

COLORADO

Stories Told in Rocks

THE SIGHT OF STONE
MASONRY WALLS AND
WINDOW OPENINGS
TUCKED INTO A ROCK FACE
STOPPED ME COLD.

EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

I'd been scrambling up and down the ladders near Cliff Palace, the largest prehistoric cliff dwelling at Mesa Verde National Park when I stepped onto a plateau with a protective rock overhang above and a steep drop below. This sheltered precipice once housed a community.

CLIFF DWELLINGS

Mesa Verde sits atop a commanding rock mesa—a flat-topped hill with steep sides—in southwest Colorado and is the only national park based on human activity rather than natural forces alone. Colorado is peppered with National Park sites; a smorgasbord for travellers seeking a hit of natural beauty, an outdoor fix or a look into the lives of the ancient Ancestral Puebloans.

During the late first and early second millennia people lived and cooked at Mesa Verde, raised their families and marked their calendar celebrations for almost eight centuries. At the wide top of the mesa, they grew corn, beans and squash, depending on rainfall to sustain the crops.



Cliff Palace may be the largest but it is certainly not the park's only rock dwelling.

"Of the 5,000 archaeological sites at Mesa Verde, there are some 600 cliff dwellings," explained Park Ranger Josh Pelham. "These people knew math. They built all of these without the horse and without the wheel."

At stops along the park's Mesa Top Loop drive are the preserved remains of centuries of human activity, from early pit house spaces dug into the ground and above-

ground "wattle and daub" of stick-and-mud construction to the more advanced single-wall masonry style. It's an architectural textbook that brings alive the arc of human history in the parkland.

BLACK CANYON

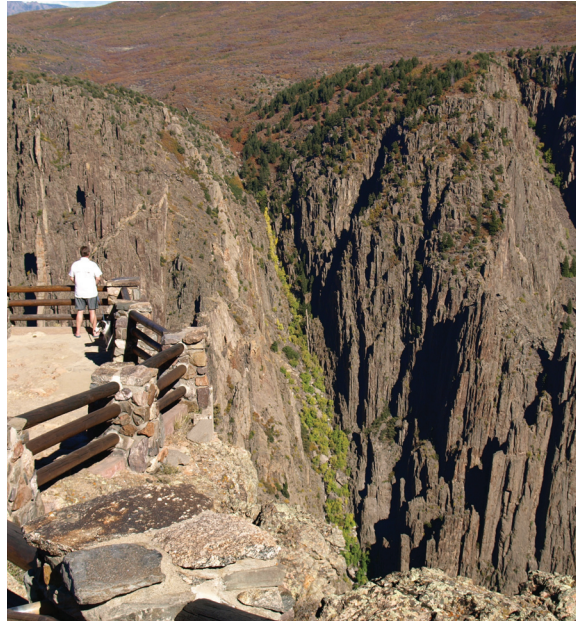
North of Mesa Verde the highway twists and turns, dipping in and out of breathtaking mountain scenery. Just east of Montrose, the road wiggles to 2.5 kilometres above sea

level, where the air is noticeably thinner, tall trees disappear and scrub oaks and pinyon-junipers become wizened and stunted. The blacktop ends at one of Colorado's lesser-known national parks, the remote Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

As Mesa Verde was a textbook of human activity, Black Canyon of the Gunnison is a primer of the Earth's crust where nearly two billion years of geology are sliced open by the power of the river.

Black Canyon was formed when the basement rock rose and tilted in the dramatic geological Gunnison Uplift, then was blanketed by softer ash from erupting volcanoes. Over the past two million years, the Gunnison River has cut through the softer volcanic layer, then slowed to a crawl through the hard gneiss base, some of the oldest, hardest rock on the continent. Even today, the water chisels away. Geologists estimate each year the river carves away the equivalent of the width of a human hair. This power of erosion created the park's namesake deep, wild canyons.

In the early morning, I tramped along the spectacular Rim Rock Nature Trail, stopping to gaze more than 1.5 kilometres into the narrow, steep-sided canyons of black rock. I shared the sunrise with canyon wrens who dipped and whirled along the canyon walls, and a red-tailed hawk who



OPPOSITE: Listed among the grand landscapes of the American West, Colorado National Monument features monoliths within a vast plateau and canyon panorama.

LEFT: Black Canyon of the Gunnison exposes visitors to some of the steepest cliffs, oldest rock and craggiest spires in North America.

BOTTOM: Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park protects some of the best preserved Ancestral Puebloan archaeological sites in the U.S.

gracefully soared with an eye out for his (unsuspecting) breakfast.

At night, Black Canyon shined on, even as it was enveloped by inky darkness. Far from urban light pollution, the park is a designated International Dark Sky Park. Twinkling constellations stippled a pitch-black canvas, right to the horizon. Before dawn, a thin sliver of new moon rose, the canyon wrens began their musical cascade of notes and the river flowed on.


THE HIGH DESERT

Just outside the town of Grand Junction, much closer to civilization, I stood on a fault line and pondered the natural artwork created by the gods of earthly forces. Interstate travellers often zip by the entrance to Colorado National Monument, oblivious to

the full menu of geological forces—earthquakes, tectonic uplifts, erosion—that created a mesmerizing landscape of deep canyons and soaring red sandstone cliffs.

The park's twisty Rim Rock drive snakes 40 kilometres from start to finish. This is high desert—areas of elevation with little rainfall, enough to classify them as arid landscapes. It shows in the stands of prickly pear cactus, pinyon and rabbitbrush—varieties that survive on precious inches of precipitation a year.

Along the scenic drive are pull-offs at trailheads and lookouts. At the Redlands outlook the steeply-tilted sedimentary rocks are a clue that a fault line is nearby. I laced up my hikers and walked the Canyon Rim Trail to the Book Cliffs View, soaking up the vista of the Grand Valley, the Colorado River and the sheer east-west ridge of the Book Cliffs in the distance.

I was stopped in my tracks again by the sight of several rock climbers atop the free-standing tower of Independence Rock. I waved from my place of relative safety. They waved back; far apart, yet I could feel the connection of the forces of nature that created this beauty. 

TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information on these and other national parks, visit colorado.com and nps.gov.

