

Travel

Isabel Conway visits Colorado to be thrilled by the dizzying vistas of the 50,000-acre Mesa Verde national park



A concert at Red Rocks Amphitheatre



Tourists at Chimney Rock National Monument

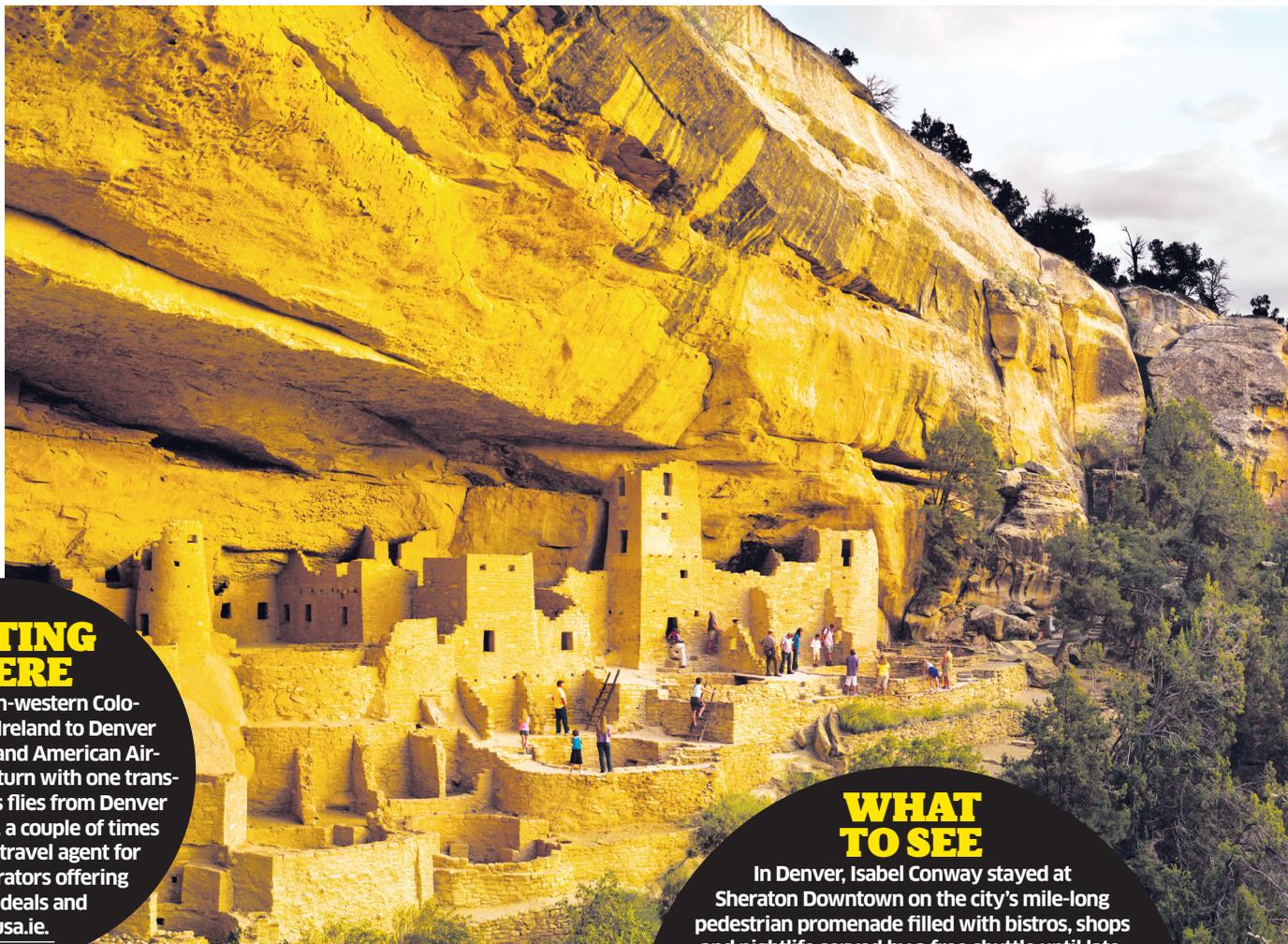
A lark in the park

Never, ever lock your knees, that's very dangerous on these steps," the ranger guide warns. "Always bend them, and above all don't freak out." She's mighty stern-looking. Our gasps are put down to shortness of breath at being more than 7,000 feet (2,135 metres) above sea level while we wait our turn to climb these narrow ladders snaking up the sandstone cliff face.

The ladders, linking one of the world's best preserved archaeological sites known as Cliff Palace in Colorado's Mesa Verde national park, are a faithful recreation of those used by the small agile Ancestral Puebloan inhabitants of old. Today's much taller and more corpulent visitors unsteadily mount vertical ladders and squeeze between tight spaces in the rocks in the searing heat on our cliff-dwelling tour. "No meat for the vultures today," jokes the ranger Margaret Grey, counting her group afterwards: "You're all still with us, well done."

We take a welcome breather and hear how, back in the 13th century, the Anasazi (ancestral Puebloans) built sturdy houses in the shallow caves but abandoned them, as archaeological evidence shows, almost overnight heading south into New Mexico. Since 600AD, there had been human habitation in cliff dwellings of spectacular Mesa Verde National Park here in south-west Colorado.

Nobody knows why these people left. Speculation runs from the hard-



GETTING THERE

Getting to south-western Colorado: fares from Ireland to Denver (British Airways and American Airlines) from €761 return with one transfer. United Airlines flies from Denver to Durango €211, a couple of times daily. See your travel agent for Irish tour operators offering fly/drive deals and visitusa.ie.

WHAT TO SEE

In Denver, Isabel Conway stayed at Sheraton Downtown on the city's mile-long pedestrian promenade filled with bistros, shops and nightlife served by a free shuttle until late. Colorado is home to numerous hot springs and Isabel checked out the sulphur baths at Springs Resort & Spa, Pagosa (pagosahotsprings.com). Visiting Mesa Verde national park, the best overnight location is Far View Lodge (mesaverdecountry.com), with doubles from €136. In Durango, the Strater Hotel (strater.com) has off-season doubles from \$100. For a winter or summer stay, Purgatory Resort (purgatoryresort.com) is just half an hour from Durango and offers year round active holidays, gourmet dining and luxury apartments with some of Colorado's best skiing.



Durango's narrow-gauge railway was built in the 1880s

ship of enduring a drought which lasted 25 years to rumours of wars and contentious happenings nearby, causing them to pack up and move on. The lineage of 20 tribes, still settled on the same land in New Mexico has been traced back to the Pueblo settlers of Mesa Verde.

The caves were only discovered by accident in 1888