

COLORADO

Mountain high



Recreational consumption of marijuana was legalised in Colorado a year ago. **Donna Dailey** pays a visit to Denver to sample the goods

IT MAY HAVE FANTASTIC SKIING, HIKING AND INCREDIBLE SCENERY but when I go to Colorado these days there's only one thing my friends want to know: am I going to buy some pot?

After Colorado voters approved a landmark law that legalised the use of recreational marijuana, the first licensed pot shops opened their doors on January 1, 2014. Somehow that's befitting of the highest state (geographically) in the nation and a place with John Denver's *Rocky Mountain High* as its official state song.

At last count, Colorado had some 322 recreational dispensaries, most of them in the Denver metro area. So is Denver the new Amsterdam?

As I stroll along the 16th Street Mall, downtown's main pedestrian thoroughfare, there are no cannabis cafés in sight. No weedy aromas wafting on the breeze, no glassy-eyed stoners sparking up a spliff. Instead, there are signs posted at bus stops and beer gardens forbidding the use of marijuana in public.

"It's a social experiment," Rich Grant, former communications director of Visit Denver, tells me. "It's the exact opposite of Amsterdam. There they have 200 coffee shops where you can buy marijuana and

consume it on the premises. Here we have over 260 dispensaries where you can buy it, but nowhere where you can legally consume it. Not in a car, a park, a street, a bar, an outdoor cafe... not even the balcony of your hotel."

CANNABIS CULTURE

By law, you can only use marijuana on private property, with the owner's permission. This hasn't deterred curious travellers. Airbnb.com advertises '420-friendly' rooms, a euphemism for pot-smoking. Nativ, Denver's first overtly weed-friendly hotel, recently opened in downtown's trendy LoDo district, with dedicated smoking rooms and a cannabis-infused coffee bar. Even the *Denver Post* has a dedicated pot columnist and a website devoted to covering the city's cannabis culture.

I pick up a copy of *Westword*, Denver's free alternative weekly newspaper. It has 24 solid pages of ads for pot dispensaries and products. There are happy hours and daily specials and introductory offers of a free joint with your first purchase. Edibles are huge, with local companies like Dixie Elixirs concocting THC-infused goodies from sodas to chocolates.

Marijuana is big business and today's ganjapreneurs have taken toking to a whole new level. Growers are developing powerful new varieties, all tested and tracked from seed to sale. Instead of a couple of joints, a mere couple of hits can keep you ripped for hours.

Prices vary widely according to the quality and the store, but it starts at under US\$6 (£4) for half a gram and averages US\$40 (£27) for an eighth of an ounce. It's all a far cry from the days of furtively scoring a bag of dubious provenance from a scruffy stranger.

For Colorado, the social experiment is paying off nicely. In 2014, recreational pot sales alone totalled \$313.2m (£208.8m) and the state reaped \$76m (£50.6m) in taxes and industry fees from retail and medical marijuana combined.

Long famous for its microbreweries, Colorado now has budtenders as well as bartenders. They help steer you to the right product through a mind-boggling array of cannabis choices. Do you want something to relax you, to put you to sleep, to give you energy or a buzz? Your friendly neighbourhood expert will recommend.

I head to Medicine Man, a leading Denver dispensary and grow facility

located in an industrial district near the airport. There's a steady stream of customers coming and going. My budtender is young, personable and well-informed. After describing sativa and indica, the main cannabis strains, he proposes two hybrids: Grand Doggy Purple and Purple Dream, with its 'grapey-esque nose'. I sniff a fat bud the size of my thumb and ask how he knows what to suggest. "We know it 'cuz we grow it," he replies chirpily.

Indeed they do. Behind the scenes I'm given a tour of Medicine Man's 40,000-square-foot growing facility, which has doubled in size in just two years. I'm enveloped by a rich, earthy, herbal smell as I stare in wonder down the 'Green Mile' into rooms full of luxuriant marijuana plants. The scale of the operation is impressive, producing 50 to 70 different strains and yielding 6,000 to 7,000 pounds of pot a year.

HIGH TIMES

The high times come a few days later while staying with friends in Pueblo, Colorado. We visit Marisol Therapeutics, a dispensary where comedian Tommy Chong, of 1970s Cheech and Chong fame, is a partner. We stick our noses into big candy jars full of

buds, finally settling on half a gram each of New York Diesel and a premium sativa called Chong Star.

Yes, reader, I inhaled. And spent the weekend blissfully – legally – chilling out around the pool.

My friends will be disappointed. Unfortunately it's still a federal crime to take or send marijuana outside the state. For now, at least, they'll have to do without a souvenir. 🚫



WAY TO GO

To visit a dispensary, bring a photo ID (passport or driving licence). You must be 21 years or older to buy or use marijuana. **Out-of-state visitors** can buy up to one-quarter ounce (7 grams) in a single transaction. You can legally possess up to one ounce at a time. **Bring cash**. Because of federal banking regulations, retail pot shops generally can't take credit cards. **Colorado Cannabis Tours** includes a visit to Medicine Man's cultivation facility: coloradocannabistours.com **For a list of other cannabis tour operators:** coloradopotguide.com/marijuana-activities-in-colorado/