

Head Out

Happy Trails

COLORADO'S MOUNTAIN DUDE RANCHES ARE DANDY PLACES TO MAKE FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS — AND RECONNECT WITH YOUR OWN FREE SPIRIT.

By LAUREL KALLENBACH

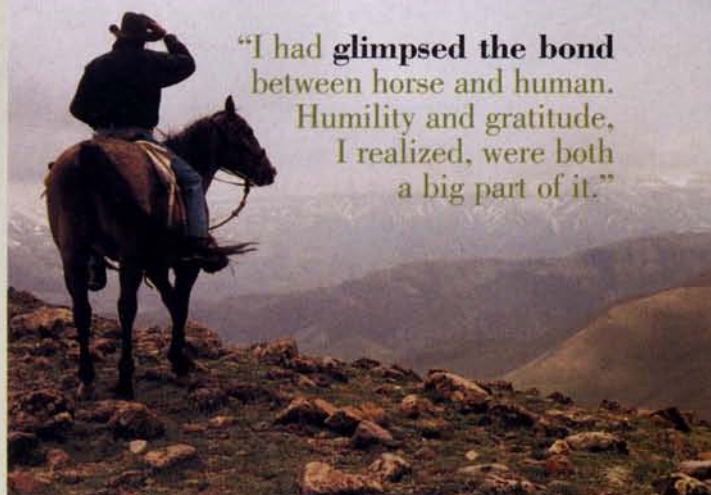
Does this saddle have a seat belt? This is the first question to cross my mind once I've hoisted myself astride a strawberry roan named Mae at Aspen Canyon Ranch in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Suddenly I'm perched 6 feet off the ground with 1,200 pounds of horsepower between my legs, and all I've got to hang onto is a saddlehorn and a flimsy pair of reins.

I can count on one white-knuckled hand the number of times I've ridden a horse, but here I am at a modern-day dude ranch learning how to get in touch with my inner cowgirl.

Right now, instead of reveling on my equine throne, this cowgirl is wishing her feet were back on terra firma. Unlike most adolescent girls, I missed "the horse phase." I never read *Black Beauty*. I never wished I was the young Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*. So, as a 40-year-old woman — one familiar with saddlebags only in the flabby-hip sense — a five-day dude-ranch excursion was, for me, not so much a fantasy come true as it was an experiment — and an adrenaline-pumping epic adventure.

I climbed into the saddle with more than a little ambivalence. As we got started, Mae didn't seem to mind my inexperience, although I imagine she got a good whinny when she broke into a trot and I jostled wildly, my teeth clattering. When we slowed, though, I relaxed and enjoyed the mountain vistas, fragrant sagebrush, aspen groves and rushing streams. The sky was brilliant blue, and a red-tailed hawk soared overhead when — whoa! — our trail suddenly plummeted down some steep, rocky terrain. I clung to Mae, imploring her to be careful and not to lose me over the precipice.

Fortunately, Mae was as sure-footed as I was petrified, and two hours later our horse train arrived back at the corral with all riders intact. I felt a rush of exaltation, a mixture of relief and accomplishment for having survived. Mae and I paraded in as a triumphant duo — until I dismounted and my knees buckled. While waiting for the circulation to return to my legs, I stroked her neck to express my gratitude for her



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calm demeanor and patience with my ineptitude. By day's end, I had glimpsed the bond between horse and human. Humility and gratitude, I realized, were both a big part of it.

SETTLING INTO THE SADDLE

Dude ranches have become popular destinations, even for people like me with little or no horse experience. Offering access to wide-open wilderness, they're a great outdoor vacation for couples or families. (For the record, "dude" refers to anyone from out of town. The word originates from the 1800s, when dude ranches were developed.)

If you don't want to ride every day (or at all), there's hiking, fishing, rafting or just lazing about. But if you seek equestrian experience, the wranglers will assess your abilities, match them to a horse, and give you pointers and encouragement.

"At first, I was skeptical about going to a dude ranch," admits Jennifer Hecox of Chicago, now a 14-year veteran of Latigo Ranch near Kremmling, Colo. "I couldn't envision myself on a horse day after day, but my husband and I were sick of commercial, hotel-oriented attractions like

Disneyland. We wanted an active vacation geared for both kids and adults, so we chose Latigo," she says. "Instead of being miserable, I turned into a horse lover. At the end of our first trip, the kids cried and made us promise to return. Now it's a family tradition."

What cinched the experience for Hecox was the riding instruction she and her family received. "Over the years, I've become a bolder rider who seeks more spirited challenges," she says. Now she participates in the fall cattle roundup where expert riders help local ranchers drive their cows down from the mountains for the winter. Frequently she's the only woman on the grueling trek.

WAY OUT WEST

Head wrangler Tim Fleuter, of King Mountain Ranch, is the quintessential cowboy, with rugged good looks, a tendency to crack wry jokes from behind his Stetson, and eyes that shine for his pride and joy, Thunder, a wild mustang he broke and trained. When it comes to horses, he's all business: Nobody leaves the corral until he's confident you can safely handle a horse. He gives us dudes insight into horse psychology and the rules of riding: Always let a horse know where you are so it won't spook; never tug on the saddle while mounting since



chafing can cause sores. A horse is strongest through the chest and front legs, Fleuter explains, so a rider should lean forward to center the weight over the front shoulders when climbing a steep hill. And he shares some cowboy wisdom: "The best training — for people or horses — is patience, TLC, and a lot of praise."

On dude ranches, these qualities are abundant. Staff members are well aware that city slickers come to have fun in the outdoors, to get away from everyday pressures, to be physically active, and to get acquainted with horses.

"The minute we drive onto the Bar Lazy J ranch, all the tension from my school year just drains away," says public schoolteacher Mary Kay Francis of Eau Claire, Wis., a repeat guest. "There's no TV or phone in our cabin," she notes, "but we don't miss contact with the outside world one bit."

Francis's 14-year-old daughter Kirsten — one of those horse-worshipping girls I never was — chimes in that she saves money all year long for her annual equine pilgrimage. "We get the same cabin by the river every summer," she enthuses. "Every night you fall asleep to the sound of water and the coyotes howling. You just don't want to leave this place. Ever."

Even young children echo that sentiment, since most dude ranches provide fun, educational activities like pony rides and games for the younger set. "Parents can enjoy a nice ride with other adults, knowing their kids are getting

mentally and physically stimulated," says Hecox. Adults have their pick of activities, including all-day trail rides with or without overnight camping. Though I wasn't up to that level of horsemanship, I overheard a woman who'd just returned from a six-hour ride. She said she'd grinned from ear to ear so often that when she dismounted for lunch, her teeth were black with trail dust.

BEYOND THE TRAIL

Not every equestrian activity is a trail ride. You can attend a horsemanship clinic or test your cattle-driving skills at the weekly Team Penning competition, where teams of three riders sort stubborn steers from a herd and move them into a small pen. On days when your rear end needs a break from the saddle — or just for some variety — dude ranches offer an assortment of activities.

At the ranches I visited in Grand County, Colo., white-water rafting is an option, as is fly-fishing, golfing, and four-wheel-drive excursions into the backcountry. Some ranches have spa services, and nearly all organize guided hikes along moun-

tain trails where you can admire the lodgepole pine forests and explore wildflower meadows on two feet instead of four. With all these options, Bonnie Graff, a frequent Bar Lazy J guest notes: "If somebody doesn't have a good time here, it's their own darn fault."

Since many dude ranch operations require a six-night minimum stay, do take some time beforehand to scope out a dude ranch that truly suits your needs and syncs with your personality. The Dude Ranchers' Association (www.duderanch.org) has guidelines for determining your dream ranch, including targeting a region you'll enjoy, finding appropriate kids' activities, deciding which activities you want, and identifying what type of accommodations you prefer. Everything from simple cabin bunks to deluxe rooms are available, depending on the adventure you desire.

One big surprise about dude ranches is that most employ chefs who cook up gourmet grub. In fact, I didn't encounter a single baked bean on my trip, instead dining on halibut, Pad Thai noodles, soy-seared venison, lemon pesto linguine, steamed asparagus and tiramisu. And, while there are plenty of steaks and barbecued ribs to go around, nobody bats an eye if you request vegetarian or even vegan meals.

After dinner, there's more Western flavor to come. Of course, you're free to just sit around the campfire and swap stories, but each night, most dude ranches also dish up some kind of entertainment, like live music (think cowboy with a guitar) or dancing. You've already met those tough-as-nails →

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ranch hands in the corral, but on Talent Night you glimpse their sentimental side. At King Mountain Ranch, earnest cowboys and cowgirls poured out their hearts in soulful songs and poems they wrote themselves. To cap off an evening during my stay, wrangler Tim Fleuter brought down the house with side-splitting opera duets sung with his dog, T-Bone.

TRUE GRIT

Think the only one getting exercise is the horse? Think again. Riding develops balance, coordination, quick reflexes and muscle strength as the rider adjusts to the rhythms of the horse's gait. In addition, it stretches tight muscles and increases range of motion in joints — not to mention how it improves your self-confidence and deepens your respect for these powerful animals.

Drowsy Water Ranch host Ken Fosha emphasizes overall fitness and a pre-ride warm-up. "You don't want to be a sack-of-potatoes rider," he warns, encouraging a relaxed, shoulders-back posture. He recommends you do inner-thigh and hamstring stretches on the ground to loosen up your legs. Once you're in the saddle, you can stretch before hitting the trail:

- Lean forward and touch the horse's neck with one hand, then stretch back and touch the rump with the same hand. Repeat on the other side. Twisting warms up waist and abdominal muscles, used when your horse goes up or down hills.
- Roll your shoulders from front to back to prepare your spine for an erect, no-slouch posture.
- With the toes of your boots in the stirrups, gently press your heels down, stretching your calves and Achilles tendons. This will help you maintain the correct heel-down position as you ride.

Walking, trotting and loping are great physical activity, says Hecox, who starts doing hip and arm stretches a month before visiting the ranch. "The looser and more relaxed you are, the more gracefully and confidently you ride," she adds. If you haven't done much riding, exercises such as squats, abdominal curls, adductor (inner thigh) training and leg extensions done beforehand can help separate the obvious dudes from the could-be cowpersons.

TRAIL'S END

My last day of ranch touring — now at the C Lazy U ranch — I rode Chester, a sweet-tempered sorrel who loved having his ears rubbed and his neck petted. He and I got along magnificently, and I puffed with pride when cowgirl Caroline told me he kept licking his lips, which in horse language means he's content. Chester and I practiced turning and trotting, and a few times as I stood on the balls of my feet in the stirrups, I caught on to his rhythm. For a moment or two my butt stopped banging in the saddle and we glided along. Just like the young Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*. Just like a real cowgirl. ●

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At Home on the Range

GRAND COUNTY, Colo., dubbed the "Dude Ranch Capital of the U.S.," spreads out panoramically just west of Rocky Mountain National Park. At altitudes of 8,000 feet and higher, this outdoor heaven features fabulous mountain vistas and rolling meadows — plus plenty of opportunities to get in touch with your inner cowboy or cowgirl.

Aspen Canyon Ranch

Soak in a hot tub alongside the picturesque Williams Fork river. Nicely furnished log cabins with stone fireplaces; gourmet meals including fabulous homemade desserts. Parshall, Colo. 800-321-1357; www.aspencanyon.com.

Bar Lazy J

The lodge of this historic ranch began as a 1904 log cabin, and became a dude ranch in 1912. Guest cabins are perched along the Colorado River, along with benches and porch swings for relaxing. Pool and hot tub. Activities geared for families. Parshall, Colo., 800-396-6279; www.barlazyzj.com.

C Lazy U

Elegant, AAA Five-Diamond guest ranch with a formal dining room in addition to casual outdoor dining. Caters to an urban crowd with hotel-style rooms (sans TV and phones) and an Old West flavor. Pool, whirlpool, sauna, exercise room. Granby, Colo., 970-887-3344; www.clazyu.com.

Drowsy Water Ranch

Small, rustic, authentic-style ranch. Cabins are no-frills but comfortable with no phones or TVs. Emphasis on families and getting to know each other. Dining hall with buffet-style meals and group tables ideal for mingling. Hot tub and swimming pool. Special children's program. Near Granby, Colo., 800-845-2292; www.drowsywater.com.

King Mountain Ranch

Mountain lodge accommodations with excellent food for individual guests or conferences. Pool, tennis courts, sport shooting range, spa, hot tubs, bowling, billiards. Near Granby, Colo., 800-476-5464; www.kingmountainranch.com.

Latigo Ranch

Beautiful vistas are the trademark at this small, secluded location in the woods. Cozy cabins, fine gourmet food. Pool, volleyball, fishing pond and stream, rec center. Operates as a nordic center in winter. Kremmling, Colo., 800-227-9655; www.latigotrails.com.

Farther Afield ...

To locate and research more dude ranches and working cattle ranches throughout the United States, visit www.duderanch.org.

