



DESTINATIONS

UTAH | THE US

Go with the slow

Take a more leisurely journey through the small towns and soaring scenery of Colorado and Utah, writes **Rashmi Narayan**

There are many reasons to head to Denver: beer is one of them and, if you're feeling courageous, frontier delicacy Rocky Mountain oysters. But another feather in Denver's cap is that it serves as one of the starting points of the Canyon Spirit train journey.

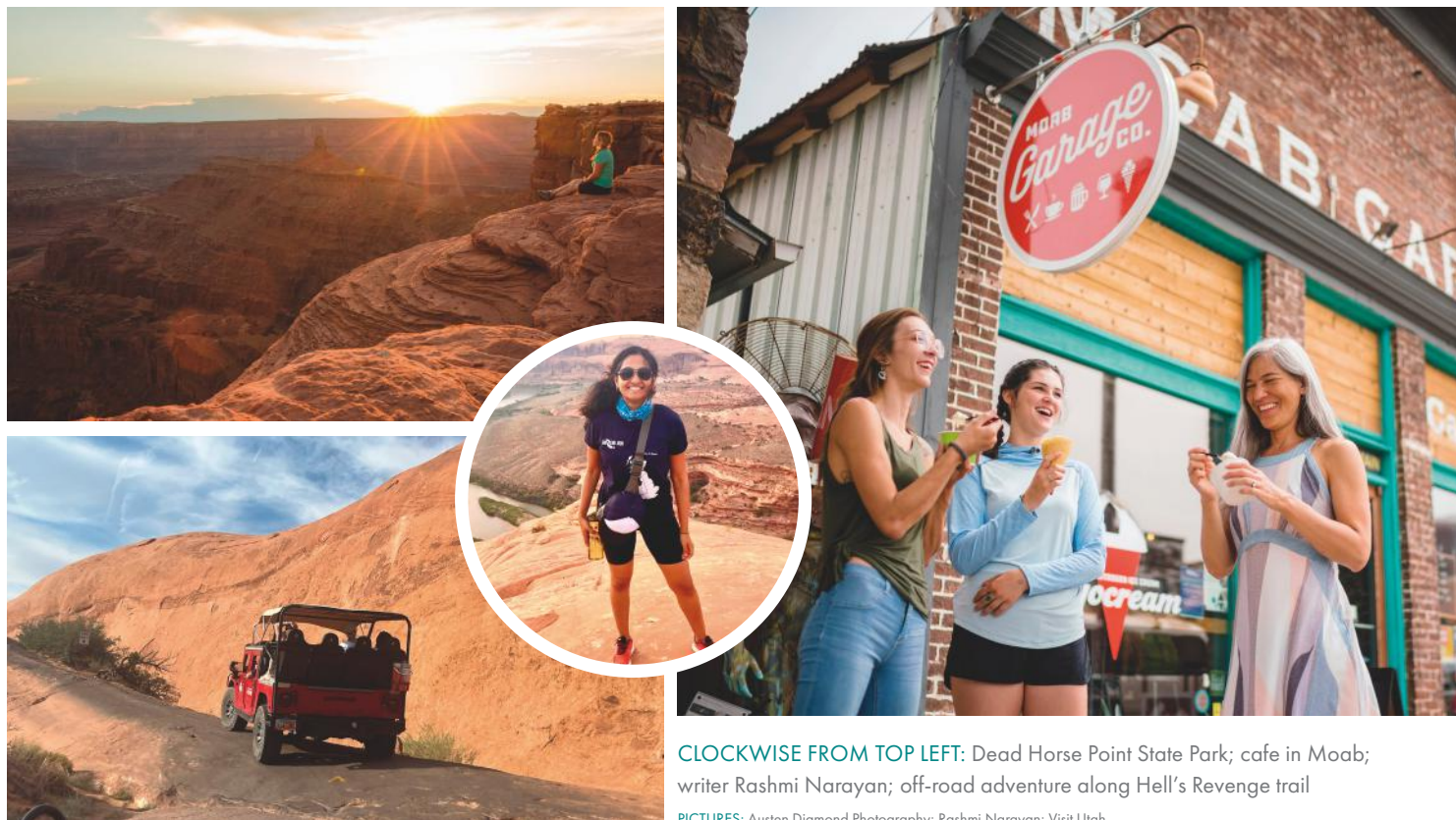
One of the most scenic rail journeys in the US sees passengers venture deep into the terracotta-red Rockies aboard the Canyon Spirit (the new name for Rocky Mountaineer's US train, previously the Rockies to Red Rocks route), which runs between Denver and Salt Lake City.

"Everywhere you look, it's like a postcard," says Chris Woods, the train manager on Canyon Spirit, which shares sections of track with the Amtrak service linking California and Chicago.

TUNNEL VISION

As the train pulls away from Denver, it enters the six-mile Moffat Tunnel, a feat of engineering that bypasses the Continental Divide before emerging into a series of canyons. Here, the landscape looks like it's been stacked up vertically as the tracks cling to sheer cliff faces and highways twist directly beneath. For a rail enthusiast, it's a striking piece of infrastructure carved through one of the country's most challenging alpine regions. ➤

Canyon Spirit train in De Beque Canyon, Colorado



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dead Horse Point State Park; cafe in Moab; writer Rashmi Narayan; off-road adventure along Hell's Revenge trail

PICTURES: Austen Diamond Photography; Rashmi Narayan; Visit Utah

Bypassing the ski town of Aspen, we travel through acres of wild sunflowers, juniper shrubs and Colorado spruce before arriving in Glenwood Springs, close to the Utah border and the first stop on the rail route. By no means a small town, it attracts 1.5 million visitors a year and has some 80 restaurants.

For centuries, the Ute people used the geothermal springs as a place of healing, calling them Yampah, meaning 'big medicine'. A settlement grew up filled with saloons and gunslingers, before being developed in the 1880s into a resort destination centred on natural hot springs and the grand Hotel Colorado. After a day on the train, I found myself following in those same footsteps, slipping into the warm waters of Glenwood Hot Springs Pool as the mountains glowed in the evening light.

REVENGE TRAVEL

Soon we arrived at a stopover in Moab and, after I bid adieu to the train, I set off from Moab Adventure Center to take on the Hell's Revenge

trail, an off-road route best tackled in a 4x4 with an experienced driver.

Tour guide Craig sensed my reluctance before we climbed into the nine-seat Hummer. "Relax, it's like being on a rollercoaster but one that can go over rocks and sand dunes – and it's definitely more fun," he said. Equal parts excited and apprehensive, I was invited to sit up front to calm my nerves.

Nothing could have prepared me for the otherworldliness of Moab. Just a few miles from the city centre and we were climbing red rocks at near-vertical angles – and the scariest part wasn't going up, it was coming down.

Swinging between fun and fear on this bumpy trail, we stopped at two memorable points. First was a site with replica tracks from the

allosaurus, a dinosaur that roamed here about 150 million years ago, measuring more than 10m in length. The second was The Abyss, where the Hummers turn around. Though there were sheer drops into the snaking Colorado River below, there was also a strange moment of calm as I watched the sky turn shades of orange, pink and violet, the setting sun bathing the scenery in a fiery red glow. After all that adventure, climbing back into a regular car seemed oddly subdued.

LEAP OF FAITH

The next day, we set off for Dead Horse Point State Park. Film buffs will know that the famous final leap in *Thelma & Louise* was shot here, not at the Grand Canyon as the film suggests. The name is rooted in a

bleak 19th-century cowboy legend about a herd of wild mustangs that died of thirst on the cliffs. Tragic tales aside, the first glimpse after a winding drive through canyon country is one I won't forget. One moment you are surrounded by rock and scrub, the next the land simply disappears, opening out into a vast, fractured landscape of cliffs and mesas carved deep by the Colorado River far below.

Comparisons with the Grand Canyon feel rather unfair. Dead Horse Point State Park is smaller and far less visited, yet still mesmerising. From the West Rim Overlook, I gaze down a sheer 600m precipice and notice a flat mesa below and a lone speck of turquoise – a replica 1966 Ford Thunderbird – marking the ledge depicted in the film's final scene.

It shows why it's worth taking your time through the national parks and notable landmarks of this region – after all, it's not every day you can follow dinosaur tracks, recreate a Hollywood ending and survive Hell's Revenge all in the same trip. **TW**

BOOK IT

Canyon Spirit offers two routes, both stopping at Glenwood Springs and Moab, with rail, stay and beyond packages including optional add-ons to explore Dead Horse Point State Park and a Hummer adventure. Journeys run between April and November, with prices starting from £1,300 per person.

canyonspirit.com