







Turning her back on her usual Greek island, Christa sets off for some spiritual development in the mountains of Colorado

## Christa D'Souza

The writer gets in touch with her inner mountain mamma on a camping trip in Colorado. Portrait by Jesse Chehak

### *Day one*

Have just flown into Cortez, Colorado, and am driving past the town of Dolores, up through the bear-strewn San Juan mountain range, to the ranch where my friends, the novelist Bella Pollen and her husband David Macmillan, have generously invited us to stay. This is the start of the hikin', bikin', fishin', campin' holiday I've always promised my other half we'd do, and that we never have done.

Call me a wimp – go ahead – but, in my book, a summer holiday is not really a summer holiday unless it involves a villa with a pool and a nice white sandy beach, with not too many rocks nearby. To me, a summer holiday is primarily about getting a tan, and, at the very least, involves being at sea level. Besides which, I've just done a week in Cape Cod with neither nanny nor partner; I've had two passports and my Mastercard nicked out of my bag in Boston; I've had to subsequently fight my way on to the plane, then endure the mother of all telling-offs from Nick, the kids' dad, when we all meet up in Denver – so I feel I've sort of had my adventure already.

But, heigh-ho, here we are. And, as Nick keeps saying, we simply cannot spend another summer with me sitting by the pool doing the *International Herald Tribune* crossword while the kids are inside on their Play Station Portables (PSPs) – it will eventually drive him mad. It might eventually drive me mad, too. How can I possibly consider myself the spiritually enlightened person that I do, when the only thing I ever think about when I'm on holiday is how brown I am or what we're going to eat at the next meal? And so it is that I have enlisted the help of Bella, always game for a laugh, to prise me out of my comfort zone and unleash the mountain mamma that lives within.

Don't know if it's the altitude or the recycled plane air, but as we hit the turning for West Fork, there's a horridly familiar tickle at the back of my throat, and my eyes are beginning to itch. I want to appreciate the extraordinary landscape Nick is excitedly pointing out, the two darling little groundhogs on their hind legs at the side of the road, and the sheer drops of crumbling shale, but my nose is too blocked to take any of it in properly. By the time we roll into the driveway, with Les Macmillans all in cowboy hats and kerchiefs, assembled on the porch to greet us, my eyes are like two pinpricks, and I cannot, but *cannot*, stop sneezing. Must be the pollen count, obviously.

"Right," says Nick, rubbing his hands gleefully. "Let's go inside and sort out the programme. White-water rafting or camping? What's it to be first?" White-water rafting. Camping. Is the world divided into two sorts, or what? The last time I went camping was on a school trip to Lyme Regis in 1973. I loathed every minute of it. Nick, Bella and Dave, on the other hand, love it. To tell you the truth, I do wonder what it's going to be like on holiday with these two very dear friends of ours. Will we be friends by the end of it? Will Nick and I still be together? Will I have taken an earlier flight back home? Feeling slightly like one does on the first night of boarding school, I pop a Stilnoct and go to bed.

Nice Bella and Dave. I really shouldn't fret so. Neither should I have read anything into the email Bella sent just before we came out (provoked by Nick, no doubt), saying she was "sitting here on my bed, eating Cheez Doodles and thinking up different ways to torture you". It's not like that at all. Not only are we allowed to sleep in on our first day, but I can smell the Nespresso machine. As for their >



“barn”, it’s too nail-bitingly, spoilingly perfect for words, with its basketball pitch-sized living room, its elk-fur bedspreads, its properly hurty power showers and its plasma screen that’s twice the size of ours at home. And the view. It’s like a cross between the set of *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Sound of Music* and *The Virginian* all rolled into one, with this great snow-capped peak that makes the Matterhorn look like a piddling Toblerone ad. But perhaps the most overwhelming thing of all is the sky. It is so much bigger than any sky I have ever seen before, and so blue against the lush, aspen-carpeted landscape. No wonder Bella calls this her equivalent of “shrinkage”. No wonder Nick was so desperate to get me out here.

### *Day two*

Over home-made granola and mounds of crispy Oscar Mayer bacon, prepared by Stacey, the tattoo-covered cook, we watch as chipmunks, hell bent on destroying Dave’s carefully tended flower-beds, poke their noses out of the rocks, and hummingbirds the size of wasps hover over the honey pot. Bella, who has been up since 6am writing a chapter of her latest novel and swimming 50 lengths in the pool, has suggested a gentle hike up into Dunton Meadow behind the house – a hike that the children can do and where we can also pick chanterelles for tea tonight. My kids, naturally, want to stay and play PSP. Me, I wouldn’t mind lying on one of those sunbeds on the deck and communing with the crossword, and having a good old girly gossip with Bella. But, for the purposes of furthering my spiritual development, I’m not going to, of course.

Amazingly, for someone who doesn’t really do inclines, it’s not as bad as I thought it would be. The white pick-up truck, which once famously plunged down this mountain after taking a corner too quickly, and is now sticking out of the side of a ravine as a kind of tourist attraction, is not fabulously encouraging. And there’s a point when, spread-eagled against the side of a cliff, unable to go up, unable to go down, I’m really not having a good time at all. But I can do it. I can just about get to the top. That’s a start, is it not?

### *Day three*

Bit sore from the four-hour horse-riding trail Bella somehow persuaded me to do across Black Mesa yesterday afternoon, and the allergies are kicking in nicely, thanks to all the wild flowers Dave made us pick on our hike yesterday. I feel a bit dizzy and depressed, too, but Bella tells me this is merely altitude sickness, and all I have to do to remedy it is drink tons and tons of water – especially

when we go camping in the desert. Oh, and by the way, how are our respective bowels? Have we experienced the Colorado coil effect yet? (Apparently, the altitude is amazing for constipation sufferers.)

Before lunch, we have a swim in the magnificent, aspen-sheltered pool. It’s lovely, the perfect, perfect temperature, but I can’t help feeling a little like Charlie Brown’s friend Pig-Pen, the way the flies all seem to congregate around my head, and *my* head alone. Dave says it reminds him of a bygone relative of Bella’s who once made the family butler cover his head in jam to keep the wasps away from a picnic. Hah, hah, hah. I belly laugh loudly, wondering if this is actually true.

### *Day four*

Still recovering from the lithium hot springs Bella and Dave took us to last night. Not just because we all had to get buck naked in front of each other, or because of the freezing-cold river we had to plunge into afterwards, but because of the snake-infested long grass they made us run barefoot through in between. They promised they weren’t bitey ones, but, still, this is technically a holiday, not a test.

*Spread-eagled against  
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a good time*

Meanwhile, all the equipment is being laid out on the lawn in preparation for the camping trip tomorrow. My God. It seems an awful lot for just the one night. Could we not sleep in the back of the two pick-ups, given the time it’s going to take to lug all the stuff out there? Is there not a motel nearby where we can go to bed really, really late and get up really, really early, and have what would amount to the exact same experience? In my eyes, that’s precisely what being a master of one’s own destiny means.

But I don’t say anything because Big Dave has a murderous look in his eyes; the LL Bean blow-up bed he ordered especially for me won’t inflate properly, the fly sheets don’t match and two tent pegs are missing. Instead, I join Bella and Stacey in the kitchen, who are hauling a fillet of beef the length of a human torso into a cooler, and, hooray, making up a big pitcher of margaritas. It’s amazing the things one can suffer when one is honking drunk, and, besides, you know what, I’m not 13 any more. I may enjoy it this time around.

### *Day five*

It’s here: the day has finally arrived. The kids and I blearily assemble ourselves outside the barn with our pre-assigned backpacks – the kids’ minus their PSPs, mine with five loo rolls and about 20 pairs of socks to guard me from rattlesnakes. We drive in convoy to John’s in Dolores, tumbleweed spiralling across our path, just like it does in the movies. John is an Englishman, who came out here years ago and who, along with writing books and articles, serving in the army and opening restaurants, has “punched cows” ever since. Our designated camp leader, he is a former-SAS type and thinks everyone’s a pansy, including, probably, Bella and Dave, so God knows what he is going to make of me.

His sprawling, hacienda-style vineyard (yup, he grows wine, too) is set at the foothills of the Sleeping Ute, the Navajo name for the coppery-red mountain ridge that looks, from afar, exactly like a prone Indian chief with his hands folded across his chest. This is where the ancient Anasazi tribe used to live and eat each other when hungry or cross. John, a mine of information, explains how it was later inhabited by the even more brutal Ute tribe, and the mountain ridge is where women from the rival Dineh tribe of Durango would hurl themselves off in order not to be flayed alive. What history. What bravery. What a long time until tomorrow evening when we will all be back in our beds. But I must put on a brave face – if not for the grown-ups, then at least for the kids.

Because Nick and Bella have decided the children would be better off not driving with me, they all go in one car together and leave me with John and his dusty, old, non-air-conditioned pick-up. Actually, I’m quite happy; John is very good company. Unlike the tossers one occasionally sits next to in London, who drone on about their polo-playing and heliskiing and white-water-rafting expertise, John is absolutely and utterly the Real Thing. White-water rafting? “Pah,” he snorts. “Those dreadful recreators, those boat prats floating down that interminable bloody river with bandanas round their heads. I can’t stand ’em. Today’s concept of adventure,” he adds a little glumly, “it’s been so downgraded. It’s like GCSEs – it doesn’t mean anything any more. Camping, glamping – everything nowadays, it’s too safe...” All of which, of course, sounds fine to me.

The drive across the Utah border, along route 163, through Mexican Hat and alongside the San Juan river, is long, hot and conspicuously absent of other cars. After getting grape sodas at a trading post



on the reservation (complete with toothless, stetsoned man behind counter), we head towards the Valley of the Gods, where we are to go on a “short” hike before pitching camp.

To be honest, I’m a bit peeved. We adults, fine, but what about my poor little son Django, who is only six? How will he cope in the 100°F heat? Perhaps he should go with me, and we can take it at our own slow pace (or, even, when the others aren’t looking, run back to the car). But Nick is adamant that he, Bella and Finn (the Macs’ 13-year-old boy) should take Django, and I go with John and the other kids. Since I’m a little fuzzy with all the Zirtek I’ve been taking (perhaps it’s West Nile virus, not allergies?), I don’t, for the moment, argue.

Two hours later, our group is nearly back at the car, and neither Django nor Nick nor Bella are anywhere to be found. From up here, we can see 360 degrees around for hundreds and hundreds of miles, and they have totally, but totally, disappeared from sight. “Don’t worry,” says John when he sees me clutching a sock I’ve found in a pocket to my mouth. “You can’t fall very far here and there aren’t many snakes. The only thing you have to watch out for are the mountain lions and the scorpions.”

Oh, but hallelujah! There they are, there they are! Django between Bella and Finn, his hair plastered to the side of his face, happily talking the hind legs off a donkey. Finn is his new hero, and Bella, by the looks of it, is his new mother. Children. They’re such tarts.

The next “sock moment” is the drive up the famously treacherous Moki Dugway – a vertical, winding road – to the top of Cedar Mesa, where we are to pitch our tents. Every time we come to a switchback, I clutch on to John and stare very carefully into the cliff face. It is just too terrifying to look 11,000ft down, and the thought of anyone overtaking makes me cross my legs. Please God, I hope Dave is driving slowly in the other car.

Finally, finally, at around 6pm, we all reach Lookout Point at the top. We are 12,000ft above sea level and on the (unprotected) cliff edge, looking out over hundreds of miles of red desert. The sight of the tall red sandstone mesas against the paint-by-numbers sky, all piled precariously on top of each other like poker chips (or molar teeth, or even giant turds), is utterly spectacular. The grandeur, the hugeness, the stillness of it all... It feels as if we’ve strayed into the land of giants or, more accurately, into God’s garden. I know. Sounds creepy. But if there is any place to get spiritual, it is definitely, definitely here. Surely this vision laid out in front > 245



*Clockwise from above left: Christa on a hike; Duntion Hot Springs, a luxury resort in the San Juan mountains; views of the desert stretch for hundreds of miles; Christa and Django take a fresh-water dip*



*Clockwise from left: relics of old America; stripping off at the hot springs; doing laps in the aspen-shaded pool; majestic views at every turn*





We avoided confrontation with each other, but there were occasions when the tensions were unbearable. It was a dizzy time, almost surreal. Much of the play mirrored the undercurrents in our real relationships. When the play finished, the relief was huge. Like boxers in a ring, we went to our separate corners and licked our wounds.

It was with the birth of my son Cal, four years later, that my sisters swooped in like mother eagles, all resentments thrown aside. They had both had their babies, years before, which, in true younger-sister style, I had not really noticed. Now, 10 years later, I was having a child of my own, and there they both were. They knew without explanation how huge an event it was for me. They knew, too, how much I missed our mum. They arrived armed with food, drink, baby clothes (some hand-me-downs for their little sister's little baby) and *joie de vivre* (something both my sisters have in abundance).

As we have grown older, Catherine and I have become closer. I have watched her blossom from a rather gauche young girl to the confident, witty, chic woman she is now. I revel in having this perspective, in being her older sister. I am more careful, better behaved, towards her than the others. Perhaps this is because, knowing what it is to be the younger one, I endeavour not to over influence or intimidate. Or perhaps it is simply that what we have is more fragile. She hasn't had the rough and tumble, the intensity, the sheer bloodiness of growing up together that my mother's daughters had. But the mark of Cyril is on all four of us. That is the bond. We have all searched out liberation from a rather bullying, powerful man. That shared struggle has consolidated our kinship.

As you read this, I will be playing the part of another sister, Maggie Mundy, in a play by Brian Friel called *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Set in Donegal, it is a play about memory, about loss, about yearning; but fundamentally it is a play about five sisters. Friel is a great playwright. The passion, loyalty, jealousy, frustration, admiration, resentment, joy, fear, pity, competitiveness, compassion, but most of all the love that characterise the nature of being a sister ooze from his lines. We actresses, five strangers, will rely on the alchemy of the play to turn us into a family. We will draw on our experiences of being a sister, the sisters we have had and the sisters we have known. And, because of Friel's genius, the audience (I hope) will be touched to its core by the profundity of those relationships, the power.

The primal nature of being sisters – that we actually come from the same place, that we have bodies which are made the same – makes it easier, I suppose, to imagine where each other is, inside herself. That very intimacy can be suffocating though, almost invasive. In Friel's play, the sisters have never been separated, and now, tipping into middle age, they are tragically trapped in their assigned roles. They are rendered impotent by their family myth. Sometimes, as you grapple with who you are, you need space. You don't want someone in there with you, judging you, or even empathising with you. Sisters, close as they are, remain separate.

I think that's what we, Cusack sisters, have spent our lives, to date, discovering. It is only now, into our forties, fifties and sixties, that I feel safe to make any pronouncements at all about sisterhood. For such a long time, I accepted the roles we were given at the beginning. But as the years have gone by, as each of us has ebbed and flowed in her individual life and then regrouped with the others, there is an equality and mutual respect that is only made richer by our familial relationship. Rather like swimmers breaststroking across the channel, we keep each other in our peripheral vision just to gauge how we are doing. I am so glad of these particular women who flank me. I feel a surge of affection and warmth when I see any of their three faces – my flesh and blood, my skin and blisters, my sisters! ■  
*"Dancing at Lughnasa" is at The Old Vic, SE1 until May 9*

of us was not made "by accident"? Surely this proves there is a power higher and greater than us? Surely this should transcend my fear of heights and my blocked-up nose? But, I'm sorry to say, it doesn't. Fearing the worst, I imagine it actually happens: six-year-old plunges down a Colorado ravine while mother searches for nose-spray. I can just see the headline.

### Day six

It's 6.30am. The LL Bean blow-up bed has deflated on Nick's side, so I'm lying on top of him, and Django is lying on top of me, his sandy, sweaty bottom pressed up against my cheek. I've got the sun shining right in my eyes, a throbbing margarita hangover and a bit of popcorn in my ear. I have done it, though. I have achieved what I feared most. Well. Not quite. Armed with one of my loo rolls, I cantilever myself out of the tent and wander – for what feels like miles – to find a bit of rock to hide behind. And would you believe it? Someone's got here first.

As we begin the long, laborious process of packing up, I catch a glimpse of myself in the side mirror of John's pick-up, and jump. Not only have I got Forest Whitaker eye, but my mouth seems to have fallen off my face. The dryness in the desert, it's like a blowtorch on one's skin. As for my mountain-mama look – lesbian hiking sandals I bought specially in Provincetown, one of Stacey's kitchen aprons over my Marc Jacobs mini, and thick, thick white socks – it does not work at all, *at all*. I think of our lovely bathroom back at the barn, with its big, fluffy bathrobes and Space NK toiletries and lock on the door. Can't bloody wait. But I'm going to have to wait just that bit longer; Nick wants to see if we can fit in some white-water rafting before we go home. Oh, Bella, must we? Even John thinks it's time to go home.

### Day seven

Result: Lime Creek is so dried up, we can't go white-water rafting, so we head to a cattle sale instead and then have a nice catfish fry at Stuart and Babs's ranch in Durango. Stuart is a proper, bona fide cowboy, who used to ride his horse to school. Bella is in her element here, charming the pants off Stuart and his brother, and she is so aesthetically unscathed, somehow, from what we have just been through that it makes me just a little bit... Oh, alright then, jealous. I'm jealous of her security of the unknown, I'm jealous of her indefatigable energy, I'm jealous of her wild-mushroom knowledge and her constant – almost manic – need to explore. I'm a little abashed, too, to think how I've made my family spend their summers in the same house, on the same Greek island, for the past three years; how one bandol-tinged day differs not one single iota from the next; how the biggest trip we ever do is to the local supermarket.

Therefore, when Bella suggests another hike – not like the gentle one we did on the first day, but a proper eight-hour one up into Dunton Canyon and along the treacherous, crumbling-shale ridges of Johnny Bull mountain and the Calico Trail – I'm all for it. After all, I've slept in a bed. I'm clean. We've only got two days to go. I can do absolutely anything now.

Leaving the men and kids to watch TV, and armed with packed lunches that Stacey makes up for us (Bella: man-sandwich, Doritos and M&Ms. Me: egg salad wrapped in lettuce leaves), we set off on our jaunt up the face of Johnny Bull towards the summit, which is 11,800ft up. Determined to prove my mettle, to show I'm not the wimp I was before, I scramble up that mountain until my heart nearly bursts. It is not pleasant, the feeling. I am not used to raising my pulse like this, and there are plenty of times when I have to pretend to admire the view in order to get my breath back, plenty of times when I can't look down or I'll freeze. But, do you know? When we reach the very top and look out across the state of New Mexico, I finally get it. OK, I still loathe camping. OK, I need a lock on the loo. But this, yes this, is truly fantastic. See, Nick? I knew it. I'll be an adventuress yet. ■