

COUNTRY LIFE®

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EVERY WEEK

A good catch:
find your
sporting
soulmate



Top tipples, knotty problems and unicorn magic
Burne-Jones and his sleeping beauties



It's a kind of magic

Editor Mark Hedges is utterly charmed by a day's fishing in Colorado, a town worthy of John Wayne and a new way of catching trout

I THINK we'll start with a Chubby Chernobyl fished with a Fuzzy Wuzzy as team.' These are flies that would cause heart attacks on Hampshire's River Test, but everything is splendidly different on the Taylor River in Colorado, USA—and all the better for it.

My guide, Moose Hofer, so named because his mother shot a huge moose while heavily pregnant, carries a splendid beard and a wealth of knowledge about fishing and the great outdoors. The river bustles along a steep valley and ravens scream at us from the trees hanging perilously on the cliffs. Hummingbirds dart hither and thither. There's an ancient magic to the place.

We wade stealthily through the river, with me casting at pockets of slack water

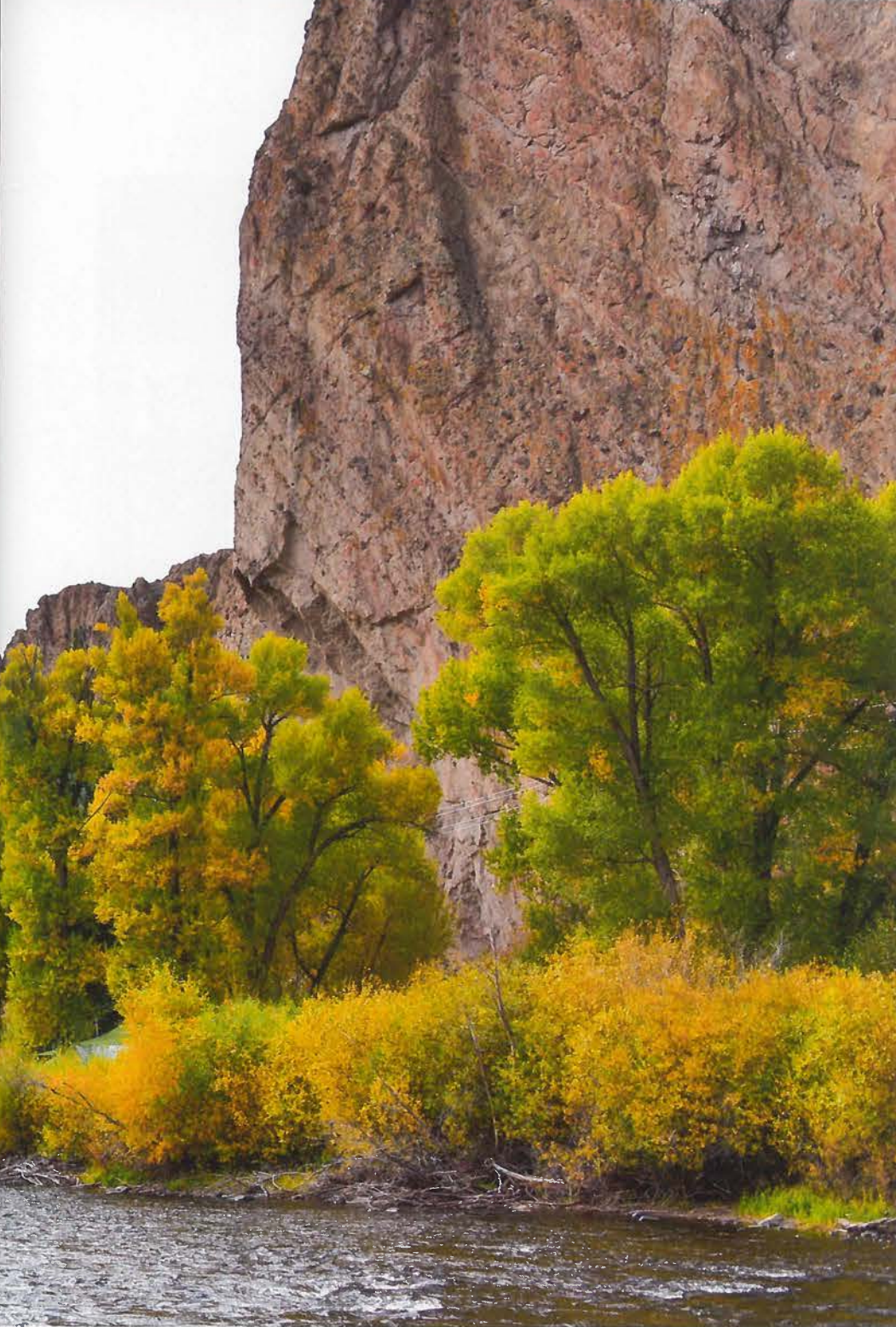
and into the pools between the boulders. Moose switches to a streamer fly and the improbably christened Sculpzilla is snatched by a hard-fighting rainbow. I'm in business and add several brown trout and my first ever cutthroat to the tally. Not only that, I've learnt a completely new way of catching trout.

Above the valley, Rachel is having her first casting lesson on the pond outside the glorious lodge. Below, I'm cursing myself and wondering what sort of idiot takes his girlfriend, who's never cast a rod, on a fishing holiday. I needn't have worried—thanks to the expert tuition of her guide, Paul, she's soon caught her first fish and progresses to the river itself. Here, incredibly, she hooks and loses a monster (Paul's words) just as he's about to net it.

My concern lifts, to be replaced by nerves. I hadn't bargained on her being a natural and there's always a slither of competitiveness when fishing.

Taylor River Lodge is an outdoorsman's paradise. We stayed in what looked like a frontiersman's cabin, which transforms into the epitome of luxury inside. The main lodge is full of charm and comfort, with an open fire for the colder evenings. The food, whether elk, trout or grilled-peach salad, was sublime, locally sourced and well matched by the wines. Our stay was blessed with thoughtful service throughout—a feature of all the Eleven properties I've stayed in.

After the triumph of the first day, we ventured downstream to the Gunnison River, with Dylan as our guide. This involved



Welcome to Crested Butte

Colorado boasts four Eleven properties, of which two are in Crested Butte: Sopris House, where we stayed, and Scarp Ridge Lodge. Across its worldwide portfolio, Eleven has always focused on ultra-high-quality service for a limited number of people. In a year, it deals with dozens of people, not hundreds. That's what makes it so incredibly special.

On arriving, I initially wondered why we were moving into a town instead of going deeper into the countryside, but this former mining outpost feels as if you're stepping into a John Wayne film—at any moment, you expect him to ride down the high street and tie up his horse outside one of the bars.

A local told me that Crested Butte remains special because it's full of hippies and outlaws. Most people appeared to have come for a summer job and stayed for the rest of their life. It has a rare, lost-world charm.

In winter, the pair of lodges transforms into the ultimate in chalet living, with private ski areas. In summer, we enjoyed the wildflower meadows and the town itself. Crested Butte was an unexpected highlight of a great trip and, if I was American, I would live there for all its character, fishing, skiing and great outdoors.

A seven-day trip to Colorado with Eleven Experience, including fly fishing on the Taylor River, costs from £2,888 (about \$3,805) per person, including B&B accommodation at Scarp Ridge Lodge and full-board accommodation at Taylor River Lodge. This also includes fishing instruction and tuition at Taylor River Lodge, all fishing gear, one day of professional photography and round-trip transfers from Gunnison or Montrose Airport. Departures May to October (www.elevenexperience.com; 00 1 970 349 7761).

The serene Taylor River meanders through Colorado's Elk Mountains

floating downstream on a type of rib, negotiating rapids and casting at the softer glides. As we slipped along the river through canyons and open spaces, eagles soared above us and a mule deer with her twins came down to drink. The tranquility was only shattered by a regular female yelp: 'I've got another one.' Rachel soon started giving me fishing tips.

By now, I was power smoking my Cohiba and casting like a dervish in a bid to match her. The result of the morning's work: Rachel eight fish, myself three. It will always be one of the happiest and most memorable day's fishing I have ever had. 🐟



Taylor River Lodge is an outdoorsman's paradise—luxurious and charming