The historic ‘Grand Dame of the Rockies’ is a renowned destination unto itself.

BY TED ALAN STEDMAN

Several miles southwest of Colorado Springs lies an extraordinary sight. Sitting at an elevation of 6,230 feet—nearly 1,000 feet higher than Denver 71 miles to the north—the Broadmoor unfolds as a sprawling resort of elegant pink stucco Italianate Renaissance buildings and magnificently landscaped greens radiating out from a 10-acre lake. Long known as the “Grand Dame of the Rockies,” it’s no wonder that awe-struck visitors often do double-takes at the palatial 3,500-acre main complex at the foot of 9,570-foot Cheyenne Mountain.

The Broadmoor is a collection of 30 buildings comprising some 784 guest rooms, suites and cottages. Its main building and lobby features European architectural style with a grand marble spiraling staircase and fountain, hand-painted ceilings and Italian tile, while the hotel’s art collection of Ming Dynasty ceramics and works by Toulouse-Lautrec are showcased throughout. Together with the resort’s stately palazzo-style towers reflecting upon a placid lake graced by preening swans, it’s as if a sizable dollop of Old World Mediterranean opulence were magically transposed to Colorado’s rugged Rocky Mountains.
That’s exactly what flamboyant and visionary founder Spencer Penrose had in mind when he created The Broadmoor in 1918.

Penrose, born into a prominent Philadelphia family, moved west after graduating last in his class at Harvard in 1886. By 1892, he’d become a player in Colorado gold mines, real estate and a Utah copper milling enterprise. Over the next two decades, Penrose amassed a fortune and gradually sold his holdings. In Colorado Springs, the rich bachelor met his future wife, Julie—herself a member of a wealthy Detroit family—and the couple ran off to Europe as privileged Americans, spending a month on the French Riviera and eventually marrying in London in 1906. Together, they traveled the world and gained an appreciation for good food, good wine, the best accommodations and the other finer things in life that money could buy.

With his newfound cosmopolitan sensibilities and sizable fortune, Penrose envisioned building not simply a hotel but a destination on par with the glamorous places he’d visited abroad. That scheme seemed improbable in the still-raucous Wild West, but his bet paid off after the savvy Penrose sold $1 million in stock, purchased the 40-acre Broadmoor site with its centerpiece Cheyenne Lake, nabbed the adjoining 400 acres and set about building his “European alternative” dream hotel.

Penrose hired Warren & Wetmore, the architectural firm that had then recently completed New York’s Grand Central Station, for the hotel’s design. For the grounds, Penrose brought in the Frederick Law Olmstead firm, famous for creating New York’s Central Park. Craftsmen and artisans from Europe and beyond were hired to paint frescos on vaulted ceilings, cut marble and tile, carve fountains, and add European-style décor that the Penroses meticulously oversaw. Penrose also secured renowned golf course architect Donald Ross to design the resort’s first 18-hole championship course.

Wanting to impress East Coast socialites, Penrose held a VIP-only party several weeks before the official opening in 1918. Ever the showman, Penrose showcased The Broadmoor to 200 wealthy friends to help spread the word about his new 350-room, $3 million resort in the middle of nowhere. For the official opening, 1,000 guests arrived for dinner, dancing and spirited shenanigans. On that guest list was John D. Rockefeller Jr., the first of many notable Broadmoor guests who have included presidents and industrialists, Hollywood elite and international royalty, Olympic Gold Medalists and golfing legends.

The Broadmoor today is among the most recognizable hotels in the world and still retains the essence of Penrose’s vision: a place where European elegance meets Western hospitality and top-notch service. It’s racked up scores of accolades in its 101-year history, including the world’s longest-running consecutive winner of both the AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five Star Awards.

Since Denver billionaire Philip Anschutz purchased The Broadmoor in 2011, pumping roughly $600 million into renovations and expansions, the property has blossomed further. The main hotel’s rooms and suites have undergone recent renovations to match the European-style décor of the property’s newer quarters. There are a staggering 20 restaurants, cafes and lounges, with culinary possibilities ranging from the exquisite French menu of the Penrose Room to the more informal Golden Bee, an old-fashioned bar with a superlative wine list. A perennial guest favorite, the 350-seat Little Theater shows nightly full-length films.

As a vacation destination in itself, The Broadmoor tempts guests to stay put during their entire stay. Tee off on any of three championship golf courses, which have hosted numerous national tournaments, or play on the outdoor and indoor heated courts at the Tennis Club, which was rated among the Top 20 tennis resorts in the country by Tennis Magazine. Colorado’s only Forbes Five Star-rated spa, The Spa at The Broadmoor features 43,000 square feet of facilities. Shoppers can rack up considerable damage at the resort’s 25 retail shops, which include upscale clothing boutiques and a jewelry store. Through hotel outfitters, guests can enjoy outdoor activities such as fly fishing, hiking, mountain biking, zip lining, falconry or rock climbing. For those who wish to retreat farther into the Colorado Rockies, the hotel’s three outlying Wilderness Experience properties offer luxurious accommodations.

If Penrose were alive today, he would no doubt approve that his “permanent and perfect” hotel still reigns as the Grand Dame of the Rockies.