-conditioned coolness of the Chevy, the heat felt almost overwhelming for a few moments. After a quick foray inside the much cooler tourist shop, though, we set off to walk for a mile around the monument – the first national monument as proclaimed by President Roosevelt in 1906.

Devils Tower is sacred ground to Native Americans, along with its surrounding land, which is covered with pine forests, woodlands and grasslands. Its boundary encloses an area of 1,347 acres and visitors are requested to stay on the trails.



Is the space ship coming yet?

Thankfully, parts of the trail meandered through some shady woodland, as I began to feel seriously hot and sweaty, despite drinking lots of water. It was therefore a relief to complete the circular mile and return to the coolness of the Chevy – although the plan seemed to be a picnic lunch outside, by the side of the van. We sat in the shade, but I remained uncomfortably hot and was bitten several times by insects of an unknown variety.

Daniel chose to drive us back to the motel again, as he really did love driving the Chevy along American roads. The journey back seemed long, hot, tiring and tedious, but it was interesting at one stage, when we drove past a place called Deadwood. It had been reached by the forest fires and I couldn't help assuming that it had originally acquired its name because of previous forest fires.

This time, they had apparently been ready to evacuate all the people, but managed to stop the fires, partly by usual methods and partly by using diggers to create huge banks of earth at the edge of the forest, so the fire would have nothing to burn. There was one house all burnt out except for a lone standing chimney and we saw a few fire fighters still in the area. A notice said: *Thanks a million to our heroes*, meaning the fire fighters, no doubt. As before, it was sad to see so many burnt trees, but all on our way back, there were many, many live ones that actually far outnumbered the dead ones.

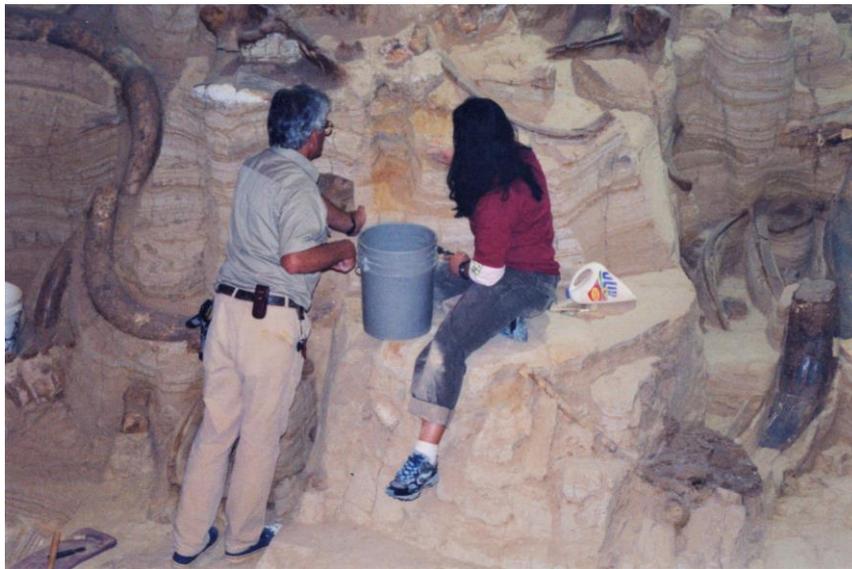
With Daniel still driving and Alan navigating (as Michael had fallen asleep) we managed to reach Keystone safely in order to find something to eat. I would have been happy with just an ice cream, but we were led into a proper eating place where everyone had proper food, so I showed willing and ordered proper cod and chips – which seemed strangely incongruous in South Dakota!

After the proper meal, we returned to the motel and went our separate ways. Daniel called for us and we walked along the streets of Custer, which proved quite interesting with the shop signs, road signs and the Custer County Sheriff's office. Daniel bought some beer, chocolate and beef jerky and we then moseyed back to the motel and spent some time sitting out on the verandah with Rachel and Josh, where I was aware of being very quiet.

Monday 8th July

It was overcast as we convened once again at 08:00 for breakfast in the café. There seemed to be a lot of bikers around, so it wasn't a particularly quiet morning. However, the pancakes, maple syrup, orange juice and coffee were delicious. We then packed our bags, paid the bill and hit the road. The clouds had lifted and it was decidedly hot once again.

Heather rode with us in the Chevy this time, but it was only about 35 minutes before we arrived at the Mammoth Site. This was not only a museum with some excellent displays of ice age fossils, but also the site of a live dig (or scientific excavation, to be precise). There was a 30-minute guided tour, which was very interesting and very well-presented. The book shop there was also well worth a browse and a couple of purchases were made.



Scientific excavation still in progress

Daniel then drove the Chevy for the rest of the day, as it was time to head back to Lafayette. After we'd made our first euphemistic comfort stop, Josh joined us in the van for the next long stretch, which was three hours or thereabouts through Wyoming. During this time, we were fascinated to see some extremely long freight trains. One I managed to count had 135 wagons!

By about 17:00 we were all tired and hungry, so welcomed a food stop. Alan and I enjoyed a tuna sandwich with French fries, followed by a sundae. It may not be the healthiest food, but it was extremely welcome after the long drive. Daniel picked up the bill, because for some reason the waitress had given it to him, as well as giving him a long look-over. He paid it willingly...

The last lap was only about an hour and we were soon being greeted by a tail-wagging Shadow. Rachel and I thought we'd caught the sun, but were unsure when it happened, except possibly at odd moments during the hot, sunny days.

The evening passed quickly with unpacking and settling back into the house. Daniel went out with Michael and returned with bananas and wine. Then for the last hour of the evening, we sat on the deck with a glass of wine in the warm, Colorado air. It was very pleasant, but I felt I was being very quiet.

Tuesday 9th July

Shadow came and slept in our room for a while last night. We woke later this morning and it was 08:30 before the first morning cup of tea. I have to say that American tea is not a patch on our tea at home and the milk tastes funny, but it's tea. We spent a quiet morning pottering around and sitting on the deck. It really was a good place to sit, in the dappled shade of the tree, with the warm, fragrant pine-laden air disinclining any real activity whatsoever.



Reading in the dappled shade of the tree

After lunch, Denise and Michael suggested going out to see a film, *Men in Black II*. Everyone wanted to see it except me (not my cup of American tea), although Rachel was going to meet Josh later. I therefore stayed behind and read. It was so relaxing that I even dozed off for a few minutes, which is unheard of at home.

The film-watchers returned and we sat around for a while, which seems to be all one feels like doing in the energy-sapping heat. Denise and Michael suggested we go out to eat later, which is precisely what we did. Alan and I had eventually wised up to excessively large American portions and shared a fish sandwich with French fries. I can say with absolute certainty that my French fry consumption has been far too high recently (and we're not even in France).

From there, we went for a walk in the mountains. Alan, Daniel and I went on a trail that was quite an arduous climb on the way back. I was completely tired, hot and sweaty, but at least I must have burned a few calories. Also, it's so beautiful up in the mountains with the breathtaking views, the many and varied trees, the rocks, the pine needles, the wildlife, the trails, the odd amphitheatre... We could find no history about the amphitheatre, but it didn't matter, because there was just such a sense of freedom and wellbeing in the mountain air.



The odd amphitheatre amid the trees

When we returned to Lafayette, the consensus was to watch another film, *Last of the Dogmen*, on the widescreen TV in the cool of the downstairs room. Unfortunately, it was still rather hot down there and my feet felt a little swollen and uncomfortable. Therefore, I was quite glad when it was time for bed.

Wednesday 10th July

I felt as though I hadn't slept for long enough last night, but we awoke to yet another sunny day and breakfast out on the deck, which is pretty marvellous after all. Josh arrived and at 10:15 we all departed in the Chevy for Estes Park, driven once more by the enthusiastic dedicated driver, Daniel.

We stopped at one place in the mountains where there are chipmunks, got out of the van and sat by the side of the road. It wasn't long before they appeared and Heather fed them with peanuts that Michael had bought. They were cute little critters (and I've never used that word in my life before), but it was exceptionally hot and I was glad when we all piled back into the van.



An American chipmunk

It wasn't very far to Estes Park after that, although I wouldn't actually call it a park, but rather more a visitor town with lots of craft and gift shops. We were taken to an eating place for lunch, although I wasn't particularly hungry, as it felt that all the food over the last 10 days had begun to weigh me down. Alan and I shared a fish sandwich with French fries again, since we're in the middle of meat country and to a non-meat eater, this can be a little troublesome.



The scenic road to Estes Park

We then walked around the shops, which Daniel, Rachel and Josh seemed to find a little boring, but which Alan and I enjoyed very much. The Native American crafts were what interested us most and we happily bought a few souvenirs to remind us of this very special part of the world and its indigenous people.

It started to rain as we were leaving, with huge, fat raindrops. Once back at the house, a thunderstorm rapidly developed, with heavy hail at one point. Daniel really enjoyed watching it and I must admit that it was quite spectacular and I watched it too, alongside Heather. Some of the forked lightning was quite close and the house electricity shut off for a few seconds.

I was glad that we could just pick at snack food for tea, before deciding to watch another film. The choice of the evening was *Into the Woods* and I have to say that I didn't enjoy it at all, although we all have different tastes and maybe I simply didn't get it! Talking of tastes, Denise had made fudge and popcorn, which was lovely, calorific and somehow very American.

Thursday 11th July

I was aware that Shadow was sleeping in our room again last night for an hour or two and was only able to doze lightly. After that, though, I slept very well and didn't wake till an unheard of 08:30. The sun was shining once more and Denise made pancakes, complete with her lovely home-made maple syrup.

After a long deliberation out on the deck, it was decided that Michael would accompany Alan, Daniel and me in the Chevy to Buffalo Bill's grave, which is 6000 ft up in the mountains. Denise was suffering from vertigo, so opted to stay home with Heather and Rachel (who was later to see Josh).

Daniel drove again and this time we made an interesting stop at a post office. I say interesting because for some reason a post office seems such a British institution, but this was obviously American, with American newspaper stands outside with American newspapers inside them. Little things...

As we drove on, it wasn't quite as hot as previously, merely up in the top 70s. However, by the time we'd travelled up the mountain, it felt much hotter, presumably because the day had progressed. We stopped and got out of the Chevy a couple of times to look at the view and take photos.



One of the Chevy stops

The mountains and grassland looked very dry, but the sight of the city way below was amazing. The air seemed still and hot, but some paragliders were taking advantage of the air currents. Once we saw a deer crossing the road – fortunately safely. The trail names could be quite interesting too:



After one wrong turning, we eventually arrived at the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave in a place called Golden and stood outside for a while, enjoying the view. On progressing inside the museum, which cost a very reasonable \$3 entrance fee, we watched a video and then walked around at leisure, looking at a number of interesting exhibits. I knew almost nothing about Buffalo Bill except his name and even that was wrong, as his real name was William Frederick Cody.

He had won his Buffalo Bill nickname after being given a contract to supply buffalo meat to Kansas Pacific Railroad workers. He proceeded to kill 4,280 American bison (commonly called buffalo) in eight months during 1867-8. There is no way I can condone this wholesale slaughter, neither do I condone his lifestyle, but I viewed what I saw as some fascinating history.

Emerging outside again, we were amazed to find it was 15:00 and high-tailed it to a nearby picnic bench to eat the sandwiches we'd packed. We then walked up a hill to see Buffalo Bill's grave, where several other tourists were walking around in the very hot air. In 1917, Buffalo Bill had been granted his request to be buried on Lookout Mountain, overlooking the Rockies and the Great Plains.



Buffalo Bill's grave

Walking back down again to the main site, we divested ourselves of several dollars in the gift shop before Daniel drove us back to Lafayette. Alan and Michael were having an interesting discussion about all sorts of world issues as we drove along and as a listener, I found it strangely comforting that two men from two different continents could agree about so much.

After we had returned at 17:30, Michael cooked some salmon on the barbecue, while Denise cooked beans and corn on the cob, which we ate outside. Denise and Michael then went to a church meeting, while the rest of us sat around on the deck and then went inside to watch *Galaxy Quest*, a fairly amusing film, on the widescreen TV. I could easily become accustomed to this lifestyle!

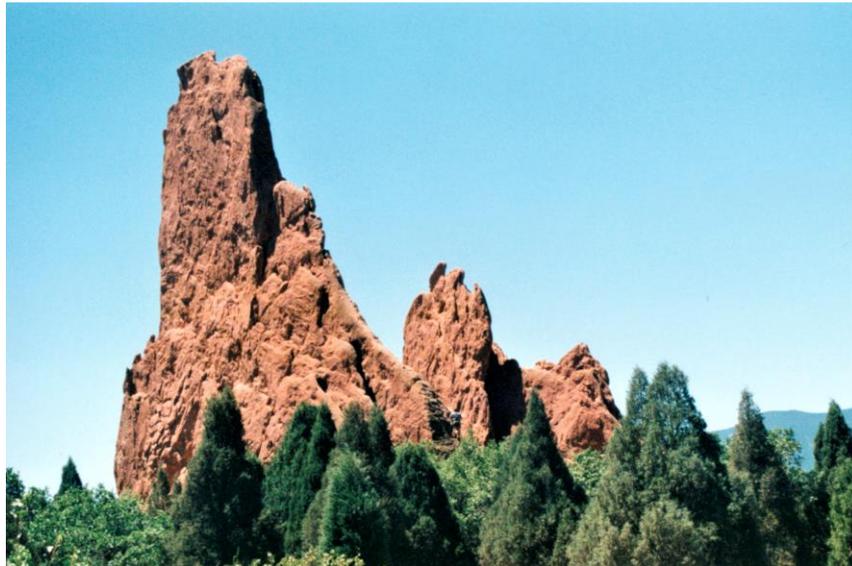
Friday 12th July

I couldn't get to sleep for hours last night and strangely enough, Rachel said the same. However, I was ready, willing and able to leave at 09:30 with Alan and Daniel for our planned Chevy trip to Garden of the Gods and Pikes Peak. My only regret was that Rachel wasn't coming with us, as she would be seeing Josh later.

Daniel drove us through downtown Denver, which was extensive and scary and I kept my eyes closed at times. When I opened them to peep out, I saw lots of skyscrapers and other interesting buildings, so wished I'd kept my eyes open.

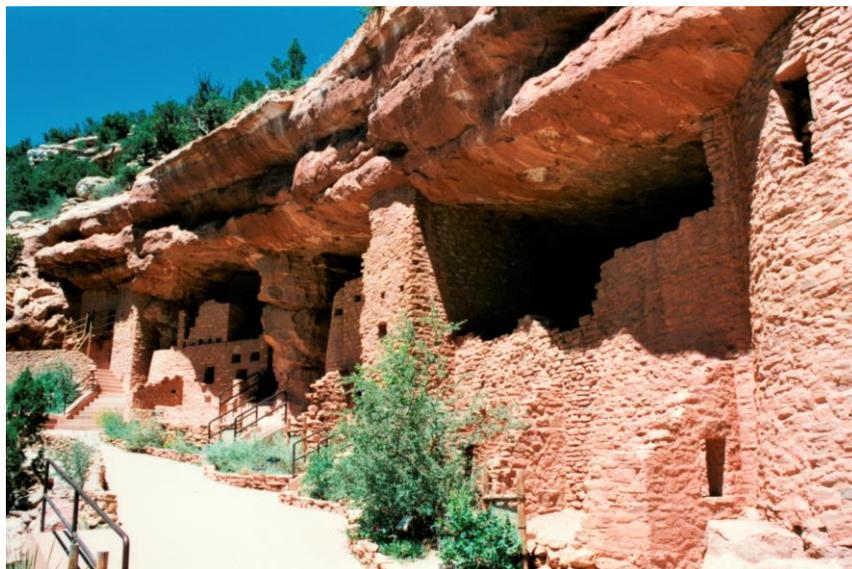
Once safely through Denver, we travelled to Colorado Springs and our first stop, the heavenly named Garden of the Gods. It had taken almost two hours. Garden of the Gods is basically a public park containing a lot of unusual and impressive sedimentary rock formations, with numerous trails for hiking, walking, cycling and horse riding. Red sandstone rises in hogbacks (ridges of sandstone with tilted layers, so named because they resemble the back and spine of a pig).

It was very hot as we walked along a path through the garden, with the fantastic formations either side, amongst trees and with mountains in the background. We wandered around for about 45 minutes, watching several rock climbers and reading notices warning us to look out for rattlesnakes on hot summer days.



One of the unusual rock formations

We ate our cheese sandwiches at midday in the relative coolness of the Chevy in the Visitor Center's car park. The relative coolness became uncomfortable heat, so we visited the rest room and gift shop, then drove to our next destination, the Manitou Cliff Dwellings at Manitou Springs, at the foot of Pikes Peak.



The red sandstone cliff dwellings of the Anasazi

Preserved underneath a red sandstone overhang, the ancient cliff dwellings of the Anasazi American Indians built over 700 years ago were an impressive sight. They were very well preserved and we were able to walk among them and even go inside them to experience blissful coolness after the heat outside.

It felt so special to be standing inside the remains of dwellings of an American Indian culture that had roamed the area from 1200 BC to AD 1300 and to be looking through their window spaces, like they must have done, seeing a faraway mountain view. I could hardly believe my luck even as I stood there.

The delight grew even more when I noticed there was to be a display of dancing at 14:05, which was only a few minutes away. We joined a group of people inside a small building because although the display was normally held outside, it was so hot that they had decided to hold it where there was some shade. There were only three dancers, but they were dressed so colourfully and the dances were quick but vibrant. Daniel was very tolerant...

Outside again, the Native American who had introduced the dances and dancers and who was also the drummer and singer, happened to be in the car park as we were heading to the gift shop. Someone asked if he would pose for them, which he obligingly did, so we naturally took advantage. He was half Cheyenne, but I'm unable to remember the name of his other half. Later, as we walked to the van, he gave us a wave, which warmed me even further. The whole visit had proved to be an unexpected delight that I enjoyed very much indeed.



The obliging Native American

However, Daniel was dying to embark on our day's final visit, the famous Pikes Peak. We had to pay \$30 for the privilege, but it was a terrific experience and one I'll never forget – a total of 19 miles to the top, along a very winding road.

It certainly wasn't for the faint-hearted and it's a really good job I trust Daniel's driving! Each mile was marked and it was recommended to get out of the vehicle at several stopping places, to acclimatise to the ever-increasing altitude. It was also recommended to drink water and eat snacks, in order to counteract the possible nausea and dizziness of altitude sickness. We did indeed stop at several places, but it was mainly to take photos of the stunning scenery. At this level there were grass meadows, plenty of pine trees and juniper woodlands.



A beautiful, blue view

According to the information guide, we left the Foothills Zone at 8,000 feet and entered the Montane Zone. Different trees were still very much in evidence – junipers, spruce, Douglas firs and aspen groves, while on the ground there were various shrubs and wildflowers. I was a little disturbed to read that black bears and mountain lions inhabit this level, but was too entranced to worry unduly.

There was a gift shop at one of the mile markers, where we indulged in an ice cream and a short walk around. A visit to the toilet was like no visit to a toilet ever experienced before, since it was like sitting on top of a draughty hole in the ground that fell away into nothing for miles underneath...

The road onwards and upwards changed to being unpaved, with a number of switchbacks. At 10,000 feet we entered the Sub-Alpine Zone, which seemed to be where the altitude really affected the vegetation. Although there were lots of spruce trees, the further we gradually wound our way upwards, the shrubs and bushes disappeared. The number of trees became much fewer and the ones that were growing at all were really stunted from the wind and cold.

I'd noticed a headache beginning quite early on and had decided to pop a couple of painkillers. Apart from this, though, all I noticed on the drive up was ear pressure that regulated itself easily enough. After a while, Daniel also said he had a headache and Alan suddenly began to have pain from the tooth he'd just had filled before coming to Colorado. He said it was terrible, like being in the dentist's chair without anaesthetic. Therefore at the next stopping point, I had to dispense painkillers to both Alan and Daniel too.

The view continued to delight, as we passed into the Alpine Zone at 11,500 feet. Here we lost the trees as we travelled up above the tree line, where the only vegetation was very low to the ground. We stopped to take photos of wildflowers and noticed different mosses and lichens growing on boulders. I was amazed to discover that plants on alpine tundra take 75 years to grow half an inch.



Wildflowers in the alpine zone

We finally reached the top at 14,110 feet above sea level, where amazingly there was a gift shop and eating place. The view at the top was frightening, with a sheer drop over one side and the temperature had dropped to 49° Fahrenheit. I felt a little light-headed for a few moments, but the thought that I was at the top of a mountain was enough to keep me fully conscious. Inside the shop, O₂ therapy was available for \$8, as the air at this level is apparently only 60%.



Feeling on top of the world

Having availed ourselves of the facilities, purchased a couple of fridge magnets and taken some photos at the top, we reluctantly decided to leave, as the day would soon be progressing towards evening – and we were also rather hungry.



View at the top

The descent was nearly as enjoyable as the ascent had been and we still stopped a few times to take more photos, including once when a very inquisitive yellow-bellied marmot sat on a rock and posed for us:



This is my best side

The temperature gradually crept up as we went down. It had been so still and quiet up there (although at the very top it had also been quite windy) that it felt almost a shame to rejoin civilisation proper again at the bottom.

We were surprised at how late it was, so as soon as we came across a convenient eating place (which happened to be McDonald's) we stopped for food. By the time we emerged from the restaurant, it was starting to become dark. As Daniel drove us along, it was wonderful to see the sun setting behind the mountains, creating an unusual silhouette. Of course, we had to drive through sprawling Denver again (94° Fahrenheit), but it wasn't nearly as busy as the morning had been. Alan managed to navigate us safely to Boulder without any mishaps and so we arrived back at Lafayette and the house.

Shadow greeted us madly by sniffing around us all. I must confess that I'm not exactly a dog person, but she's always been so gentle and all the time we were there, I had never felt uncomfortable with her (except perhaps a little in our bedroom at night). As it was mid-evening, we sat with the others for a while and talked about our day. Rachel came in a little later and told us about her day and then it was time for bed and our penultimate night here.

Saturday 13th July

Both Alan and I slept really well last night, no doubt exhausted by the previous, fantastic day. We enjoyed some toast and a banana for breakfast out on the deck, joined by Daniel, Rachel and Denise. Then at about 10:30, Alan, Daniel and I took to the Chevy once again on another hot day.

It was necessary first of all to buy gas/petrol, which caused Alan a spot of bother with the self-service machine. In the end, he was forced to ask an attractive young female attendant for advice, but still had trouble, despite Daniel leaning out of the window and saying, "Press the big yellow button!"

When he had managed to press the big yellow button successfully, we were free to continue with our day. Daniel drove us past Estes Park and further on into the National Park area, where this time we paid \$15 to enter. The sky was blue with a few white clouds and the scenery was as inspiring as ever. As we climbed up, it became spectacular and several times we stopped to get out and look at certain interesting sights, one of them being a log jam in a river.

Further up still, we began to see signs that warned of dangerous snowfields ahead, which sounded very exciting, but would also have been alarming had it not been the height of summer. As it was, snow was visible on the higher mountain slopes, making for some dramatic and breathtaking scenery.



Snow on the higher slopes

Time seemed unimportant and it was 14:00 when we stopped at the Alpine Visitor Center, where we had trouble finding a parking space. As before, we ate our sandwiches in the van, before visiting the rest room and gift shop. Then we were on the road again – the bendy, picturesque, sometimes switchback road.

We stopped at Lake Irene along the way, which was a small but beautiful, quiet and serene lake among the trees. Further along, another interesting stop was a viewing point where we looked down onto the Cache La Poudre river, which is the beginning of the watercourse that leads to the Gulf of Mexico.



Alan and Daniel at the viewing point

Daniel wanted to drive to Grand Lake, which we did, but when we arrived there it was underwhelmingly like a resort with a swimming pool for residents. It was in a lovely spot overlooking the lake and people obviously used it for weddings – the white ribboned sign *Nuptial Knoll* rather gave this away.

We stood and looked at the yachts moving around on the lake for a while, feeling somewhat disappointed, before deciding we may as well start the long drive back. The weather hastened us along in the end, as clouds had been steadily building all day and they had begun to be a breathtaking, if not slightly alarming sight. They were particularly heavy and thunderous above the mountains and gave every appearance of coming our way.



Help!

When Alan and Daniel got out of the Chevy at one stopping place to take photos, hoping to catch one of the lightning flashes, they suddenly returned very quickly because the rain had begun to bucket down. In due course, several rainbows added to the astonishing scene and we wished we could have captured the sight properly in a photo, without becoming completely drenched.

All three of us were tired on the journey back, but Daniel insisted on driving. We made it to Lafayette at 19:45, whereupon pizza was ordered and we sat with the others to talk about the day. Rachel had partly spent her day with Denise and Heather, having lunch in a Mexican restaurant.

Despite being tired, Alan went to watch a James Bond film with Michael, while I sat with the others (being very quiet) until going gratefully to bed at 22:30. Goodnight for the last time in Colorado!

Sunday 14th July

I woke at 08:10 on our last morning, but Alan was sleepier and surprisingly didn't surface until almost 09:00. We had a final morning cup of tea and a final Colorado shower, then completed our final packing.

Daniel, Rachel and Heather were all up and about, while Denise and Michael had gone to church. They returned at around 11:00 and deposited a box of donuts (spelt the American way) with us before they went out to lunch. I have to say that it seemed a very odd way to spend our final lunchtime together.

By 14:00, we were all packed and ready to go. Denise and Michael had returned to the house in order to accompany us to the airport in their car, but Heather had decided to stay home, so we said goodbye to her and Shadow. Josh had popped in earlier on his way to work to say goodbye, which felt good.

The four of us piled into the van for the final time and drove to Denver airport – it was 99° Fahrenheit. Denise and Michael drove in their car to the Avis rental place, where we said goodbye to the Chevy and goodbye to Denise and Michael.

It was so unbearably hot that while we were standing around waiting for Alan to settle the van hire bill (which was rather a financial setback) I simply had to go and stand in what meagre shade I could find and take hefty swigs of water from the bottle I was carrying. It was that or end up in a sizzling heap on the ground.

I managed not to melt before the free Avis shuttle bus arrived to whisk us away to the international terminus. Here a porter appeared and helped us to take our cases to the right check-in desk. Unfortunately, we'd just about used all our American money, so Daniel gave him all the loose change he had, about \$3. The porter wasn't amused, but tough – we hadn't asked him to carry our cases.

Check-in was immediate, unlike Gatwick. Alan was frisked and I was asked to drink from my plastic water bottle, to prove I wasn't carrying a dangerous substance. I didn't care, I wanted to go home! Then we were in the duty-free area, but it was being renovated and was more or less useless. We bought some overpriced drinks with a credit card, but they were half ice cubes – so that part of Denver airport definitely had the thumbs-down. Going to the airport toilet in somewhere marked *Tornado Shelter* was a bit different, though!

The plane was on time, but neither Rachel or I slept at all, as there was a fair bit of turbulence and I felt far more anxious than on the inward flight. However, dawn arrived somewhere over the Atlantic and then we were flying over the Celtic sea, Cardiff, Bristol and finally London. My right ear hurt a lot when we were descending and I couldn't hear out of it for a few hours afterwards, but we were home, safely on English ground again.

I had a tremendous time visiting so many fantastic places and managing to set foot in three different states. However, the mountains were the overriding joy, as they are truly awesome. Just breathing in the mountain air is a panacea for all ills, while the breathtaking scenery is quite heavenly.

It was a wonderful experience that I'll never forget, despite feeling at times like a square introverted peg in a round extroverted American hole. I'm so grateful to everyone who made the trip possible and if Colorado could re-locate some 4,000 miles closer, I'd visit it again in a shot!

