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Breathless in Denver

Long a crossroads for other destinations, the mile-high city is reinventing itself as a cultural, culinary and architectural destination in its own right.



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➤ Daniel Libeskind's wild addition to the Denver Art Gallery has sparked an architectural renaissance in Denver.

Not since the days when Krystle and Alexis were battling it out for control of the Carrington Dynasty has Denver been so hot. No longer just a rest stop on the way to the mountains, Denver is forging its own identity as an active and cultured city with an appetite for good design, art and food.

What to Do

To get a sense of where the city's storied past meets its future, wander around the LoDo (Lower

Denver) neighbourhood. It was here in 1859 that gold was first discovered in the area and the buildings still wear the scars of history and evoke a sense of authenticity. After falling into decline throughout the 20th century, the area was a full-blown skid row by the 1970s. A concerted revitalization effort in the '80s helped the neighbourhood blossom and today it is bustling with shops and restaurants, galleries and bars.

While in the neighbourhood,

urban cowboys will want to pick out some new duds at Rockmount Ranch Wear. You might find the 107-year-old proprietor, Jack A. Weil manning the till; he still comes in several days a week. Renowned as the inventor of the snap-button western shirt, Weil is a living legend whose innovative design is featured in the Smithsonian. So many celebrities have shopped here that it seems easier to list those who haven't. I believe that leaves Tony Danza, Bruce Vilanch and Lauren from



Denver Metro Commission & Victoria Burana

➤ The eclectic LoDo neighbourhood belies Denver's old image of a staid metropolis.

The Hills. The embroidered designs will appeal to both Johnny Cash and Liberace fans, with patterns ranging from flaming skulls to pink hearts with fringe and rhinestones.

From LoDo, hop on the free mall ride shuttle at 16th Street and take it through downtown to the Civic Center station—ground zero for architecture aficionados. Here Daniel Libeskind's design for the Denver Art Museum competes for the skyline with Gio Ponti's original 1971 building. Next door, the Michael Graves-designed

Denver Central Library—the largest public library between L.A. and Chicago—plays the architectural jester and brings a playful classicism to the square.

Where to Eat

Denver has long been home to a sizeable Mexican American

population and the city is awash in good, inexpensive Mexican food. One of the best is D'Corazon, which offers over 30 tequilas from single barrel to handcrafted while the totally delicious house margaritas are only \$3 apiece. Meltingly soft pork carnitas benefit from fresh-made tortillas and a deeply satisfying combination of salsa and guacamole, rice and beans.

Rioja, with its UFO-shaped lamps and open kitchen, is one of the city's most celebrated restaurants. The vibe is relaxed and comfortable while the service manages to be at once highly professional and casual. Don't miss the signature dish: artichoke mousse-stuffed pasta with artichoke broth, truffle essence, queso de mano cheese and fried artichokes (pictured, left). If that's enough to bring you back for brunch be sure to order the homemade beignets.

Osteria Marco is a bottles and bricks kind of place with a marble bar and a pizza oven. House-made cheeses include burrata and ricotta and the charcuterie plate might include bresaola and ciccioilli (Italian pulled





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➤ Denver's
Grand Dame: the
Brown Palace
Hotel.

pork). Best of all are simple pizzas with a side of bright, fresh red pepper flakes, freshly grated parmesan and house-made chili oil.

Go Now

Ritz-Carlton Denver,
303-312-3800, 1881 Curtis St.
ritzcarlton.com

Brown Palace,
303-297-3111, 321 17th St.
brownpalace.com

Rioja,
303-825-2588, 1431 Larimer St.
riojadenver.com

Osteria Marco,
303-534-5855, 1453 Larimer St.
osteriamarco.com

D'Corazon,
720-904-TACO,
1530 Blake St. #C.
dcorazonrestaurant.com

Rockmount Ranch Wear,
800-7-ROCKMO,
1626 Wazee St.
rockmount.com

Where to Stay

The city has just been blessed with a shiny new Ritz-Carlton, which will play contemporary yin to the classic yang of the Brown Palace, Denver's luxury choice since before Teddy Roosevelt stayed there. The Palace's soaring lobby is flooded with natural light filtered through a stained-glass skylight,

whereas the Ritz favours a subdued modernity with interplay between beiges and dark wood. *W*