

JOURNEYS; 36 Hours | Boulder, Colo.

By CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON

BOULDER, a half-hour drive from Denver, could arm wrestle any town for the title of fittest in the nation and walk away champion. In the last few years, the hyperoutdoorsy city pressed against the Rockies has been crowned everything from the nation's best running city (Runner's World magazine), to the No. 1 sports town in America (Outside). What other city can boast 42,000 acres of protected open space and a bank with a drive-through lane for cyclists? Surging shards of tilting sandstone, called the Flatirons, lean like old-fashioned irons over town, a constant reminder that rock-climbing (outdoors and in), mountain biking and trail-running await. Meanwhile, the sun shines more than 300 days a year, and it's not unusual to be able to eat at an outdoor cafe in mid-January. Such charms have also lured to this traditionally left-wing city of 100,000 people (counting the 25,000 students at the University of Colorado) plenty of well-heeled bourgeois bohemians, who like to push their bodies by day but still kick back with a local microbrew at night. CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON

Friday

6 p.m.

1. Climbing the Walls

Bouldering, the sport of performing balletic rock-climbing moves to ascend boulders without a rope, is exploding in popularity, and perhaps the best place to learn it is the Spot Bouldering Gym (3240 Prairie Avenue, 303-379-8806), one of the largest such gyms in the world. One free-standing artificial boulder mimics the contours and overhangs of the sandstone at Hueco Tanks in Texas; another resembles that at Fontainebleau in France. In all, the gym has over 100 climbing "problems" of varying difficulty. When you fall -- and you will -- the gym's floor has the springy air cushion of a running shoe to soften the blow to bones, if not egos (\$10 for a first-day pass, \$14 thereafter).

9 p.m.

2. Rocky Mountain Sushi

It's a sign of Boulderites' sophistication that the town can support several sushi restaurants so far from saltwater. The Hapa Sushi Grill and Sake Bar (1117 Pearl Street, 303-473-4730) is where young, beautiful people shoehorn into the minimalist dining room and try, futilely, to make themselves heard above waves of electronic trance music. Traditionalists may cringe at offerings like the moo moo roll of beef, garlic and sauteed

onions (\$7.95), but the results are inarguably unusual and savory.

Saturday

7 a.m.

3. Early Start

The ambitious athlete should motor to the Walnut Café (3073 Walnut Street, 303-447-2315) first thing. It has early hours (open 7 a.m. daily), rib-sticking breakfasts (the early-bird special of two eggs, two bacon strips, two pancakes and potatoes for \$4.99) and Boulder sensibilities (you can substitute soy cheddar cheese for 75 cents). And the view of the Flatirons may be the finest vista from a strip mall you're likely to find.

9 a.m.

4. A Quick Ski Fix

The Eldora Mountain Resort, (303-440-8700), 21 miles west of town, is where the locals make turns when they don't want to brave the horrendous weekend traffic headed for Copper Mountain or Vail. The ski area (weekend adult pass \$49) isn't huge -- just 1,500 vertical feet and 680 acres -- but is a nice size for two hours of skiing, and close to 30 miles of challenging nordic trails (trail pass \$14; rentals \$16 for nordic gear, \$25 for skate skis) also leave from the parking lot. Don't feel like driving up Boulder Canyon to Eldora? A public bus (\$7 round trip) runs every hour or two from Boulder's transportation center at 14th and Walnut Streets.

1 p.m.

5. Namaste, and Pass the Naan

Eating at a restaurant run by a world-class mountaineer may conjure up images of spartan food served in freeze-dried pouches. That is hardly the case at Sherpa's Adventurers Restaurant and Bar (825 Walnut Street, 303-440-7151), whose owner, Pemba Sherpa, grew up in the shadow of Mount Everest and has been a professional mountain guide in Nepal since 1986. Topographic maps of the Himalayas and rainbows of prayer flags festoon the walls. The menu mixes Indian, Tibetan and Nepali foods. Start with beef momos (\$4), a Tibetan dumpling, and saag, an Indian creamed spinach with garlic, cumin and chick pea flour that is eaten with naan, a bread baked in a tandoor oven (\$5).

Vegetarians gravitate toward the Sherpa sampler (\$13) of saag, vegetables, chutney, naan and kir, a sweet rice pudding with raisins and nuts. Lunch 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily.

2:30 p.m.

6. A Hike Down Pearl Street

No place captures Boulder's dual identity as an enclave for hippy-artsy holdouts and high-net-worth bourgeois bohemians (known, of course, as "BoBos,") as does Pearl Street, which includes a four-block downtown pedestrian mall. Wander into Outdoor Divas (1133 Pearl Street, 303-449-3482) for gear female and adventurous, including climbing harnesses, trail-running shoes and ski boots. At the 33-year-old Boulder Arts and Crafts Cooperative (1421 Pearl Street, 866-656-2667), ask the clerk to show you which work is hers. (The 42 member artists must help run the place.) Flagging after skiing? Bolster your chi with a "smartini" (\$6.50) of organic orange juice and jun, a

Chinese herbal elixir, at the oxygen bar Tonic, the healthiest bar in Boulder (just off the mall at 2011 10th Street, 303-544-0202).

7 p.m.

7. Work Hard, Eat Well

After working out in the mountains, and breathing at Boulder's 5,430-foot elevation, it's not unusual for a newcomer to feel like a heavy bag that has been worked over by a prizefighter. Settle in for a leisurely dinner at John's (2328 Pearl Street, 303-444-5232). The brother-sister team of Corey Buck and Ashley Maxwell bought the place from original chef-owners John and Nancy Bizzarro in December. Mr. Bizzarro still occasionally lends a hand in the kitchen of this intimate, 60-seat restaurant. Classic entrees are sometimes given a modern spin, as with the postmodern cassoulet of duck with ribbons of Napa cabbage surrounded by a smoky white bean sauce and topped with herbed duck crispings (\$25).

9:30 p.m.

8. Fresh Beer and Dobros

The Southern Sun Pub and Brewery (627 South Broadway, 303-543-0886) may live in a corner of a strip mall, but it hasn't abandoned the Age of Aquarius roots of its sister, the Mountain Sun (1535 Pearl Street, 303-546-0886), Boulder's first brewpub and a lefty hangout. Bumper stickers on the wall berate the Bush administration, and the Mountain Sun's communal approach lives -- your waitress today may be a cook tomorrow, or even the manager. At 10 p.m. on Saturdays, about 15 chairs are put in a circle, and anybody with an instrument, be it fiddle or washtub bass, can show up for improv bluegrass jams.

Sunday

9 a.m.

9. Trail Run With the Sun

Boulder's open-space preservation strategy has created a ring of more than 42,000 acres of undeveloped land around the city, with 120 miles of trails. Lace up your running shoes and head for the best of these: the 6.9-mile Mesa Trail and its more challenging offshoots like the Skunk Canyon Trail, which are usually usable even in midwinter. Don't be dismayed by the steep and paved start at Chautauqua Park, (900 Baseline Road, 303-441-3440). The north-south Mesa Trail path soon mellows, changes to a dirt trace and undulates through an open forest of ponderosa and Douglas fir.

11 a.m.

10. Hospitality on the Hill

Despite its motto -- "Cold Coffee and Surly Service" -- the year-old Burnt Toast Restaurant (1235 Pennsylvania Avenue, 303-440-5200) has plenty of fans. The restaurant is decorated with thrift-store tables and lives in a 100-year-old house on the Hill, the small rise that is home to the University of Colorado. Follow the smell of homemade bread to a sunlit cafe and order the buffalo teriyaki scrambled and fried eggs (\$8.75), an ideal training table entree after a bracing run. (Yes, you can get tofu instead.) Because the place serves red meat doesn't mean it's gone eco-soft; in the bathrooms, scraps of old T-

shirts have been reincarnated as hand towels.

THE BASICS

Visiting Boulder

Most major airlines serve Denver International Airport, which is a 45-minute drive from Boulder in light traffic.

The 160-room Hotel Boulderado (2115 13th Street, 800-433-4344), opened in 1909 and on the National Register of Historic Places, is in the heart of the shopping and restaurant district. Rates are \$185 to \$235.

A century ago Chautauquas were all the rage. They were combined intellectual salons and summer camps, and among the few remaining is the Colorado Chautauqua (900 Baseline Road, 303-442-3282). It has 60 refurbished cottages tucked between the University of Colorado and the mountains. Rates are \$84 to \$209.