

"Folks, this flight is cancelled". This uncompromising announcement followed a tedious two-hour wait that Gill and I had already endured sitting on the tarmac at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. This was to have been our final leg of the journey to Denver, Colorado but clearly we weren't going to make it today. On the bonus side we enjoyed a night of luxury at the Hilton hotel at United Airline's expense.

### Boulder – The Flat Irons

We continued our journey next day and arrived in brilliant sunshine in Denver mid morning, rented the smallest car possible and continued to the Hadlum residence in Denver. Both Dez & Ann were at work, so we dumped our gear and immediately set out for the crag. This involved an hour's drive to Chautaugua Park in Boulder where we arrived at around 1pm. Ominously there was distant thunder and it was clouding over rather quickly, but we set out anyway to walk up to the First Flat Iron. These conspicuous slabs rise up for 1000ft or so above Boulder and give a very immediate introduction to the climbing in the area.

Afternoon thunderstorms are a frequent occurrence in Colorado in August, but generally it is possible to get in a couple of routes and get off the crag before they arrive, retire to a bar for a beer in the certain knowledge that it will be brilliantly clear again next day. Today the weather moved in early, so combined with our late start, we didn't manage to get onto a route. However, we only had light rain and still managed a three-hour walk underneath the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Flat Irons to reach Devil's Arch, a fine viewpoint, before returning to Chautaugua Park. We also drove up Boulder Canyon to check out the climbing areas, then went into downtown Boulder to enjoy a beer at the Old Chicago.

Gill immediately decided this was the place she wanted to move to: a vibrant university town with a lot of fit looking young people all into outdoor sports. It has world class climbing less than half-an-hour from down town, plus skiing in the winter not too far away – what more could you ask for? Sometimes the intensity could get a little comical as we watched a youth out training, running normally for a hundred yards, then turning round and running backwards for a hundred yards!

We returned to Denver to meet up with my long-standing friends Dez and Ann Hadlum, originally from Nottingham, who have helped me and many other British climbers to enjoy their visit to Colorado. They welcomed us to their house and we planned our trip for the next 2 ½ weeks, which they would share with us over a couple of long weekends.

However, the next day we returned to the Flat Irons to complete the route I had initially planned. The East Face Direct on the 1<sup>st</sup> Flat Iron gives about 10 long pitches, never very hard, but in delightful position at 5.6 standard (easy VS/Severe). We pushed our luck a bit by also visiting Eldorado Canyon and starting another route – the all time classic, Wind Ridge. Today the thunderstorm came in with a vengeance and I had to retreat off the first pitch in a torrential downpour.

Lumpy Ridge

At the weekend we transferred to Dez and Ann's delightfully situated weekend retreat in Estes Park, a small town close by Rocky National Park. It has a rather touristy, chintzy centre, but is a superb location and from the house one can see the top of Lumpy Ridge. This has a magnificent collection of granite buttresses up to 1000ft high rising above the McGreggor ranch with views across Estes Park to the high mountains of Rocky National Park, including Longs Peak at over 14,000ft. This is one of my all time favourite climbing areas, perhaps because it has some fine hand jam cracks! For a similar reason Gill wasn't so enthusiastic, although she was impressed by the situation and also enjoyed the slab climbing that can be found here too. Over the next three days, together with Dez, we climbed half-a-dozen routes including Star Trek a 5.9 (E1) on The Bookmark which I found quite extending, while Gill enjoyed a 5.7 slab climb—Hiatus, on Left Book.

After the weekend Dez and Ann left for Denver leaving Gill and I together at Estes Park. The weather was less stormy, so it seemed the right moment to tackle a bigger route and we left the house at 4am for the parking lot at the start of the trail leading to Longs Peak. Our objective was The Flying Buttress, a 5.9 route on Mount Meeker, which is just south of Longs Peak. It is often overlooked because it doesn't quite make the 14,000-ft mark and the mountain is less spectacular. However, this route is aptly named and is a very prominent feature high on the mountain.

It took us three hours or so to reach the bottom of the scree slopes below the climb where we geared up. We could feel the altitude as we scrambled up the scree and the initial easy rock. As with many high mountain routes, the exact line wasn't obvious and several different lines are now written up in the latest guide. I climbed up on the East side of the prow with some suspect rock and a rather gloomy atmosphere over a steep gully with remnants of snow below us. A promising crack led to steep holdless territory, so I retreated, having wasted some time on this pitch. Easier ground further left enabled us to make progress until we had to traverse right onto the centre of the prow, again on suspect rock – easy enough, but quite exposed. The rock improved and two absorbing pitches led to a platform below the crux pitch. By now it had become quite cloudy and there was a strong breeze, so we were climbing in all the limited clothing we had brought with us. The crux pitch was magnificent: weaving up some steep ground to a thin slab, fortunately protected by a bolt, although this was quite hard to reach. Another steep section turned the overhang and gained the upper part of the ridge and two more pitches brought us to the top of the prow.

It is possible to continue up another section of the ridge, but we had already been climbing for several hours and with the weather threatening we opted to traverse to the descent gully. It started to rain as we descended, treating us to a fine double rainbow, but we reached the gear we had left at the foot of the route without any problem. A couple of hours in descent and we could return to Estes with a fine route completed and a good 'tick' that I had wanted to do for some years.

We stayed at the Estes Park cottage for another three days – it was just too good a base to leave! Gill did another fine slab route on Left Book, and we did a tourist trip up the Fall River Pass road: this was the original road over the watershed, 15km long, started in 1913 and build by 38 convicts. We returned by the present road that replaced it in 1932. Another day was spent walking a chain of magnificent trails that link ten of the many beautiful lakes in Rocky National Park, and our final effort was to climb Mainliner, a brilliant 4 pitch 5.9 climb on the highest part of Lumpy Ridge – Sundance. It was simply amazing to have this entire cliff to ourselves the whole day and a fitting end to this part of the trip.

We now returned to Denver, but on the way we completed the climb in Eldorado Canyon – Wind Ridge – that we had been rained off earlier in the trip. Conditions were really hot, but with sufficient breeze to keep us cool enough. When we got back, Dez and Ann held a barbecue in our honour, with several of their friends who I knew from earlier trips to Denver. Apart from a sumptuous spread, it was really great to be able to be able to share in their social ambiance.

### Lost Creek Trail

Apart from superlative climbing, Colorado also provides endless opportunities for mountain walking. There are 53 peaks over 14,000ft compared with just 14 in the Alps! Most of these are not technical, but often quite remote. Dez had often talked about going on "back packing" trips – carrying gear into a wilderness area and camping in a remote spot, but it is quite difficult to organise this if you are on a short trip and don't really know the area. Hence we jumped at the opportunity when Dez suggested that we all went on a trip to Lost Creek trail.

This is located in the Pike Forest area; about 3 hours drive SW of Denver. From the road, Route 235, we had a 14-mile drive along a dirt track to reach the trailhead. Delayed by an early morning thunderstorm, as a front passed through, we didn't set off until early afternoon and only walked for about 4 miles to set up camp in a pristine location, now bathed in evening sunshine. In addition to camping gear and food, we also carried climbing gear, so the packs were considerable. This was so we could repeat some routes that Dez had put up some years ago in this remote area. On this first evening we just explored a dome above the camp and climbed a fairly simple slab route that led to a superb viewpoint. Having had countless trips over the years, Dez and Ann have honed their technique, so we were treated to some surprisingly excellent food before settling down for the night, as it became quite cold under clear skies.

We woke up to another sunny day, but also a magnificent hoarfrost. The sun soon burned this off as we toiled up to a dome high above our camp where we located and climbed a 5.7 crack line: Columbine Crack, put up by Dez about 15 years ago. This was just the beginning, as we still had a strenuous walk to reach our planned camp. We followed a steep gorge with treacherous descents. Here Ann had broken her ankle some years ago and Dez had been forced to carry her back to the trailhead – a heroic effort. No problems today, but it was slow going, particularly when we reached the area where the river disappears among a jumble of huge boulders and gives the trail its name. To escape, we had to climb steeply out of the gorge

and descend the McCurdy Park trail to another fine remote camp in a magnificent rocky setting.

The third day was to prove the most strenuous of all. First we walked to the junction with Goose Creek trail in a couple of hours. Here we left the heavy packs and descended with the climbing gear to Reservoir Gulch where there is another remote dome where Dez had established a route. This was a 3 pitch 5.8, with an initial pitch that I could only protect with my biggest cam; hence I had to walk this up the crack. A fine route, but we had no real idea how to get down (Dez had not come with us on this climb) and it took a while to locate a bolt which was the start of an abseil descent. We returned up the valley to our sacks and rejoined Dez and Ann having been away for about 5 hours! It was now 3.30pm and we had another 11 miles of hiking with our heavy packs before reaching the trailhead. We finally made it after stumbling around in the dark at 9pm – and we still had 3 hours drive to get back to Denver. A most enjoyable, if strenuous, three days in a superb wilderness area.

### Independence Monument

Our plan now was to take our leave of the Hadlum's and head west along Interstate Route 70 towards the desert canyonlands of Utah. But first we would visit Independence National Monument (a National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, but is a lesser entity established by Presidential Decree, rather than Act of Congress). We arrived in the late evening, setting up our tiny bivouac tent on a substantial plot designed for a RV, so making it look rather ridiculous.

Independence Monument is so named because in 1911 John Otto drilled holes to fix metal pipes that enabled him to aid his way to the summit and plant the Stars & Stripes there on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Today Otto's route is an excellent 4 pitch 5.8 climb leading to the top of a fine sandstone pinnacle. The off width slot on pitch 2 is really awkward, but just as it feels desperate, one of Otto's holes comes to hand and helps upward progress. Gill led the third pitch, a steep face pitch that is a relatively unusual feature for sandstone climbing. The final pitch is in magnificent position. It follows a very easy angle ridge, but I was so apprehensive of slipping on the "ball bearings" on every hold that I conjured up several pieces of marginal protection on what is really a very easy but run out bit of climbing. This leads to the overhanging capstone that is fortunately protected by several pitons; these gave me confidence even if their holding power was suspect. This was an unusual, but highly enjoyable route. Two long abseils and a bit of scrambling brought us back to the base.

## Utah

The whole area of Colorado National Monument is very photogenic, so next day we spent a little time taking photos before continuing our journey into Utah. Although very much on the tourist trail, Arches National Park is an absolutely fascinating area of natural stone arches, weird pinnacles, spectacular towers and balanced rocks in a very concentrated area. We visited the classic Delicate Arch and also Landscape Arch, then joined a ranger led trip to the "Fiery Furnace". This took us to some unique rock formations we wouldn't have otherwise seen, with "people watching" other members of the group proving almost as interesting.

Our trip to Utah was forced to be brief, but next morning we hired mountain bikes to ride the "Slick Rock" trail close to Moab. The distance isn't very far, but the riding is very technical and strenuous and we wilted in the 100-degree F temperatures, quickly using up our water supply. Despite the effort of enduring several hours in these temperatures, this is another worthwhile objective if travelling in this area.

### Independence Pass

We now had to return to Denver and set off in the afternoon. There is so much to see and do in the Canyonlands area; we just hadn't touched it. But we followed the scenic route by the Colorado River and took a side trip to see Castleton Tower, a climbing objective for a future visit. Then we rejoined I 70 and hammered back towards Glenwood Springs, pushing our Suzuki Swift up to 90mph at times. To break the journey we stayed at Carbondale, near Aspen and next morning climbed on Weller Slab near Independence Pass. Hardly a destination venue, but enjoyable as we were passing through. Finally we made it back to Denver and time to return to the UK after a really excellent trip. Apart from our travel day to Utah, we had managed an activity on every single day of the trip – 17 days in all. Few other destination areas have so much to offer and we certainly plan to be back there again soon!

Chris Radcliffe