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TALK

Utopia on the Range

By ALEXANDRA FULLER

I went to Boulder, Utah, because I read a cookbook — “With a Measure of Grace: The Story and Recipes of a Small Town Restaurant” — and 18 pages into it, there was a photograph of a serene-looking woman catching a housefly in a special bug catcher so that it could be released, unscathed, back into the wild. “We ask our employees not to harm any living creatures at the restaurant,” the caption read. And later, next to a recipe for Baby’s Got the Blues Fudge Brownies, I came across this sentence: “One thing people sometimes notice about Boulder . . . is the fact that the occasional Boulder resident can be seen walking down the road barefoot, wearing nothing but buckskin, carrying a homemade bow and arrows.” And that made me think of the Hindu adage “Sometimes naked, sometimes mad, now foolish, thus they appear on earth, the free ones.” And that made me want to see the place for myself.

There is no major airport within four hours of Boulder, SO I LEFT my home in Wyoming at dawn and drove south all day, biting off a few good hundred miles of the so-called Mormon Corridor, which turned out to be the first interesting thing about Boulder. Everything I saw of Utah on this drive was the very opposite of the sacred lunacy advertised in the cookbook.

The Mormon Corridor, stiffening Utah’s spine from north to south down modern-day Interstate 15, is no small thing. It came about in the latter half of the 19th century, providing Mormons heading to California with Latter-day-Saints-friendly settlements no more than a day’s travel apart. Now, in my station wagon, the towns cropped up every half hour or so, like celestial thumbprints: churches with signature spiked white spires, Victorian houses in various stages of repair, memorials to commemorate the pioneers.

A waxing tide of modular office buildings and overnight suburbs spread from the towns’ centers. Roadside billboards, bleached pastel in the high-altitude sun, advertised high-speed Internet, fast food, express lube, rapid lens, extra this, super that, plus everything. Where the towns didn’t touch each other’s edges, industrial farms took up the slack. Somewhere near Richfield, the sameness of the development stupefied me, and I found myself in an eternal knot of highways and interstates, spat out near the same feedlot and shooting range over and over again.

Eventually, I found a route over to Highway 24, and from there, Highway 12 made itself known to me. I rejoiced, and not only because once I was lost and now I was found, but also because Highway 12 is one of the nation’s most scenic roads and, being surrounded by such buoyant loveliness — sagebrush rolling into

canyons, clusters of aspens, pine forests — it made me remember lost innocence, mine and the world's.

IT WAS DUSK WHEN I FINALLY REACHED Boulder, at the base of the Aquarius Plateau. “Welcome to Boulder,” I read on a sign, but in the common way of thinking, there was nothing there: no buildings, no lights, no billboards. I stopped my car and got out. Nothing happened. The thought crossed my mind that the town of Boulder had been set up by the cookbook as an extravagant practical joke — a nothingness at the end of the trail. Then a group of mule deer poked their way out of the forest onto the verge. They looked at me with casual disinterest before tiptoeing back into the darkness. More of nothing happened until finally I understood that Boulder's apparent nothingness was everything about it, the way a soul's apparent nothingness is everything about spirituality.

Blessed with remoteness and millions of acres of surrounding wilderness (a patchwork of national forests, national parks and the country's largest national monument), Boulder's community has made the most of these rare gifts by disallowing billboards and signs more than 10 feet high and prohibiting outdoor lighting that might pollute the blackness of the night sky. Almost all Boulder businesses support the Boulder Community Alliance, which promotes Quiet Use, encouraging visitors to safeguard silence by opting to engage in fishing, hiking and stargazing in technically the least efficient way — which is to say in any way that excludes the use of an engine.

Boulder is named for the volcanic rocks that were swept off the Aquarius Plateau over the ages and now perch like massive black marbles in meadows and on the desert floor or roosted on pillar formations. The town reclines on a long, south-facing slope — warm enough, at about 6,700 feet, to allow residents to grow their own vegetables, which is just as well because that's their only hope for fresh produce. With a stream fed from snowmelt off Boulder Mountain, it is, for miles around, the most logical place to make a year-round home — which is why, when Mormon settlers arrived in the late 1880s and began to create irrigation ditches where it made sense to do so, they found that they were following ditches dug in the 12th century by the Anasazi (also known as the Ancestral Pueblo).

The Anasazi State Park Museum is on Highway 12, in the heart of Boulder. The excavation of Ancestral Pueblo life serves as a constant reminder to residents that they were not here first, nor are they invincible. And while it remains a mystery why, after inhabiting the place for 50 to 75 years, the Ancestral Puebloans suddenly up and left — their descendants, the Hopi, believe it was a prophetic directive — archaeologists surmise that overuse of resources or drought, or both, drove them out. “Both of which we're coming up against now,” says Keith Watts, a local geologist and tour guide. “There were roughly 200 Anasazi, and there are roughly 200 residents here now. That seems to be the carrying capacity of Boulder.”

I FOUND THE BOULDER MOUNTAIN Lodge by a few low, yellow lights shining out of the darkness, like fires nursed at the entrance to an African village. The lodge, developed by a local anti-developer, Mark Austin, was built to blend as best it could into the background: a series of two-story buildings, reddish-dirt-colored with rusted corrugated tin roofs. In 1992, seeing other towns along Highway 12 allow the

construction of massive hotels and remote, rural communities all over southwest Utah engage in what [Edward Abbey](#) called “industrial tourism,” Austin realized that the question his town needed to ask was how it wanted to develop, not if it wanted to develop.

Austin speaks with an intensity of someone wounded by his own passion: “The pattern of the new West was that development happened to small towns, and broke communities, tore up history, disregarded heritage. So I engaged the entire community and asked what mattered to them.” In the end, Boulder residents decided to keep the town’s character wildly rural.

In 1994, Austin built the Boulder Mountain Lodge with the mission that it preserve and promote local culture, contribute to environmental causes and lead in the effort to protect surrounding wild lands. In 1999, Austin asked Blake Spalding and Jennifer Castle to run Hell’s Backbone Grill, the restaurant on the grounds of the lodge. It quickly became famous regionally and then nationally, both for its food and its philosophy. “What everyone in this community shares is a love of Boulder,” Spalding, who is Tibetan Buddhist, told me. “So we started with that, and went from there.”

In 2000, the lodge was bought by Dave Mock, a Salt Lake City entrepreneur. An unassuming man of quiet ambition, Mock has expanded the lodge’s mission. Well over one-third of its profits now go to philanthropic causes, from the Quiet Use initiative to the Utah Food Bank. The lodge and Hell’s Backbone Grill are the town’s largest employers, and they set the tone for Boulder’s culture, the way oil and gas development or logging have in so many other small towns across the West. “We had a real business voice,” Austin says, “that was willing to say: ‘My business is in favor of compatible development. We oppose non-sustainable coalfields. We oppose logging. We oppose abusive ATV recreation.’” He sounded almost evangelical as we spoke, and I began to see the lodge as a kind of church, a historic intention of culture — a place of refuge for like-minded travelers.

IT IS SAID THAT ONLY A HANDFUL OF places in the world have deeply right chi, and apparently Boulder is one of those places. Most summers, a dozen or so monks from the [Dalai Lama](#)’s Drepung Loseling Monastery in India visit for a week. They are housed at the lodge and fed by Hell’s Backbone Grill. “The Utah deserts and plateaus and canyons are not a country of big returns,” wrote Wallace Stegner in “Wilderness at the Edge,” “but a country of spiritual healing. . . . We depend upon it increasingly for relief from the termite life we have created.”

The town, as such, is more of a feeling than a place. One evening, I saw four children meandering home on horseback on Highway 12, which acts as Boulder’s main street (in a town with three large ones, total). The youngest child was on an old, faithful gelding that had no mind to keep to one side of the road or the other, and it didn’t much matter. On my way to the post office one morning, I walked the breadth of Boulder’s dwellings and fields in half an hour. Houses looked deliberate for the weather: easily battened down for the winter, sheltered by poplars and pines for the summer. Each one was adjacent to open pasture where sheep or cattle lifted their heads as I passed.

One early morning I ventured into the pink-yellow desert, trying to pay attention to the significance of the rock layers. But the more I tried to envisage the vast inland prehistoric sea and the dinosaurs, the more my understanding shrank until I knew only one thing: this too shall pass. For every mile that I walked, I lost a piece of myself, and I knew that if I walked far enough, I'd disappear completely. In a slot canyon, a smooth, red fissure into a cool, dead-end womb, I looked up and saw debris hitched about 60 feet up off the floor — remnants of a flash flood that a person would be unlikely to see coming. Such is the tricky bequest of the desert canyons; they pretend largess at their entrance and deliver obliteration in the end.

THAT NIGHT, I ATE JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE soup and [meatloaf](#) at Hell's Backbone Grill. Francis Coppola Black Label Claret was the drug of choice. In the food I tasted a high-altitude richness, a purity, no hint of anything chemical. "People come here and start weeping when they eat the food," Castle told me. And I knew what she meant, but I couldn't put it into words, so I asked her to try. "It's because the food is nourishing in every sense of the word. We know who grew it, who picked it, who prepped it, who cooked it. We know the story behind it."

I had read in "With a Measure of Grace" that the local ranchers who supply the restaurant's meat all respect its belief that "the animals providing the meat we serve are precious beings deserving of our gratitude and prayers." The book goes on to cite one lamb producer, a Mormon rancher: "There's a scripture my dad likes to quote. . . . To paraphrase it, the animals you come in contact with in this life will testify for or against you on the judgment day. It's rather disconcerting to some people."

The next day I made my way to the Hell's Backbone farm, which provides produce for the restaurant. It is run by Spalding's brother, Nathanael, a wiry man of few words. He handed me last year's corn. "Anasazi corn," he said, a crop raised right here by the Ancestral Puebloans. The ear sat in my hand, yellow, black and pomegranate-colored seeds. "Like jewels," Nathanael said. Then he drew my attention to the so-called Three Sisters growing side by side in neat rows: "We grow corn, beans and squash, the three staples of the Anasazi." He smiled.

I thought of [David Grossman](#), the Israeli writer, who in his 1998 novel, "Be My Knife," explores the idea of "luz." "I once read," he writes, "that Our Sages of Blessed Memory had the idea that we have one tiny bone in the body, above the end of the spine — they call it the 'Luz.' You can't kill it, it doesn't crumble after death and can't be destroyed by fire. It is from this that we will be recreated at the Resurrection."

Thinking about it in this way, Boulder and Hell's Backbone Grill, the tiny bone at the end of the fastest-growing state in the union, became a kind of pun. The soul of a place, its chi, can never be destroyed, even in a world that cultivates soullessness. [?][?][?] ALEXANDRA FULLER

ESSENTIALS BOULDER, UTAH

PLANNING From most parts of the country, it's easiest to fly to Salt Lake City, rent a car and drive to Boulder (four and a half to five hours). Note that many places close for the winter season, from November

to March.

HOTEL Stay at the very comfortable 20-room eco-resort Boulder Mountain Lodge (800-556-3446; boulder-utah.com; doubles from \$99 in high season).

RESTAURANTS Hell's Backbone Grill, on the grounds of the lodge, serves remarkable place-based food that alone is worth the trip (435-335-7464; hellsbackbonegrill.com; entrees \$16 to \$37). Boulder Mesa Restaurant has fresh food, well prepared (435-335-7447; bouldermesa.com; entrees \$6.50 to \$19).

ACTIVITIES In the heart of Boulder, the Anasazi State Park Museum is an exploration of Ancestral Pueblo life (435-335-7308; utah.com/stateparks/anasazi.htm). The town is bordered by Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Dixie National Forest and Box-Death Hollow Wilderness, and both Capitol Reef National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area are easily reached. A day or two out with Earth Tours's Dr. Keith Watts provides all you ever wanted to know about the geology of the area (435-691-1241; earth-tours.com). For pack trips into the canyons, there's Red Rock 'n Llamas (877-955-2627; redrocknllamas.com); Boulder Mountain Fly Fishing can take you fishing (435-335-7306; bouldermountainguide.com). One of the country's oldest and biggest survival/traditional-living skills schools is the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (303-444-9779; boss-inc.com).

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