

## travel

Glorious peaks and forests, sparkling rivers, buffalo and moose moments reward a lucky dip into Colorado by **Cameron Wilson**

One of the delights of travelling is that you don't need a sensible reason for choosing a particular destination.

I once took a trip to the Indonesian island of Sulawesi because of how it looked on the map (like a scarecrow flailing in the wind). In much the same spirit, I plotted my hiking holiday to Rocky Mountain National Park.

My reasoning ran thus: the Rockies are a wonder — mighty mountains replete with glorious forests, sparkling rivers and populated by near-mythical animals such as buffalo and moose — so surely the national park that bears their name must be the elk's antlers.

In the interests of adventure I did no research on the park itself, though I did check my Rough Guides Colorado edition for information about its two gateway towns, Estes Park and Grand Lake. I discovered that Grand Lake is the biggest natural body of water in Colorado, and in 1901 this was reason enough to inaugurate the Grand Lake Yacht Club, after which the town's future as a holiday destination was assured.

Although some ubiquitous family holiday tat like mini-golf and games arcades has crept into the town (resident population 450, nudging 5000 with summer visitors), the guidebook suggested that to really appreciate Grand Lake, you only had to visit commercially ravaged Estes Park. Grand Lake would be the go.

Home for a few days would be Shadowcliff Lodge, which bills itself as: "an eco-friendly mountain sanctuary where together we are creating a climate for a restorative world". Needless to say, my inner hippie was well and truly roused.

Rarely am I gobsmacked by accommodation on my travels, but that's what I was the moment I'd toiled up the short but mighty hill from Grand Avenue to the rustic timber lodge butted up against the park's western border. The lake views, log fire, travellers from around the globe and general mood of bonhomie and good cheer were all I had hoped for and quite a bit more.

Early next morning, equipped with a backpack, tent and food for an overnight stay, I headed for the park's Kawuneeche Visitor Centre to



Rocky Mountain National Park is a hiker's delight, with some of its trails topping out at 3960m.

# Rocky high

pick up a trail map and some advice about hiking safety. It turns out that what most distinguishes Rocky Mountain National Park from other parks in the region is altitude: some of its trails top out at 3960m and there are 76 summits over 3630m within its boundaries — by way of comparison, the highest point at most North American ski resorts seldom exceeds 3050m.

It's this dramatically changing hiking environment that attracts many of the three million annual visitors to the park. Set out from a trailhead and you take in the ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine and Douglas fir forests of the montane region (2140-2900m), then feel the air start to cool and thin as you reach the stands of subalpine fir and

Engelmann spruce in the subalpine strata (2900-3350m), before breaking out above the tree-line on to the windswept alpine tundra.

As a ranger explained, dehydration and altitude sickness are ever-present dangers, as are the afternoon thunderstorms that produce lightning strikes on the exposed tundra. Feeling more than a little intrepid, I shouldered my pack and hit the trail.

The cool and forested Tonahutu Creek trail made for a comfortable and gradual ascent, and it was easy to strike up conversations with other hikers as I walked. Some were completing the loop I was on, which winds its way up to the US Continental Divide and the peak of 3760m Flat Top Mountain. An

occasional elk or mule deer browsing by the trail tensed at my approach but then relaxed once it was clear I posed no threat. It was heartening to see some of the dammed and waterlogged meadows created by nature's great industrialist, the beaver. Trapped almost to extinction in the mid-19th century, the large rodent is making a steady comeback to the Rocky Mountains eco-system.

Stopping for a breather after about 5km, I chatted with a hiker who told me he often visited the park but was frustrated at never having encountered any of the park's moose population. Sure enough, 30 minutes after we parted company, I came upon a clearing marked Big Meadows, where six moose were calmly grazing not 100m away.

The designated back country campsite I'd selected was at tree-line, just over 3350m altitude — the highest point on the planet I'd ever been. Walking up on to the tundra, it was easy to see why park rangers are fiercely protective of this fragile terrain with its mosses and lichens and delicate wildflowers.

Camping out solo is both a peaceful and eerie experience. In my tent after dark, every sound outside generated a nervous thrill, though I was able to tell myself there are few bears (and no grizzlies) in the park and that mountain lions, though present, are rarely seen. I finally drifted off to sleep, only to wake just past sunrise to a disconcerting rustling of branches and the crunch of footsteps on the pine straw.

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thursday travel



Hi everyone!

We'd heard this was one of the best wildflower seasons in years and we certainly haven't been disappointed! Our drive took us north via Cervantes to Lesueur National Park for beautiful species including hakeas, starflower and cat's paw. Mullewa's wildflower walks were gorgeous and at Coalseam Conservation Park yellow pom poms and pink everlasting carpeted the area. A magical few days! Wish you were here!

PS. Check out [www.australiascoralcoast.com](http://www.australiascoralcoast.com) for what's blooming where.

For your copy of the Australia's Coral Coast Wildflower Map visit your local RAC Member Service Centre or phone 13 17 03. Price: \$1.75 RAC members, \$3.50 non members.



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