

## Julia Saer remembers

how intimidated she was the first time she got on a horse. It was June 2005, and the backcountry Greenwich girl, now eight years old, was vacationing with her family at a dude ranch in northwestern Colorado, the Vista Verde Guest & Ski Ranch near Steamboat Springs. "I was a little scared, then I liked the horse, and it made me happy," she recalls, eyes shining as she says the last word. Coincidentally, that was the horse's name, Happy, a docile brown mare the wranglers at Vista Verde keep on hand for young first-time riders like Julia. There are horses for all riding-skill levels at the ranch.

Julia's skills had improved enough that by the end of the week, she had mastered both trotting and reining Happy's head up when the mare leaned down to crop at grass, a frequent habit. Meanwhile, in addition to the horseback riding all the Saers did, Julia's mother Shelby

mountain-biked, rock climbed and otherwise took in the Elk River Valley, a scenic panorama of babbling streams and unspoiled forest nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountain highlands. Shelby's mother Jo Gwin Shelby hiked and rode, too, while Shelby's husband John fly-fished and even played some golf. Their oldest son Kenneth, thirteen, went on an overnight camping trip with others in his age group, and eleven-year-old Tobin caught a calf by the tail at a Steamboat Springs rodeo.

Tobin didn't watch any television or play video games. Neither did his brother or sister. Did they miss them? Hardly. "At Vista Verde, you don't want to be sitting down at the house," Tobin explains. "There's so much to do, you wanna be outside having fun, playing with your friends, riding, petting the goats."

You can rough it at Vista Verde the way America's pioneers did some 150 years

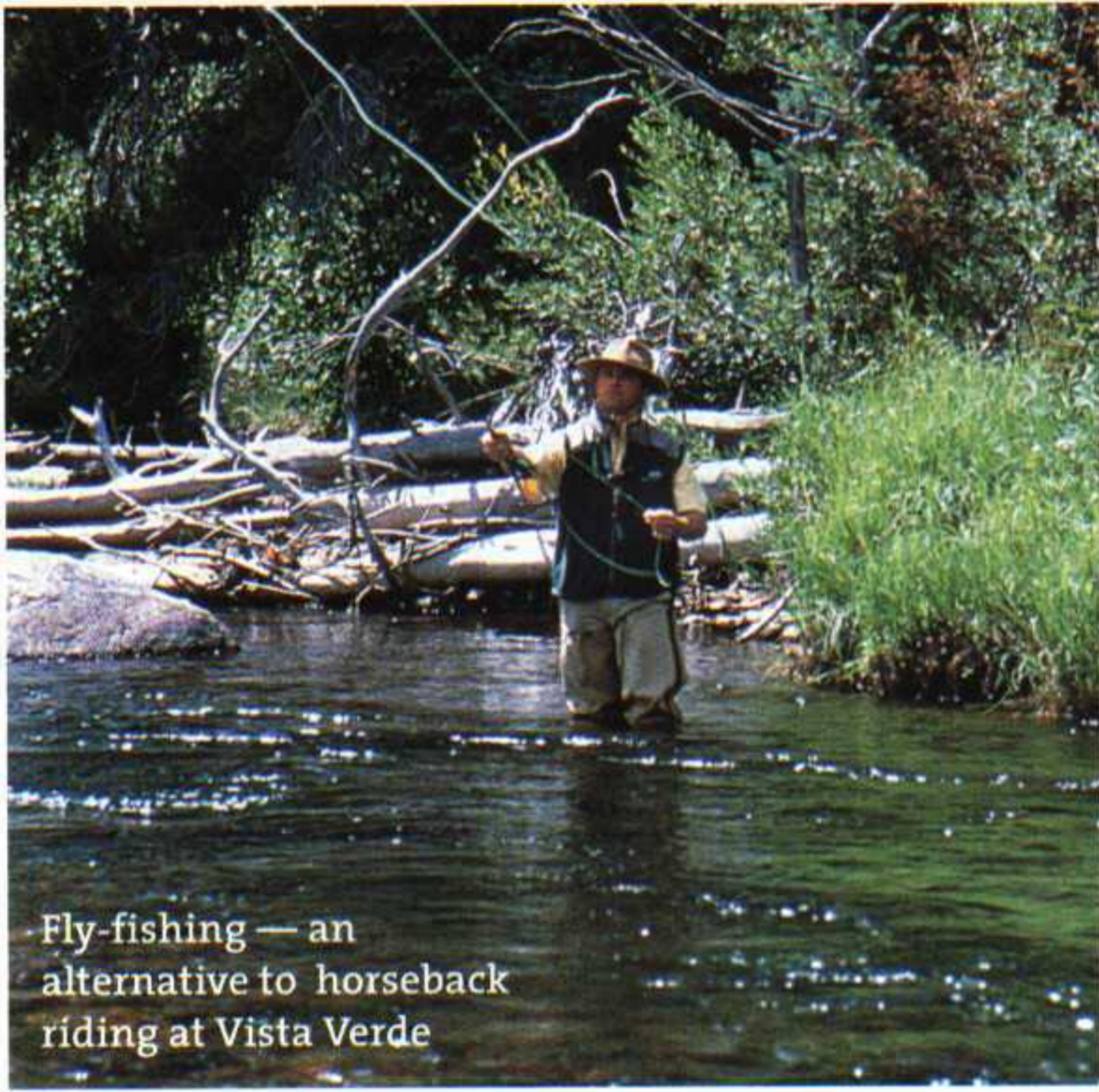
ago — assuming, that is, that frontiersmen Jim Bridger and Kit Carson had a gourmet chef and cabins with Jacuzzis. Like other dude ranches, Vista Verde has been adjusting to the demands of the upscale modern tourist, with strenuous recreation by day and luxurious pampering at night.

"Greenwich folks are our ideal guests," says assistant manager Stephanie Wilson. "We don't get snoots here. We get nice, nice people. Yes, they are fairly affluent, but they're people you want to sit down with or have a beer with."

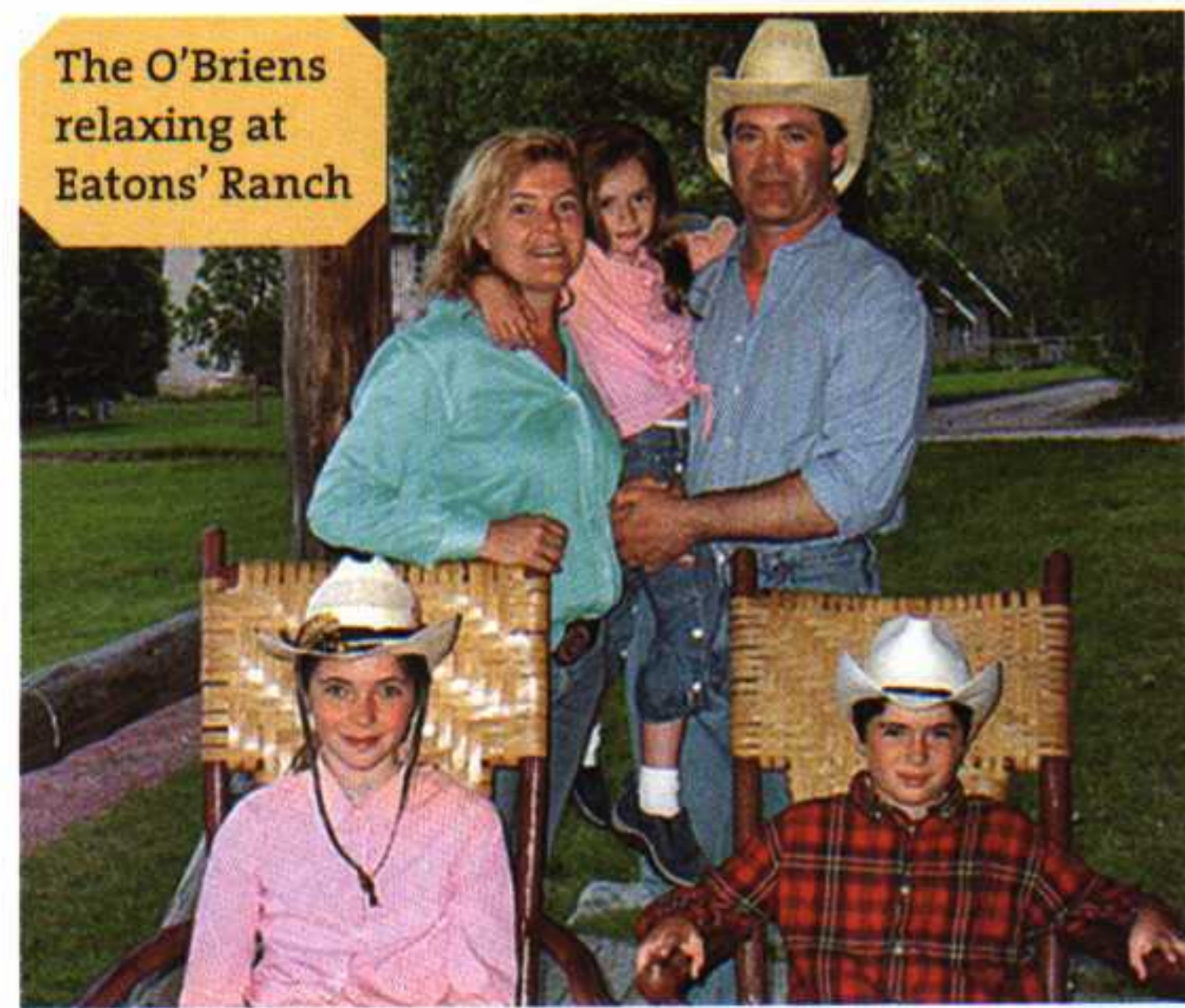
Dude ranches started out informally enough in the late 1800s. Back then, a ranch owner in the still-wild West might invite friends from the East to stay over for a month or so, helping out with chores to earn their keep. By the 1930s, dude ranches had become an industry, and "dudes," as these part-time cowboys are called, paid their way in currency rather



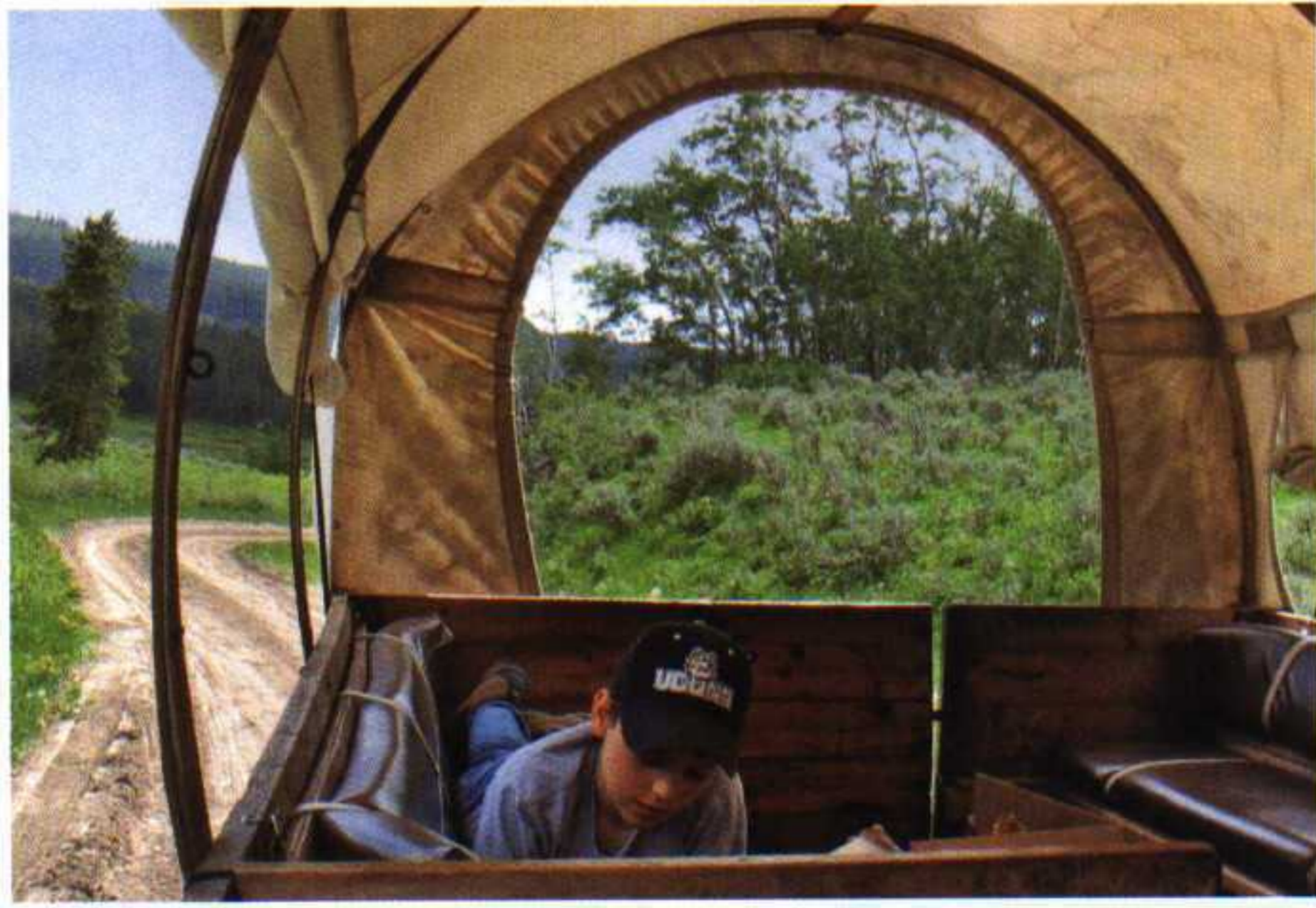
Three generations of Saer women at Vista Verde



Fly-fishing — an alternative to horseback riding at Vista Verde



The O'Briens relaxing at Eatons' Ranch



Brandon McClenachan, who went out west with his grandmother Sue, goes for a covered wagon ride. Later at Wagon's West, there will be a campfire with traditional food and songs.

than labor, supplementing the ranch's normal income. Over the decades, dude ranches continued to beckon suburban cowboys; but these days, it's their families, from toddlers to grandparents, who are lured by the prospect of watching wranglers saddle horses for guests ready to hit the range.

Gene Kilgore is one of the nation's foremost dude ranch authorities, author of a series of guides, *Gene Kilgore's Ranch Vacations*. He estimates that between 100,000 and 150,000 people have visited 200 dude ranches this past summer.

"One of the reasons I'm so passionate is because I believe this experience is the real thing, the right stuff," Kilgore says. "More than ever, we need to get our kids out where they can play, be kids, get wet and dirty, and embrace nature in a way very few kids get to do anymore."

Louis L'Amour, that master of the Western potboiler who did more than

anyone other than John Wayne to burnish the appeal of the American frontier, once wrote: "The West was a place where you started over. When you came west, you wiped off the slate, and whatever you were to be began here and now."

The C Lazy U Ranch outside Granby, Colorado, made for a refreshing change for Scott Smith of Greenwich, his wife Heidi, daughter Sabrina and son Alex. "Our entire family thoroughly enjoyed the complete dude ranch experience — the Colorado air, our fellow guests, the staff at the C Lazy U, the food and, of course, the horses."

When Mike and Alison Troy of Glenville took sons Dylan, twelve, and Christopher, ten, to the C Lazy U Ranch in the summer of 2003, they wanted a place to disconnect and recharge. "It was something way out of the way, away from the cosmopolitan lifestyle and back to basics," says Mike, who, like John Saer, is

accustomed to long days in the financial sector. "It's not the first thing I would think of for myself, but it's a great way for the family to be all together."

Tim Hennen, general manager of the C Lazy U, says, "a wholesome, old-fashioned family vacation" is just what the ranch has offered since 1946. "We don't have phones or TVs; you won't find video games," he explains. "Everything is outdoors, back-to-nature."

According to Hennen, the C Lazy U draws many young couples, as well as parents in their forties, with children in the five to fifteen age range, looking for an active summer vacation. The days of the Old West are far from their minds. "These people didn't grow up with Audie Murphy or John Wayne," Hennen says. "Their heroes are different."

Located ninety miles northwest of Denver, the C Lazy U stretches across 8,000 acres, with more than 165 horses



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF VISTA VERDE

A bit of freedom for the horses at Vista Verde

# Happy Trails

All rates and dates quoted are valid for 2006. Sales and accommodations taxes vary by state, and some ranches require gratuity fees. Many ranches have lower "shoulder season" rates available just before and after their official summer season that may also allow for shorter minimum lengths of stay. Some also offer lower rates and minimum stay periods for the winter. Check ranch websites for details.

According to Gene Kilgore, there are dude ranches throughout the western United States and Canada, and as far east as Lake George, New York, and the Carolinas. Kilgore's website, ranchweb.com, showcases many of them. Still others can be found on the Dude Ranchers Association website, duderanch.org.

## Colorado

### *C Lazy U Ranch*

clazyu.com • 970-887-3344

**Summer season:** June 11–August 20

**Summer rates:** Average \$2,975 a week per person based on double occupancy.

**Additional rate information:** Children 5 years old and younger receive a \$200 per week discount. Children 6 years old and over are charged as adults. Children under age 3 require a nanny.

**Minimum length of stay:** 3 days

**Winter season:** December 16–February 26

### *Smith Fork Ranch*

smithforkranch.com • 970-921-3454

**Summer season:** June 18–September 4

**Summer rates:** [For an entire cabin] Varies from \$19,500 per week for a 3-bedroom cabin that accommodates up to 10 adults and children, to \$5,950 per week for a 1-bedroom cabin for 2. Guest lodge bedrooms are also available at \$5,800 per week.

**Additional rate information:** \$2,000 more for each extra guest beyond standard occupancy. Deduct \$500 per child, age 3–10 years. Deduct \$500 per nanny in the same room with child. Children 2 years old or younger are free.

**Minimum length of stay:** 1 week

**Winter season:** There are plans to offer a winter season for the first time this year, reopening the ranch just before Christmas 2006 and running programs through February.

### *Vista Verde Guest & Ski Ranch*

vistaverde.com • 970-879-3858

**Summer season:** June 18–September 3

**Summer rates:** \$2,900 per person if staying in lodge; \$3,100 if staying in a cabin.

**Additional rate information:** Deduct \$500 for each child under 12 years old.

**Minimum length of stay:** 1 week

**Winter season:** December 17–March 18

### *Wagons West*

huntinfo.com/ww/ • 800-447-4711

**Summer season:** June–September

**Rates:** \$905 per person for 6 days (\$805 for child 13 years old or younger); \$710 for 4 days (\$625); \$375 for 2 days (\$335).

**Additional rate information:** Group discounts available.

**Minimum length of stay:** 2 days

**Winter season:** None

## Montana

### *Mountain Sky Guest Ranch*

mtnsky.com • 800-548-3392

**Summer season:** June 11–August 27

**Rates:** Adults \$2,940–\$3,640 per week; 7–12 years old, \$2,450–\$2,975 per week; 6 years old and younger, \$1,925–\$2,240 per week.

**Additional rate information:** Group rates available; 18 months old and younger, \$630 per week or \$10 per hour for infant or childcare. Nannies are charged at half of the adult rate.

**Minimum length of stay:** 1 week

**Winter season:** None

## Wyoming

### *Eatons' Ranch*

eatonranch.com • 307-655-9285

**Summer season:** June 10–August 18

**Rates:** Adults, \$190–\$205 per night; 6–17 years old, \$160 per night; 3–5 years old, \$135 per night.

**Additional rate information:** No charge for children 2 years old and younger. Nannies charged the 5-year-old-and-under rate.

**Minimum length of stay:** 3 days

**Winter season:** None

on hand. Like Vista Verde, it can accommodate forty guests at a time and offers high-end amenities like a pool, hot tub, two tennis courts and gourmet meals. Horseback riding is the central focus.

"It was great," says Alison. "Everyone had their own horse. Most people had the same horse for their whole stay, unless it wasn't working out between them. Everyone got to do something at their own level. Christopher was only six, and they had him riding inside this ring, which was great. Dylan was two years older, so he got to do some trotting."

Hennen isn't kidding about the phone service. You can't even get a cellphone signal at the C Lazy U. Mike recalls a Greenwich man who took his family to the ranch at the same time as the Troys did, regularly driving five miles down the road so he could check e-mails on his BlackBerry. Mike, by contrast, embraced his isolation.

"It was an easy vacation," Alison concurs. "There were no anxieties. No one was uptight. When you get the kids having such a good time, we can relax."

The granddaddy of dude ranches is Eatons' Ranch, located beside Wolf Creek, Wyoming, near the Montana border. Started in North Dakota by three brothers named Eaton, the ranch began taking in guests in 1879 and moved to Wyoming in 1904. Eaton pal Teddy



— B.S.

Roosevelt paid visits — a 1909 letter on White House stationery is on display at the ranch.

Eatons' Ranch has a Greenwich connection: Jeff Way, a fifth-generation Eaton who is a part owner and general manager of the ranch, grew up in town and graduated from Greenwich High School in 1985. His mother Patty Kaufmann, a fourth-generation Eaton, lives in Riverside and works in the town's public school system. She first met her husband, Greenwich lawyer Charles Kaufmann, when she was eleven and he was a boy staying at the ranch with his parents. Years later, widowed, she met Charlie again. They fell in love, which is how she wound up in Greenwich.

"Eatons' maintained its original ways," Patty says. "It isn't a fancy resort. They've updated what they needed to. No TV, no pay phones. The ranch business is more competitive than it used to be."

Many visitors came to Eatons' for the first time with their parents, and now they take their own children there. David Cluett of Round Hill, who remembers his first trip in the 1960s with his sisters Caryn and Christina, was the third generation of his family to go to Eatons'. In the last few years, David has been taking his eight-year-old daughter Skylar, while Caryn, now living in Berkeley, brings her husband and

three children. "It's a family reunion," David says.

Also along for these family trips is David and Caryn's mother Gloria Lange, a part-time Greenwich resident who enjoyed vacations with her parents at Eatons' in the 1930s. "Being out, riding along the Bighorn Mountains, it's just so beautiful," Gloria says.

Eatons' is less luxurious than many guest ranches. "It's not the Four Seasons," says David. "It's very rough. They get very nice people, who go out to rough it. Only recently did they put heat in the cabins. Before that, they had coal stoves."

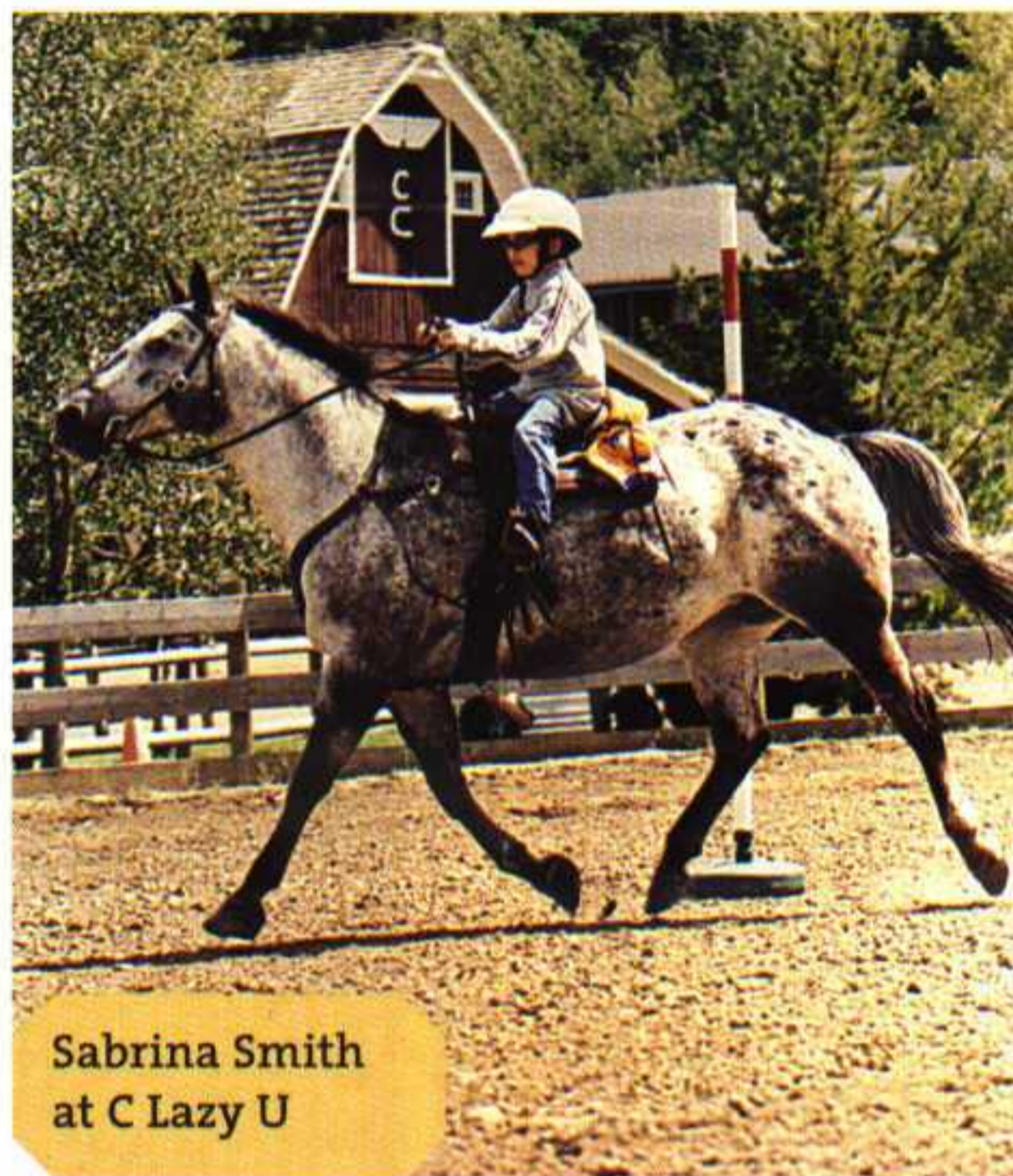
Way takes less pride in the amenities than the riding country available to Eatons' guests: 7,200 acres of property and

access to the Bighorn National Forest's 1.2 million acres. Eatons' can accommodate up to 100 guests. "People like that it's consistent, that they know what they are getting," he says. "Everything else in their life may be changing, but when they come here, everything is the same."

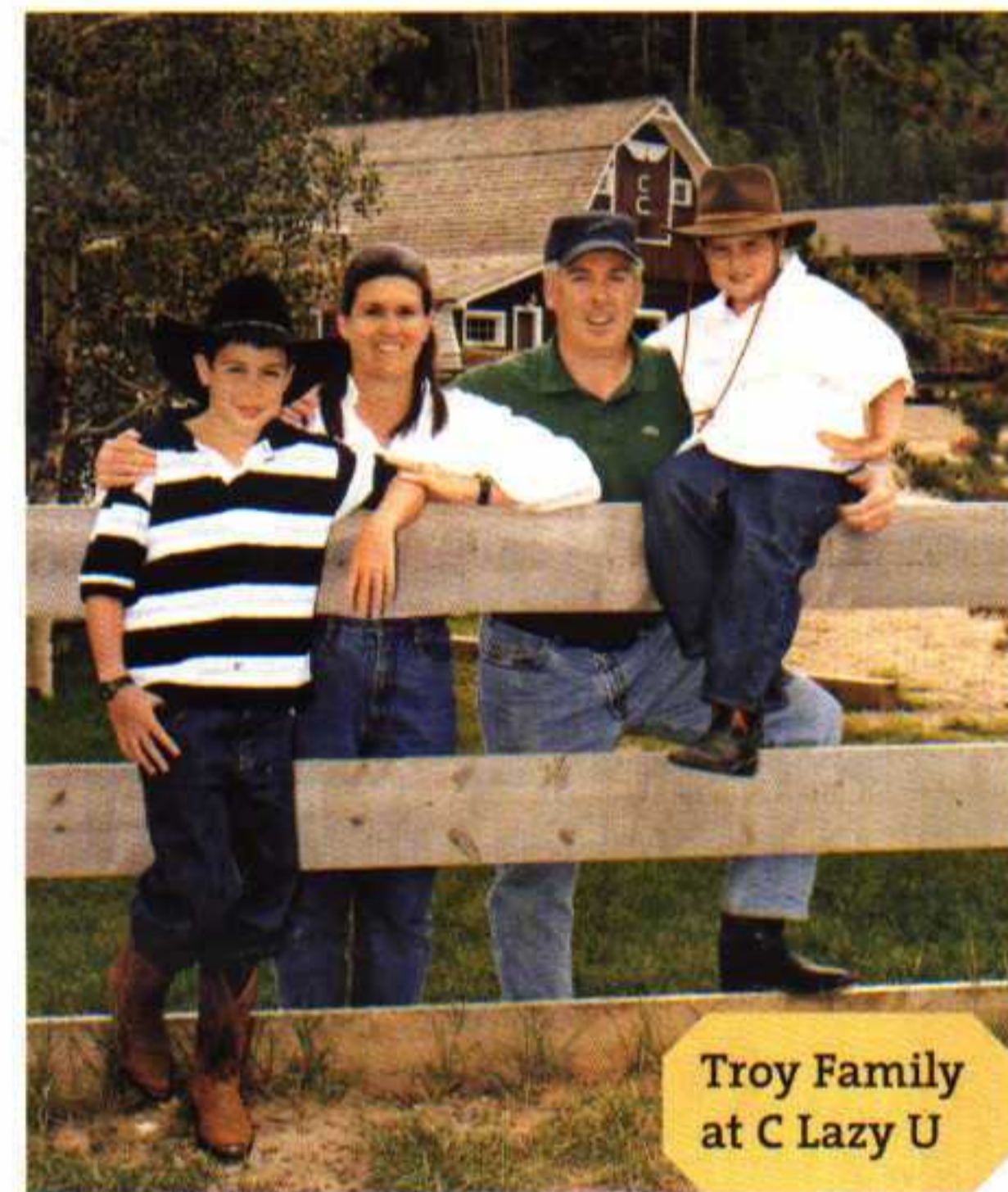
Eatons' lets dudes ride unescorted, after wranglers determine they have the necessary expertise. This is different from most ranches, which require that a wrangler accompany guest riders at all times.

"The ranch is concerned about insurance, but they want to keep it the way it was," David says. "The wranglers are very good at determining what kind of horse you can use." "We've all had the experience of falling off our horse,"

BELOW LEFT COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN SKY RANCH



Sabrina Smith at C Lazy U



Troy Family at C Lazy U



Pool time at Mountain Sky



The Becker clan at Smith Fork Ranch

Gloria adds. "You just get back on."

While things are deliberately kept spartan at Eatons', just on the other side of the Wyoming–Montana border at the Mountain Sky Guest Ranch near Bozeman, some eighty-five guests each week enjoy five-course dinners, fine wines, a pool with a bar and a view of Emigrant Peak, and the latest in massage therapy, which helps guest unwind after a long day riding and hiking. Mountain Sky wins plaudits from the well-traveled O'Brien family of Greenwich (they've also enjoyed Eatons'): husband Michael, wife Kathy and children Madeline, twelve; Will, ten; and Avery, six.

"Our clientele tend to be in the upper echelon and take several vacations over the summer, but we're the one they are coming home to every year," says Mountain Sky marketing director Lynne Peachey. "We have the same staff people year after year. It's amazing to hear of the connections people make at Mountain Sky. We have families who have been coming here for ten, fourteen years. Working here, you get to see children grow up."

Though most dude ranches take guests just through the summer and early fall, some are shaking things up a bit. Mountain Sky hosts corporate retreats in the spring and singles-only programming in the fall. Vista Verde and C Lazy U offer extensive winter programming as well. "There are ranches that operate summer and winter," Kilgore says. "A handful operate in the winter and offer cross-country and backcountry skiing, and snowshoeing."

Ranches often mention fishing as the next most popular activity available after riding, but few take that charge as seriously as Smith Fork Ranch in western Colorado, where radio station WGCH's former owner John Becker took his extended family in July 2003. The group included his daughter Lisa Edmundson of Cos Cob and her family: husband Tucker; daughter Chloe, twelve; and sons Iain, nine, and Caleb, seven.

"They have five stocked ponds, and there's always someone to go with you and, at the same time, look after your kids," Lisa says. "They can keep your child occupied while they watch you fly-fishing and tell you what you need to do. They are instructing you, not just being a baby-sitter."

Lisa marveled at the fly-fishing equipment on hand at Smith Fork and the impressive array of trout. "Rainbow, brookies, cutthroat," she elaborates. "Deeper in the forest, you can do some deep-woods fishing and get some wild browns. I didn't get any, but my husband did."

Smith Fork Ranch has fewer guest accommodations than most dude ranches, just enough to contain the extended Becker clan. "We took over the ranch the week we were there," Lisa says. "Normally at a ranch, the eight-year-olds go off and do things with each other. We wanted to stay together. Here my husband and his ten-year-old nephew could go fishing and have their own adventure."

Smith Fork Ranch is also small in size — just 285 acres — but

it sits in the middle of the 2.1 million-acre Gunnison National Forest. "Our area is the least discovered area in Colorado," says Marley Hodgson, who owns the ranch. "We are but twenty-five minutes from the Black Canyon, one of the newest national parks. The Gunnison River cuts this huge deep canyon out of the ground, an incredible sight no one is prepared for."

Marley and his wife Linda had divided their time between New York City and Southport, Connecticut, until they discovered what had been the Bar-X-Bar Ranch, an active dude ranch from the 1930s to the 1960s.

"It was a ghost ranch, really," he says. "Doors were swinging in the breeze. We quickly became enamored with the idea of bringing it back as a guest ranch."

Having recently sold off the leather goods concerns he had developed, Marley was looking for a fresh challenge. He fixed the ranch up, hired staff (twenty-eight are there now, for just twenty-six guests) and slowly began to advertise Smith Fork's ample charms, including great horseback-riding terrain and groundwater he claims is untouched by man or beast.

"We are in the mountains, so when you come down, you are in the breadbasket of Colorado," Marley says. "It's the state's most fertile area, where people raise organic beef and chicken. There are thirty-seven vineyards between our ranch and Grand Junction, and the three best are within fifteen miles. We put them on our wine list, which partly came from our personal cellar in New York. Probably no other guest ranch in the country has a wine list like ours. My son [Marley III] and I are as passionate about wine as we are about fly-fishing."

For such a young ranch, Smith Fork is already on a self-sustaining basis. "We're not going to get rich doing this," Marley says. "We're doing this for the love of it."

Kilgore says the ranch business is holding its own, expanding not so much as a whole but in certain sectors. "Every year, there's someone who comes in, buys one of these ranches and upgrades it," he says. "The level of food, the gourmet chef thing, is expanding. The children's market is expanding. Parents are really

looking for safe havens for kids. Having a young child myself, I think this is the best vacation for families. Long before cruise ships offered kids' programs, dude ranches were doing it."

Expanding the concept of dude ranches is Wagons West, which allows guests to ride covered wagons along the foothills of the Teton Mountains near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in imitation of those hardy pioneers. Marilyn Dahle, office manager in charge of reservations, calls it "a glorified camping trip" in which food is cooked outdoors in a Dutch oven and guests sleep under the stars.

"Once in a while, we get a woman who thinks she's going to die because she's not going to shower for three days," Dahle says, noting that washing is typically done with hot water in pans. "But most like it. You would be amazed at how many city slickers who don't think they can do it, discover they can."

Sue McClenachan of Greenwich took her ten-year-old grandson Brandon on a four-day, three-night jaunt with Wagons West this past June. "I called it a dude ranch on wheels," says Sue. "Every day, we went a little farther, a littler higher, and saw different things."

Brandon learned to ride a horse Western style and taught the other boys on the trip to play a variation of poker known as Texas Hold 'Em. Sue got to know her horse China and photographed a wide variety of mountain flora. "We roughed it and had a ball," she says. "It took me back to Girl Scout days."

Nostalgia may be a common denominator behind the dude ranch experience — for old days, for past times spent with family, for American history. "For so many, it's like, 'Holy cow, I didn't know this existed,' " says Kilgore. "That learning curve is part of our challenge in the marketplace. I'm not saying dude ranching is not growing, but the opportunity for growth is there.

"Cruises have been successful permeating the American marketplace and making people think about them in terms of a vacation," says Kilgore. "Dude ranches are like cruise ships on land. They have so much to offer to so many." ■