

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

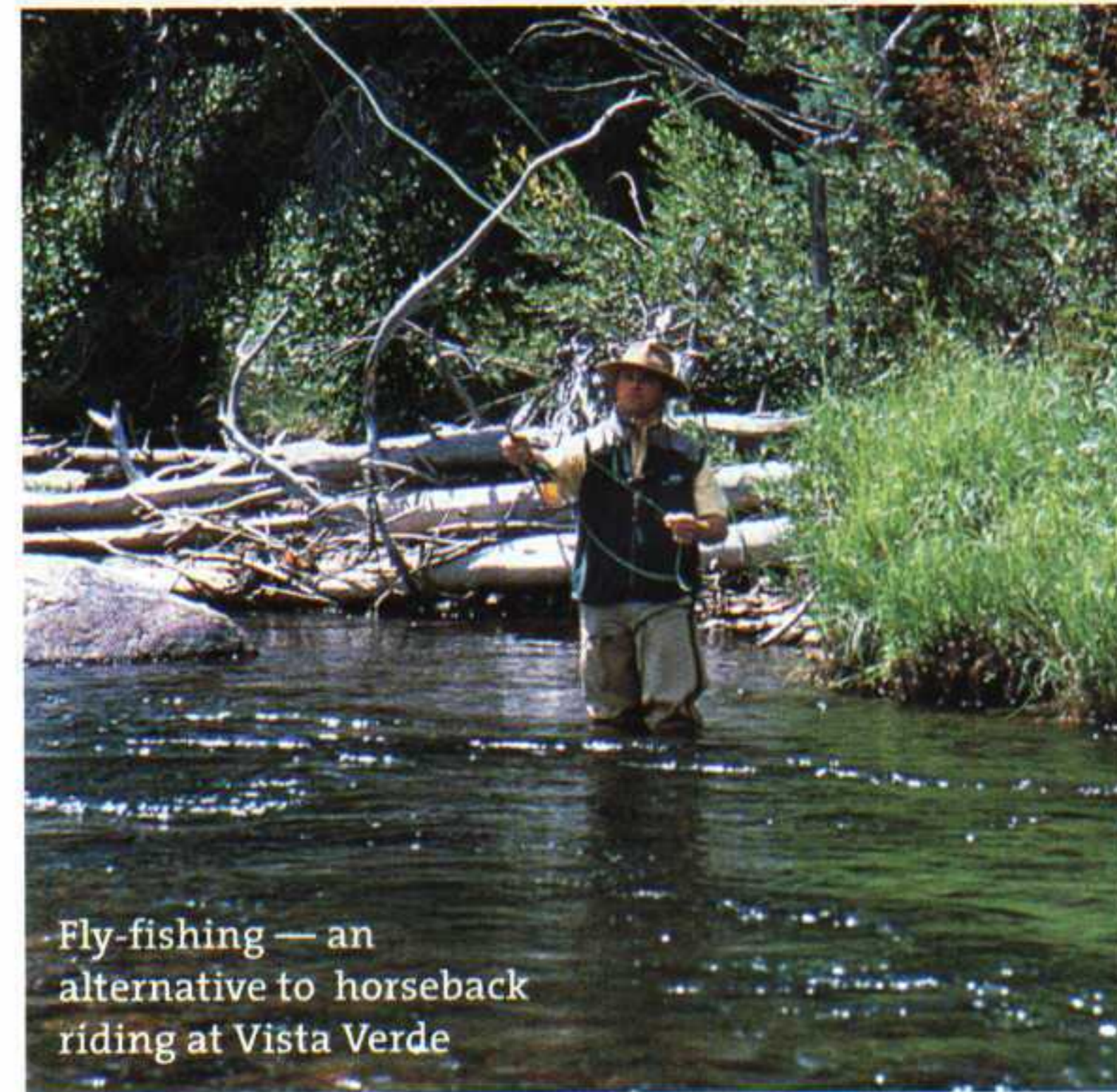
ago — assuming, that is, that frontiersmen Jim Bridger and Kit Carson had a gourmet chef and cabins with Jacuzzis. Like other dude ranches, Vista Verde has been adjusting to the demands of the upscale modern tourist, with strenuous recreation by day and luxurious pampering at night.

"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

