INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Amid the craggy mountain peaks and under-the-radar vineyards of Colorado's Western Slope, Jill K. Robinson finds her happy place

A shaft of sunlight illuminates the canyon wall of the Colorado National Monument, revealing layers of charcoal-gray Precambrian rock and Jurassic-era sandstone the color of dried chiles. As I coast along Rim Rock Drive through this sprawling landscape of sedimentary rock, I feel the signature panoramas of the American West envelop me in a symphony of fiery sandstone canyons and towering rock spires. There isn't another soul in sight.

During the pandemic, we turned to the memory of trips past to satisfy our wanderlust, and one of mine—this solo moment in Colorado's Western Slope—stuck with me like a promise. I've made dozens of pilgrimages to popular outdoor destinations around the country, from the alpine peaks of New Hampshire's White Mountains to the prehistorically raw Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. But what I've craved most is this 3,341-square-mile region, its riverbeds and red rock trails, desert vistas and rolling vineyards.

Each visit feels like a return to something elemental, always with some new joy to be discovered. With the city of Grand Junction in my rearview mirror, I'll take the 63-mile Grand Mesa Scenic Byway, which climbs through a steep canyon before opening up on Grand Mesa, the world's largest flat-topped mountain, a terrain dotted with some 300 deep blue lakes. It's here at the top that the Palisade Plunge, one of the country's longest single-track downhill mountain bike trails, begins its vertiginous descent through a stand of aspen trees. I can almost feel the deep grooves across their trunks, alert and eye-like, following my movement. The 32-mile route stretches all the way to its namesake town, Palisade, depositing adventurers straight into the heart of Colorado wine country.

Vineyards stretch for miles in orderly lines, nourished by the Colorado River and the daytime warmth that bounces off a 250-mile-long escarpment known as the Book Cliffs before giving way to cool nights. From my vantage point at Restoration Vineyards, a local outfit that produces crisp Chardonnay and silky Cabernet Franc, I feel pulled into their neat rows, which reach like fingers toward Mount Garfield. Restoration is one of many wineries along the Palisade Fruit & Wine Byway, a tangled network of backcountry roads. It's a route littered with the bounty of this place: lavender gardens and farmstands, apple orchards and more vineyards. Later, back in Grand Junction, I'll soak it all up with dinner at Bin 707 Foodbar, where locally sourced plates of blue-corn grits and lamb tenderloin hold the essence of this refuge in the desert.

Morning comes quickly, and just eight miles out of town, the pink light of dawn splashes across the rugged canyons and plateaus of Little Book Cliffs Wild Horse Range, one of only three reserves in the U.S. set aside for these animals. A breeze carries the resin-like scent of piñon and juniper laced with spicy sagebrush. A mare nickers to her foal as a small band of horses grazes nearby. I'm alone, but I hardly feel lonely.

"Northeast of Yellowstone in Montana, you'll hit the Beartooth Mountains. They're incredible for high-alpine hiking around Island Lake, where you can take a swim." Matthew Gaghen, CEO, Under Canvas