

Destination Elevation



Written by Ottocina Ryan

I've never felt so at home yet simultaneously pushed out of my comfort zone. My days at Scarp Ridge Lodge in Crested Butte, Colorado begin early with a day's itinerary on my nightstand. The first morning, our experience manager, Harmony, is easing us into life at 9,000 feet with mountain biking, one of many activities I've never experienced before. Yet currently I'm almost too comfortable to move, lying in a four-poster bed in a lodge with tall ceilings, exposed beams and mountain chic decor. Think a neutral color pallet, textured fabrics, and no shortage of antlers. My room even has a loft filled with *National Geographics* and a desk begging to have a novel written at it.

I pad downstairs in my slippers to the ground floor of the hotel, which is situated like a house. I'm greeted by a breakfast spread of berries and pastries and the chef asks me what type of eggs I'd like. I go



with an omelette with house made sausage, chatting with her as she makes my breakfast. I feel immersed in the local culture even before leaving the hotel. From my first interactions with the staff in the morning I get a feel for Crested Butte. They bring the best the area has to offer within the walls, sharing anecdotes about the idyllic mountain town and later showing us the most interesting activities.

Throughout our stay, we spend a lot of leisure time with the staff, in the lodge and on trails. From the bartenders to the guides to the chefs they are all locals with a story of why they moved to Crested Butte, recommendations, and a curiosity about guests.

After breakfast, my friends and I meet Lani, our guide for all of our activities. She has a never-fading smile, genuine cheerfulness and admirable patience with the four of us who have never gone mountain biking before...And are starting off in what is considered one of the top few mountain biking destinations of the world (read: breathtakingly beautiful but no bunny slope). With just the right amount of guidance, and tips that double as life lessons like "focus on where you want to go, not the obstacle," we traverse trails strewn with rocks and streams with views of wildflowers, snowy peaks, and the flowing river. Lani carries all of our water, snacks and jackets so we're free to enjoy the scenery unencumbered.

Returning to the lodge, with its oxygen enriched air system, we are welcomed by a family style lunch. Afterwards I curl up on a couch in one the lounge areas to do some work on my laptop. I feel like I'm in my own living room, except with a view of a mountain saturated with pine trees.



Nearly convinced that I'm in the safety of my own house, I leave the door to my room unlocked, sometimes ajar, when heading downstairs or out for a hike, such as today's, along Lupine Trail among lupins and aspen trees. Lani notes that she doesn't know anyone in Crested Butte who locks their doors and crime is limited to borrowing someone's bike to ride across town.

Back at the lodge, I take a peek at the Bunk Room, with seven sophisticated bunk beds and a playroom loft, it's my childhood dream come true. I immediately send a video to my family, hinting at returning for our next reunion. With only six rooms at Scarp Ridge Lodge, to accommodate larger groups Eleven Experience has two

other properties only a stones throw away, Public House Lofts and Sorpris House.

The following day, just a three blocks from the lodge, we have lunch at Public House. Surrounded by navy blue tufted leather booths, dark wood, and moose heads lining the walls we fuel up on truffle poutine and fresh salads. Taking note of the live music downstairs for later, we head out to wander around Crested Butte. With no chain stores and colorful victorian buildings housing countless boutiques, restaurants and bars within easy walking distance of each other it's a vacationers paradise. Quaint with just enough to do to make you want to extend your trip.





For our daily dose of things we've never done before, Lani takes us stand up paddle boarding down the Slate River. The lazy river carries us for an hour and a half of mountain views and bumping into each other. While the guides take care of our boards we retreat back to the lodge for apres. We gather around the bar with wine and chat about the day's adventures while depleting the jar of local beef jerky and platter of roasted vegetable topped hummus.

I chat with the chef as he prepares dinner, he owns a local restaurant Ginger Cafe and is four time winner of a local downhill bike race Chainless (where participants remove the chains from their bikes prior to the race). He offers me a piece of lemony wild sorrel to try and lets me in on what's in store for tonight. The menu includes



a salad with freshly picked vegetables from his garden and herb seared NY strip steaks. He explains that the lodge buys whole cows to support local ranchers. Dessert is a lemon cornmeal cake with strawberry rhubarb and thyme compote.

After dinner my friends and I head to the rooftop jacuzzi. With no light pollution, it's just us, shooting stars and the smell of pine trees.

Not ready to leave (I don't think I ever could be) yet excited for the next couple days, Harmony drives us thirty minutes away to Eleven Experience's Taylor River Lodge. Cell service fades away and ranches are replaced by pine trees and rocky cliffs. I've usually found that the more remote a place is, the more fun it is and Taylor River Lodge, situated in a canyon next to the river and surrounded by more pine trees than I've seen in my life combined, is no exception. Only open late May through October, this all-inclusive lodge is a summer camp that's just as much fun for adults as it is for kids. Games of darts come with a side of Bloody Marys and apres is at 5 p.m. daily. They have everything from a teepee to a rock climbing wall to a spa.

The lodge staff takes our bags to our cabins, and we waste no time in starting a game of ping pong on the lawn filled with games. Then I head to the spa cabin, for a well earned massage. No frills, just a really good massage. I apologize that I haven't showered after the day's activities and my masseuse says she doesn't give two shits. This is Colorado after all.

Dinner is at a communal table on the balcony of the main lodge. Overlooking the river (and adjacent to the property's garden) with evening light streaming through the trees, we indulge in a four course meal. Over local trout we chat with our fellow guests, a couple



from Chicago, before heading to the blazing fire pits to roast homemade marshmallows and play horseshoes. This place has us questioning why we even have Netflix accounts.

The next morning, right after breakfast, we cross the bridge spanning the river to hike up the hillside. With no sounds except the rushing water and chirping birds, we make our own trail though the trees, stepping around succulents and pine cones. Reaching the top, we turn around and sit and take in the view—all pine trees and blue sky—until we remember how many activities we have yet to try. Upon returning we start a game of darts. Let's just say, a round where all of the darts make in into the dart board is a good round. So naturally we promote ourselves to axe throwing and archery. The couple from Chicago is at the marksmen's range; he's already broken an axe and she hits the target dead center on her first throw. "Sorry for messing up your bullseye sticker," she jokes, retrieving the axe. No hidden talent here for us, but somehow that makes it even more fun. We keep trying until we're summoned for the fly fishing clinic. John, the fly fishing guide, teaches me how to cast in the property's pond, and with better luck than I have aim, I catch three rainbow trout.

Our afternoon is the perfect balance of adrenaline and relaxation, starting with white water rafting down the river. It's exhilarating and fun, and our guide makes it easier than I thought it would be. Retuning to the lodge we relax at the sleek indoor pool, which has a garage-like glass door that opens to an unobstructed view of the pines across the river, making you feel like you're outside. Leave it to Eleven Experience to take something great and make it extraordinarily special.

When our days of endless fun come to an end, I feel closer to my friends, having been pushed out of our comfort zones together and reminded how much fun it is to just play a game outside. Adding in the luxuriousness of the remote setting and friendliness of the staff, I would go as far as to give the trip an eleven out of ten. *

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