

CHICAGO  
Travel



Who needs speeches when you can go for a spin at Denver's Elitch Gardens? | DENVER METRO CVB

In Denver, find unconventional fun amid the politics

BY ANDREW DRUCKENBROD

DENVER — When the Democratic National Convention rolls into town this week, it will be the latest event in a city where a fascinating mix of people have met over the centuries.

Once the last stop for miners, prospectors and traders on their way to mountain streams, and the modern trading post for skiers, snowboarders and hikers on the way to the Rockies, Denver always has had an interesting mix of temporary inhabitants. These days, plenty of attractions keep one from moving on at all. And people are staying. U.S. Census estimates show that Denver's population grew by almost 22,000 in 2007 to 588,349, making it the nation's 26th-largest city.

If you're among the estimated 42,000 politicians, delegates and supporters filing into the state capital's 94 hotels to attend the convention, you will visit a city with a tremendous variety of entertainment.

Denver had a theater before building a hospital or school, and now it has enough cultural institutions to warrant hosting the mammoth National Performing Arts Convention earlier this summer. The city also boasts many art and history museums, culinary delights and sporting endeavors — both recreational and spectator.

If you have just a few hours to sneak out amid the parade of speakers at the Pepsi Center and Invesco Field at Mile High, the convention's two main sites, and the parties, here are a few fun suggestions:

**16TH STREET MALL:** This is the city's commercial, entertainment and culinary spine, with everything from movie theaters to bars to boutiques. The strip is closed to public automobiles. Sleek hybrid buses offer free rides, a boon if you're laden with items or torpid from a big meal.

**DENVER ART MUSEUM:** The most striking building downtown, it combines a modernist, blocklike structure built in 1971 and a 2006 wing with sharp angles designed to mimic the Rockies' peaks.

This museum is manageable in a day. It has a strong permanent collection of contemporary art, with more than 4,500 works in-

SEE DENVER, PAGE 4C



DIVE RIGHT IN | PAGE 4C

At the Georgia Aquarium in downtown Atlanta, visitors can do more than just look at the sharks and rays; they can jump into their tank. A dozen snorkelers and divers get to 'Swim with Gentle Giants' each day.



BERRY FUN

Be among the 100,000 visitors flocking to Warrens, Wis., for this year's Warrens Cranberry Fest, Sept. 26-28. The Badger State's other popular cranberry festivals are in Eagle River, Oct. 4-5, Stone Lake, Oct. 4, and Manitowish Waters, Sept. 27.

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Let's get into it.®



Chicago writer gives up some cash — and precious free time — to help build straw bale house on Montana Indian reservation

Montana's "Custer Country" abounds with the straw bale Red Feather uses to create homes for Native Americans. | DONNIE SEXTON ~ TRAVEL MONTANA

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

BUSBY, Mont. — As the deafening hail pummeled my tent, I lay there spread eagle, pressing my weight onto the floor in a desperate effort to anchor myself to the ground.

I quickly did the math: Four pounds of 2-millimeter thick nylon sheltering me from 80-mph winds, relentless rain and hail ... carry the one ... I'm 154 pounds ... I was a goner.

So this is how it ends, I thought. In a barren field in southeast Montana, on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. In a storm that a local resident would later call "by far the worst" he had ever seen.

A fury of final thoughts raced through my mind as a roll of thunder shook the very ground to which I was trying to cling: I should have worked less. I should have watched more television. I should have taken more cabs.

Kaboom!

Pack your tool bag

Most people don't really travel to Busby; they pass through it, on the way to somewhere else.

History buffs might be headed 23 miles west to Little Bighorn Battlefield, site of Custer's defeat. Fly fishermen might be traveling 70 miles southwest to Fort Smith, at the base of Bighorn Canyon. Still others might find themselves a bit lost and enjoying the open road, the mammoth Montana sky coaxing them toward an unattainable horizon.

I was here on vacation. Actually, a working vacation. I had signed up to be a volunteer with the nonprofit Red Feather Development Group to build a straw bale home on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.

I would be working alongside 30 volunteers during the fourth and final week of building a home for a man I knew by name only: Winfield Russell. I would work 10-hour days (punctuated by ample breaks), survive Level I hurricane-like winds and have no access to running water or flush toilets. And it would end up being one of my most memorable and rewarding vacations ever.

As one of five Northern Cheyenne Indian villages, Busby seems lost and forgotten. There's no discernible economy. Travel 15 miles in any direction, and you won't find a store, restaurant or coffee shop. Not even a pop machine.

Since there was no motel within 30 miles, Red Feather told me to bring my own tent and a 5-gallon water bag that would serve as a drip-drip shower. I also was told to bring evening entertainment; Nerf football was my contribution. And I was asked to bring tools — something that doesn't usually make it onto most people's vacation packing lists.

And this certainly wasn't most people's idea of a vacation, dishing out several hundred dollars in fees and travel costs to spend your precious free time performing physical labor for someone you've never met in a harsh, physical environment.

Admittedly, it's not for everyone. Consider first what the experience is not: It is not rest-



As one of five Northern Cheyenne Indian villages, Busby seems lost and forgotten. There's no discernible economy. Travel 15 miles in any direction, and you won't find a store, restaurant or coffee shop. Not even a pop machine.

ful. It is not physically comfortable. You won't find a pool or even a TV. Alcohol isn't allowed. It's a dearth of vacation amenities, yet Red Feather makes no apologies. And its volunteers don't seem to mind, either. They're here for other reasons than to perfect their tan, although you can get pretty golden working under Montana's summer sun.

Housing crisis

A modest sign from the state highway led me down an unpaved trail littered with jagged rocks. After less than a mile, in the middle of a 40-acre parcel of land, stood a trailer where Russell lived. For a hundred yards or so in every direction was a Grateful Dead concert parking lot-like assortment of tents, trailers, tarps, and even one tepee, a ragtag display that included a fire pit, several portable toilets, a tool trailer (amply stocked by corporate sponsors), food trailer and dining canopy.

Red Feather, founded in 1993 by a former clothing company executive and his wife, is about improving the lives of Native Americans by teaching them affordable, sustainable ways to build much-needed homes.

They use straw bale, for example, because it's abundant in Montana, has excellent insulation properties and is very forgiving — an important trait when houses are being built by volunteers.

Out of a population of more than 2 million, "there are more than 300,000 people on reservations in need of homes," said Robert Young, Red Feather's founder. "They have no running water, no electricity ... it's an enormous problem."

Working closely with tribal leaders, the organization has built and rehabbed dozens of homes in Native American communities. Current projects are targeted at Hopi and North-

ern Cheyenne tribes.

"Red Feather doesn't offer solutions. We look to the experts, the people who live there," Young said. "They know exactly how they want to see homes on the ground ... and we chose [Hopi and Cheyenne] because they have the leadership, ability and will to change things."

Sweat equity

My volunteer group was a diverse one, made up of college students, families, singles, couples, retirees and at least a dozen Native Americans. In fact, all Red Feather volunteers work side-by-side with tribal residents, including the soon-to-be homeowner.

"If we overload our program with non-natives, there's no cultural exchange," Young said. "At the end of the day, that's a huge benefit ... as people are willing to cross cultural boundaries, we have an exchange going on that's long overdue."

Some of the best parts of my trip resulted from these kinds of cultural exchanges. Just a day into the project, a local Cheyenne resident invited all volunteers to take part in a traditional sweat lodge experience.

Fifteen of us crouched around a shallow fire pit covered by a patchwork of tarps and blankets. Preheated rocks were deposited into the pit. As a wool blanket filtered out the last traces of daylight, an elderly Cheyenne presided over a ceremony that included prayer and song. As he intermittently poured water onto the hot rocks, the temperature climbed so high, the majority of us — including yours truly — didn't make it through the six rigorous sessions.

While the sweat was a planned introduction to Cheyenne culture, there were spontaneous moments, too.

The evening before the anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn, I was enjoying a snack under our dining canopy when 40 Sioux Indians came charging over the nearby mountains on horseback. They had traveled from South Dakota to take part in festivities at Little Bighorn and spent the night on a neighboring tract of land.

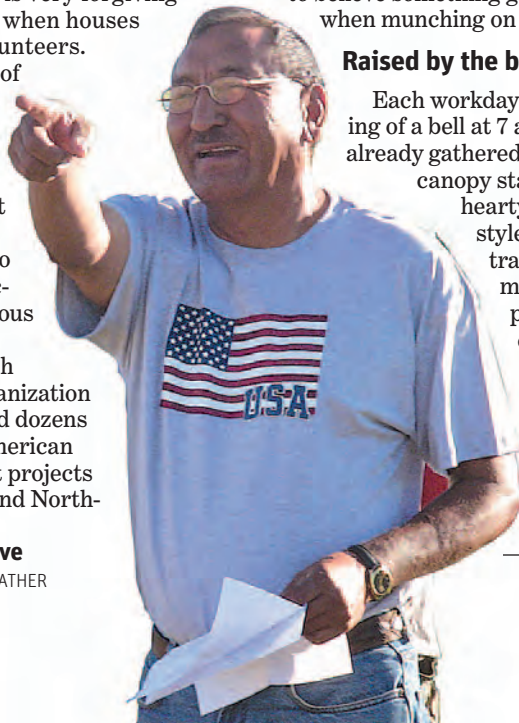
Watching their traditional, uninhibited celebrations that evening was surreal. (I've come to believe something great usually happens when munching on Twizzlers.)

Raised by the bell

Each workday started with the ringing of a bell at 7 a.m. Anyone who wasn't already gathered under the large dining canopy staggered over for a hearty alfresco, cafeteria-style breakfast. A semi-trailer served as a makeshift kitchen complete enough to offer culinary options limited only by the creativity of those on kitchen duty.

Three generous meals a day plus twice-daily snacks kept me plenty fortified. I rarely needed to

It took volunteers four weeks to build a straw bale home (above) for Native American Winfield Russell (right) of Busby, Mont. | PHOTOS COURTESY RED FEATHER



SEE HOME, PAGE 2C



# FROM THE COVER

## HOME | 300,000 on Indian reservations need homes

dip into my cooler of bulk warehouse snacks thanks to Red Feather's association with Costco, a corporate sponsor.

Volunteers were expected to work from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., but uncooperative weather during the build's first few weeks meant we sometimes kept going after the sun went down.

In between meals, snacks and home-building, people typically gathered under the dining canopy to socialize, play board games and huddle close to those with guitar- or banjo-playing skills.

### Silent partner

As someone who needs to study Lego assembly instructions, it's safe to say my carpentry skills are near the bottom of the bell curve. It didn't matter because Red Feather's staff was impossibly patient, supportive and encouraging.

Each morning, a supervisor went over the goals for the day. Volunteers joined tasks commensurate with their skill level. While this meant I never stepped foot on a roof, stripped electrical wire or soldered pipes (whatever that means), I was comfortable digging trenches, staining boards and scrubbing floors.

For much of the week, I worked alongside a local man from Busby who seemed shy and withdrawn. We carried loads of wood together and painted walls together, but he never acknowledged me personally, not even when I greeted him each morning.

His distance was in stark contrast to the warm handshake I got from Winfield Russell, who stood in his new home and delivered a tearful, heartfelt speech to all the volunteers.

As I said my emotional goodbyes to the volunteers and Red Feather staff, I gave a silent nod to my quiet, occasional work partner.

No one was more surprised



Bales of straw provide good insulation for homes and lay people find them easy to work with.

than I was when he walked up, embraced me tightly and muttered the first words I'd heard him speak all week.

"Thank you, Jerry," he said.

### Give me shelter

As I lay in my tent on that stormy June night, the fierce winds shaking my shelter like a bear trying to overpower its prey, my thoughts flashed quickly to Chicago. I miss my couch. I miss my remote controls. I miss "The King of Queens." Basically, though, I miss my apartment — especially its walls and ceiling.

For a few minutes, I understood the fear that goes along



Jerry Soverinsky (right) didn't mind being relegated to digging trenches and scrubbing floors. | PHOTOS COURTESY JERRY SOVERINSKY AND RED FEATHER

with lacking one of life's most basic necessities.

Living without running water and electricity for a week were modest inconveniences that paled in comparison to the vulnerability I felt without a secure roof over my head. The storm was a reminder of the importance of Red Feather and its mission.

I certainly hadn't changed the world in helping to build one home. But like every Red Feather house, you start with a solid foundation. Everything else follows.

*Jerry Soverinsky is a Chicago-based free-lance writer.*

## IF YOU GO

**GETTING THERE:** Frontier Airlines, [www.frontierairlines.com](http://www.frontierairlines.com), offers three daily flights from Chicago (via Denver) to Billings, Mont. You can either rent a car or ask Red Feather to help coordinate car-pool logistics with other volunteers for the 90-mile drive to Busby, Mont.

**WHEN TO GO:** Red Feather runs home building projects twice a year in June (Northern Cheyenne, Mont.) and September (Hopi, Ariz.).

**COST:** Volunteers each pay \$250 a week — the minimum time commitment; \$50 discount for students and seniors. Call (406) 585-7188 or visit [www.redfeather.org](http://www.redfeather.org).



You're never too young to pitch in on a Red Feather project.

**COMING WEDNESDAY:** Can't find a hotel room, or at least an affordable one? Check out Airbed & Breakfast, a new Web site that can turn anyone with computer access and a couch into an instant innkeeper.

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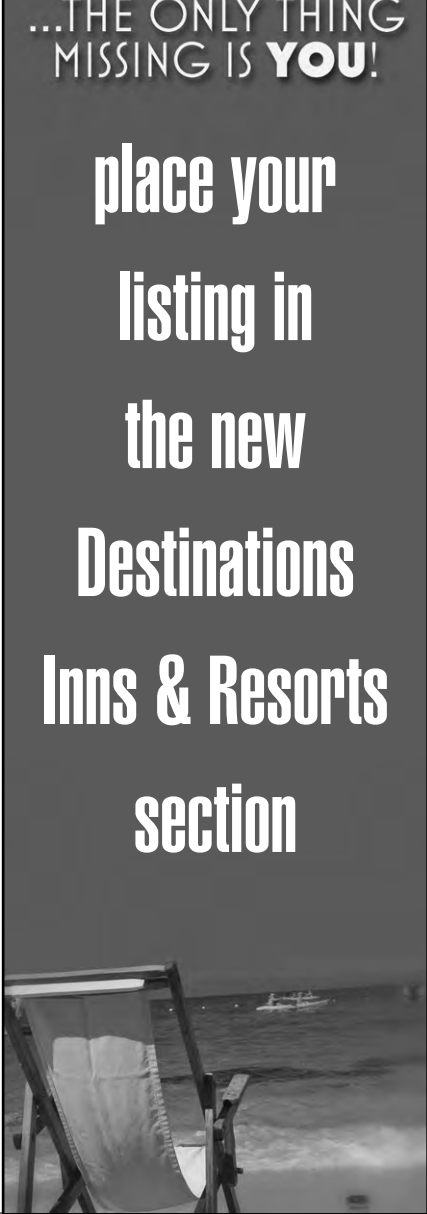
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