

RIDE THE RAILS
ON A NEW JOURNEY THROUGH
AMERICA'S

WILD WEST



Sprawling metropolises can only reveal a tiny fraction of the stories that make up a nation as vast as the United States. To really get to know this country, you have to venture into a wilderness where white-water rivers run between walls of red stone and granite peaks loom over seemingly endless forests. These are the landscapes of the great American road trip and now the great American rail trip, too, with the launch of the Rocky Mountaineer's two-day Rockies To The Red Rocks luxury train expedition (rockymountaineer.com), the first-ever US route for the famed Canadian touring company.

The journey starts in Denver, Colorado, before snaking through the glacial valleys and otherwise inaccessible canyons of the Rocky Mountains to the very heart of the American West. The names on my map grow ever more evocative on the westward track (as do the onboard hosts' stories) but from my comfortable seat the only worries posed by Hardscrabble Mountain, Gore Canyon and Dead Horse Point are whether I can get my camera ready in time.

The train travels at "Kodak speed" over its 570-kilometre route. That's what our host, August, calls it because the leisurely pace provides us with ample time to take photos. The reference may be a little outdated but it works for a trip that doubles as a journey through time. The Rockies are still capped with winter snow when we pass them early on the first day but by the time we're crossing deep gulches carved into Utah's striking red sandstone just 24 hours later, spring is clearly visible. "It's absurd how much it changes," train manager Zach Lucas tells me. "We see a lot of wildflowers throughout the spring and they stay until summer in the mountains. Then in fall it's like fire on the side of the mountain when the trees are changing colour."

And it's not just flora that catches our eye. Before lunch on day one I see a stern white face poking out from a jumbled mass of branches. A bald eagle is sitting patiently on its egg and my fellow passengers – the train can host up to 270 travellers on each trip – make good use of one of the Rocky Mountaineer's chief drawcards: the windows of our carriage go all the way up each side and curve around part of the ceiling so that passengers can always see what's happening on both sides of the train, as well as above it.

"When it's snowing outside, it's like you're in your own little snowglobe," says Kendra, the other of the two friendly hosts aboard our carriage. Midway through the first day, we reach Upper Gore Canyon. Craning my neck to look through the domed windows, I see a sliver of blue sky framed by 300-metre-high walls of rock that rise vertically on either side. Between them the track hovers above a series of churning rapids and because the gorge is far too narrow for a road, the only other people who can enjoy this view are the rafters bobbing downstream beside us.

As we descend, the Colorado River grows in size and deepens in hue, slowly eroding the surrounding stone, until it's the colour of iced coffee when we reach Utah's canyon country. The onboard meals evolve alongside the landscape, from a frontier breakfast of eggs, hickory-smoked bacon and a biscuit smothered in sausage gravy to a tightly wrapped cigar of spicy pulled chicken with corn and black bean slaw. And because all the organic waste goes into compost, the Mountaineer is well on its way to the goal of diverting 90 per cent of its waste from landfill by 2023.

The United States is a country divided, literally. On one side of the Continental Divide, any rainfall will eventually make its way to the Atlantic, while on the other side it continues westward all the way to the Pacific. We pass beneath the country's most significant geographical feature as we plunge directly through the spine of the Rocky Mountains, 120 kilometres west of Denver. The 10-kilometre Moffat Tunnel is part of the Tunnel District that sees the train navigate 28 tunnels in 21 kilometres, transporting us from slopes overlooking the boundless Great Plains to a valley where skiers carve down runs between Christmas-tree-like Douglas firs.

A gregarious fellow passenger named Liz tells us that the Moffat was once called the "makeout tunnel" by locals who travelled through it to the ski resort at Winter Park. We're already back in the sunshine by the time she shares the story and because the Rocky Mountaineer runs from April to October, when the days are at their longest, there's still plenty of light when we stop overnight at the trip's halfway point, Glenwood Springs.

Across the river from the train station, the sprawling Italianate Hotel Colorado (hotelcolorado.com) is modelled after a Roman villa (complete with twin bell towers) but the grand lobby adorned with stuffed animals leaves no doubt as to its location. Former US President Teddy



Roosevelt stayed here so long on his various hunting expeditions that it was nicknamed "the little White House" and Al Capone once partied here. But these days the most talked about guests are the ghosts rumoured to walk the hallways at night. "This town reminds me of a Norman Rockwell painting," says lead train manager John Garner as an introduction. "It's a quaint town with an active railroad, a river running through it and friendly folks on the street." Yet his description manages to leave out the best part.

After disembarking, I head straight to the Iron Mountain Hot Springs (ironmountainhotsprings.com), where I spend an hour hopping between 16 spring-fed pools arranged in tiers on the northern side of the Colorado River. The natural spas range in temperature from 36°C to 42°C and the reputed healing powers of the 14 minerals in the water drew ailing gambler Doc Holliday to this small town. Sadly for both of us, the fact that his grave is located nearby suggests they're not quite enough to make up for years of hard living.

It's impossible to say precisely where the West begins. Doc Holliday's grave seems like a plausible candidate, as does the Continental Divide. For Lucas, "it's at the Colorado-Utah line when we travel through Ruby Canyon. You have these massive walls of red rock and the Colorado River is right beside the train. After that you're in the Wild West of cowboys and bank robberies."

We spend much of the second day passing through country haunted by the ghosts of desperados and the lawmen pitted against them. Wind and rain have carved innumerable overhangs, caves and castellations into the sandstone on either side of the tracks – perfect hideouts for bandits. When we emerge into a broad valley, I spot a cloud of dust that turns out to be a herd of pronghorn antelopes cantering over plains covered in sagebrush. A top speed of more than 80 kilometres per hour means they easily outpace us and soon the train stops within sight of rock formations at Arches National Park. While we alight for a final bus transfer into Moab, a weathered *vaquero* rides past with an American flag fluttering in the wind.

As if by design, the colours of the stars and stripes find their echoes all around us in grand mesas of rust-coloured rock rising abruptly from the plains, distant snow-capped mountains and the endless sky looking down on it all, the red, white and blue providing a fitting coda to this memorable all-American journey. ●