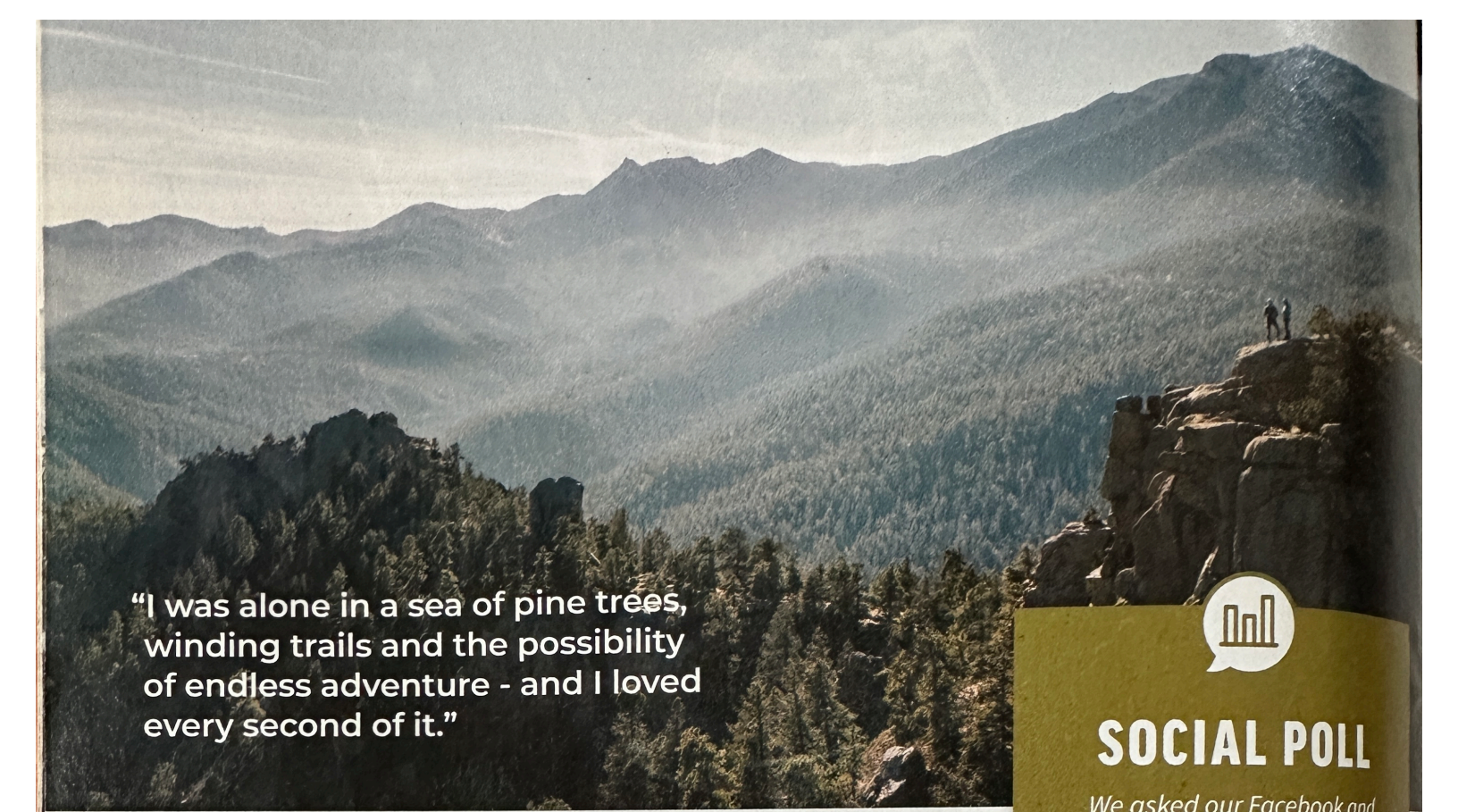


Get Outside

Explore the outdoor offerings of Colorado Springs with Cass as she embarks on a journey of rediscovery, conquering some of Colorado Springs' Olympic-sized adventures.

BY CASS D'ALESSANDRO
FROM LOVING LIFE WITH CASS





"I was alone in a sea of pine trees, winding trails and the possibility of endless adventure - and I loved every second of it."

It was just me and the Rocky Mountain wilderness of **Palmer Park**. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the fresh mountain air and kept hiking along the trail, taking in every inch of the beauty around me. I was absolutely content, alone in nature. As I walked and admired my surroundings, my thoughts were interrupted by the stunning landscape of mountains and rock formations. From this spot on the trail, I had a clear view of **Pikes Peak - America's Mountain**. At 14,115 feet above sea level, the Peak stands proud and majestic, overlooking the city of Colorado Springs.

A few weeks prior to this, I went through a painful breakup that left me heartbroken, not wanting to do anything but binge-watch Netflix. I was stuck in a whirlwind of sadness that was completely out of character for me.

I knew I needed to ditch my pity party and start loving life again. There's always one sure-fire way to get me out of a rut; adventure in the great outdoors. I immediately jumped on my computer and booked a plane ticket to my favorite U.S. city and top adventure travel destination, Colorado Springs.

With each step, I could feel the weight of sadness and the sting of misplaced hope lift off my chest, and for the first time in a while, I felt like myself again. I was alone in a sea of pine trees, winding trails and the possibility of endless adventure - and I loved every second of it.

I first discovered Colorado Springs when visiting a friend a few years back. I instantly fell in love with this vibrant, rugged and extraordinary city. As someone who has traveled all over the world, I can easily say that Colorado Springs is one of my all-time favorite destinations to explore and find adventure. Known as Olympic City USA for its numerous Olympic assets, gorgeous terrain and endless outdoor activities, I knew this would be the perfect location to bring back my fearless, thrill-seeking self.

I began my escape by hitting some trails and enjoying my favorite outdoor activity - hiking. My first stop was Colorado Springs' breathtaking natural landmark, **Garden of the Gods Park**. Here, I was able to start off on easier trails that helped me become acclimated to the altitude while taking



SOCIAL POLL

We asked our Facebook and Instagram followers:

What's your favorite hiking/biking trail to get your heart pumping?

"Eagle's Peak at the US Air Force Academy. Perfect hike to train for a 14er, plus a killer workout with stunning views at the top as a reward. It can be a bit tricky with navigation or if you're climbing it in wet weather."

Micah O.

"Section 16. It's just amazing to be so close to the city and find such beautiful views!"

@mokala87

"The Manitou Incline is the first and most difficult trail my husband and I did on our first trip."

@megan.d.nixon

"Mt. Muscoco Trail is challenging but not strenuous. Decent elevation gain. Spectacular view." **@d0rj33:**

"Palmer Park is secluded with great trails and good views. Great for watching astronomical events."

@daveyscones



Terror-dactyl at Cave of the Winds Mountain Park



Barr Trail to the summit of Pikes Peak

in some out-of-this world scenery. The park is filled with towering red rock formations, lush vegetation and a variety of wildlife. With incredible views of the mountain landscape, the park's trails are perfect for hikers and bikers alike. While visiting the Springs, I hiked on a number of trails with a varying levels of difficulty, all in preparation to conquer the legendary **Manitou Incline**.

The **Manitou Incline** is the hardest trail to hike in the Pikes Peak region. It may even be one of the hardest trails in the country. Athletes from all over the world have ventured here to reach the summit. It's a rite of passage for Olympic and Paralympic athletes, service members and local hiking enthusiasts alike. This was a challenge that I was determined to conquer to find my own inner Olympian. While it's only one mile in length, the trail is comprised of 2,744 steps that gain 2,000 feet in elevation. I'm not going to lie to you, the hike up the Incline was ridiculously hard. I was sweating buckets, my body ached and I felt like I was going to collapse. When I reached the halfway point, I stopped for one of my many breaks and questioned if the rest of the journey would be worth it. However, my self-doubt was interrupted by the breathtaking views of the city and the amazing accomplishment I had already made. I was filled with so much gratitude for the experience of hiking such a famous trail that so many inspirational athletes have tackled. The Olympic and Paralympic ideals of determination, excellence and courage suddenly washed over me, encouraging me to get out of my comfort zone and achieve something wonderful. I was filled with resolve and excitement to reach the top.

Even though the second half of the trail was even harder than the first, I pushed through it and reached the top. I felt victorious, like a gold-

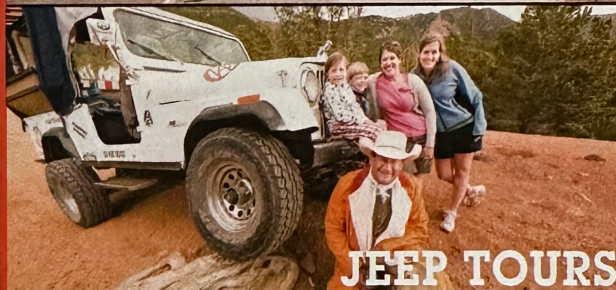
ONE OUTFITTER...

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TRAIL MIX

Take the trail less traveled on these six impossibly beautiful hikes in the Pikes Peak region.



1 Dixon Trail

This new trail takes you from Cheyenne Mountain State Park (entry fee) to the summit of Cheyenne Mountain. You'll pass the remains of a crashed aircraft and be rewarded with astonishing views.
Length: 14 miles - out & back
Elevation gain: 2,000 feet

2 Tunnel Drive

This historical section of the Arkansas Riverwalk Trail offers incredible views of the Arkansas River Gorge near Cañon City. The trail is great for both hikers and bikers and takes you through three historical train tunnels.
Length: 3.8 miles - out & back
Elevation gain: 521 feet

3 Paint Mines Interpretive Park

Have an other-worldly adventure into a maze of colorful clay hoodoos and spires. For the most stunning experience, explore at sunset and stick around for epic stargazing.
Length: 3.4 miles - loop
Elevation gain: 334 feet

4 Paul Intemann Nature Trail

Want a Manitou Incline experience without the crowds? Try this lesser-known train incline. The trail follows a series of switchbacks that lead to stunning views.
Length: 1.8 miles - out & back
Elevation gain: 344 feet

5 Pancake Rocks

The trailhead begins near Cripple Creek and takes you to aspen groves and high meadows. Exploring flapjack-esque rock formations as well as Horsethief Falls.
Length: 6.7 miles - out & back
Elevation gain: 1,837 feet

6 The Craggs

This hike on the west face of Pikes Peak features beautiful wildflowers, quaking aspen and huge granite rock formations known as cusps and domes. Horses and leashed dogs are allowed.
Length: 4.8 miles - out & back
Elevation gain: 820 feet



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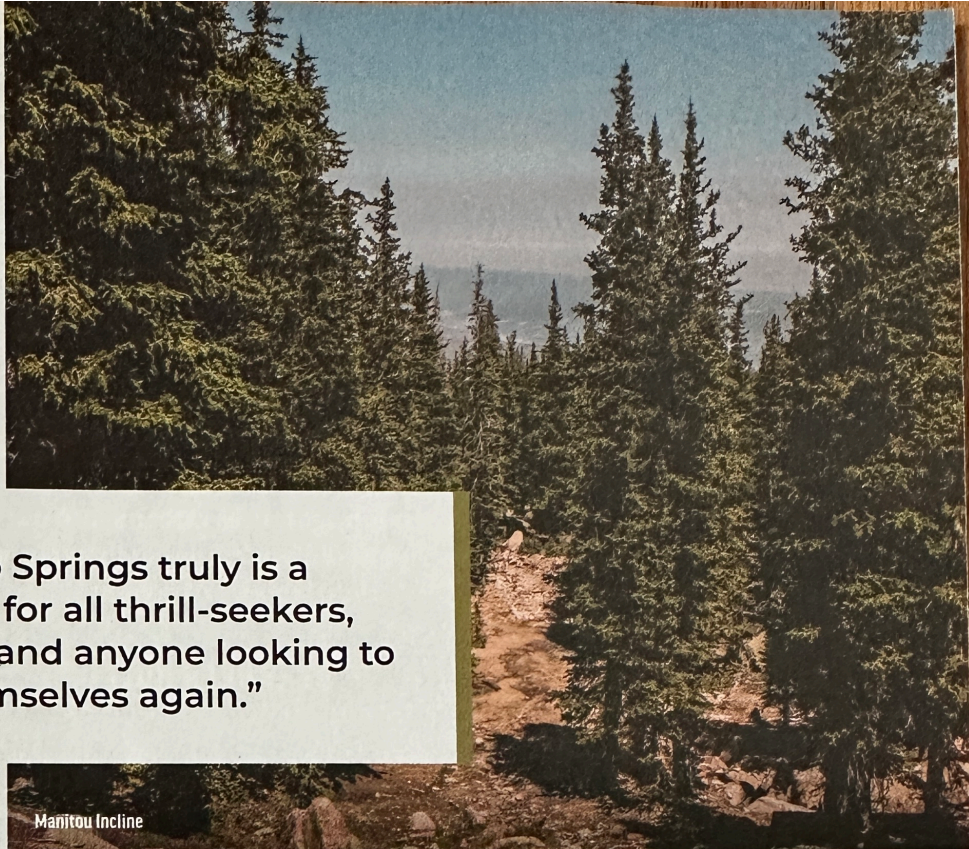
medal athlete and queen of the world. As I stood at the summit, admiring the stunning views and feeling the rush of adrenaline flow through my veins, I couldn't help but relate my hike to my current life situation. The physical pain of hiking the Incline felt like a poetic nod to the emotional pain from my breakup. As I stood proud and exhausted, I knew that when I pushed through this rough patch, the end result would be completely worth it - just as the Incline was.

The final leg of my Olympic-sized journey was a visit to **Cave of the Winds Mountain Park**

to ride the world-famous Terror-dactyl. This adrenaline-lovers dream ride launches riders into a 150-foot canyon at close to 100 miles-per-hour. I didn't realize how nervous I was until I was all strapped in and the ride tilted 90 degrees, dangling me straight down, forcing me to look at just how high up I was. The nerves were short lived and replaced by pure adrenaline as I was dropped into the canyon in a large, graceful arc. All I remember is laughing, screaming and having the time of my life, my stomach flipping as I swung back and forth in the vast canyon.

This didn't even begin to cover the gamut of outdoor adventure activities I experienced while on this trip. I spent as much time as I could exploring, enjoying and living in the moment in the beautiful wilds of Colorado Springs and the surrounding area. I experienced a serene morning on a mountain lake with **Dragonfly Paddle Yoga** and took an epic afternoon electric bike ride through **Garden of the Gods** with **Amp'd Adventures**. I filled my days with thrilling adventures fit for an Olympic athlete and my nights surrounded by good people, drinking craft beer and enjoying delicious food in **Downtown Colorado Springs, Old Colorado City** and **Manitou Springs**. I can't wait until my next trip, when I plan to tackle the rapids of the Arkansas River with an exhilarating rafting trip through the Royal Gorge.

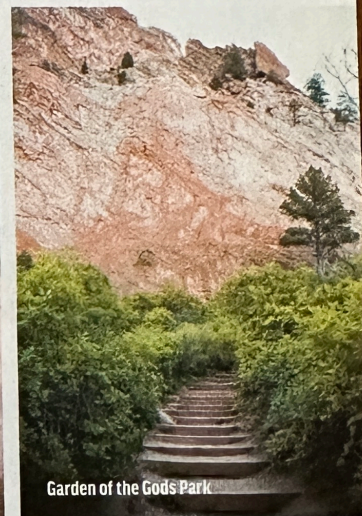
"Colorado Springs truly is a paradise for all thrill-seekers, athletes and anyone looking to find themselves again."



Manitou Incline



Trails on Pikes Peak



Garden of the Gods Park

Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak region is truly a paradise for all thrill-seekers, athletes and anyone looking to test their limits. It was the perfect location for me to rediscover myself, my potential and fall back in love with life. Olympic City USA will always be my favorite destination in the country, full of the greatness, adventure and excitement that reside at the base of America's Mountain. ♦

For more outdoors info, visit:
VisitCOS.com/outdoors &
Pikes-Peak.com/thrill-seeker



Cass D'Alessandro is the founder and writer/photographer/videographer behind the travel blog Loving Life With Cass. She is a proud Canadian, who loves to explore different cultures and have amazing outdoor adventures – especially in Colorado!