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TRAVEL AGE WEST

PUBLISHED BIWEEKLY • NOVEMBER 11, 2019

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*Dude ranches allow travelers to live
out fantasies of a bygone frontier —
cowboy boots included*

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Dude ranches allow travelers to live out fantasies of a bygone frontier — cowboy boots included

BY VALERIE CHEN



A lone tumbleweed rolls into focus, disrupting the stillness of the arid, desolate landscape. Not long after, clouds of dust cover the cornflower-blue sky. Sitting astride a galloping horse is a steely-eyed sheriff, with one hand on the reins and the other lightly touching a shotgun tucked into his denim pocket.

He's a man on a mission: to track down and bring a disgraceful wrongdoer to justice.

This scene — or some version of it — is one that has graced the silver screen for many decades, notably during the 1930s heyday of the Western film genre. With the American West front and center, Westerns romanticized tales of retribution, which were often punctuated with quick-draw contests in the town square, or raucous notes from the piano in a saloon.

WOW



Horseback riding is an essential component of dude ranch culture.

Whether encompassing entertaining fables of lore or allegories of a country's complicated past, the genre has earned its place in Americans' hearts as a national treasure. And today's travelers can live out their own fantasies of the iconic bygone frontier — without any imminent danger — on a dude ranch.

According to the Dude Ranchers' Association (DRA), an organization that promotes, preserves and protects the dude ranch industry, this concept originated in the late 19th century, starting with the Custer Trail Ranch in North Dakota's badlands. Even capturing the attention of U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the working ranch began to host "dudes" — or city slickers — in hordes, and its owners soon realized a lucrative opportunity. Fast forward to present day, and there are numerous

ranches across the Western U.S. that are thrilled to offer a taste of cowboy hospitality to paying guests.

Similar to the varied types of cruises, hotels and tours available today, dude ranches are not a one-size-fits-all vacation. There are several categories of ranches, including working dude ranches, which host active cattle operations; traditional dude ranches, with horseback riding as their cornerstone; and luxury dude ranches, where elevated amenities and activities run the gamut from spa treatments to fly-fishing. Across the board, however, dude ranches are typically family-owned and all-inclusive, offer horseback riding, and pride themselves in creating cherished memories.

Bryce Street, executive director of the DRA,



says the association qualifies its member ranches based upon the six H's: horses, hats, hospitality, heritage, honesty and heart.

"Obviously, horses make the ranch; without horses, you don't have a ranch," she said. "Hats represent the cowboy way of life. Some of the most hospitable people in the industry work at ranches; many are making memories alongside guests. Long-time ranches have shaped the Western heritage and culture. Honesty refers to the way ranches advertise themselves — what you see is what you get. As for heart, people working at ranches are truly committed to what they're doing."

Another industry authority is Gene Kilgore, CEO and founder of Ranch Vacations International. He first fell in love with cowboy culture at age 7, while

TIPS FOR SELLING DUDE RANCH TRAVEL

ASK LOTS OF QUALIFYING QUESTIONS, ESPECIALLY FOR FAMILIES.

“Check with ranches on what they have for kids, which might not always be a structured program. Additionally, some ranches separate kids and adults during meals, riding and more, which might not be a fit for families who vacation to bond.” — *Caroline Wood, an independent affiliate of Travel Experts, Inc., a Virtuoso agency*

PRESENT ALL-INCLUSIVE DUDE RANCH OPTIONS.

“People think they are going to get nicked-and-dimed; however, one of the requirements of being in the Dude Ranchers’ Association (DRA) is operating an all-inclusive program for at least eight weeks of the season. The spa and guided activities might not always be included, but clients will have three meals a day, lodging and at least horseback riding, among other activities, within one price.” — *Bryce Street, executive director of the DRA*

CHECK ON CLIENTS’ RIDING EXPERIENCE.

“There are ranches that allow guests to lope on horses. But some ranches have insurance policies that only allow walking rides, which would be disappointing for experienced riders.” — *C.W.*

CONSIDER BOOKENDING THE TRIP.

“One of the first questions I ask is, ‘Geographically, what else do you want to accomplish on this trip?’ This helps narrow down dude ranch options. It’s easy to find ranches around Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton National Park and Glacier National Park, for example.” — *C.W.*

REMIND CLIENTS THAT THIS WILL BE A TRIP THEY’LL NEVER FORGET.

“It’s not another Disneyland or trip to the beach. They’ll remember their horse’s name and the times they had.” — *B.S.*

visiting Trail Creek Ranch in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He has since spent countless hours at countless ranches, and today provides travel advisors with many selling tools.

“Dude ranches reconnect people with the natural rhythm of the Earth,” Kilgore said. “They get folks out of the big cities and out to blue skies and crystal-clear streams; among the smell of the grasses and the sage; and in front of other guests, with whom they can form a camaraderie.”

It felt like Kilgore had read my mind. My thoughts were drifting to my early May visit to The Resort at Paws Up. Arguably the acme of luxury ranches, it sits on an untamed swath of land in Greenough, Mont. — untamed, that is, save for the 28 single- or two-story homes; 36 glamping tents; and an array of other facilities that ensure no request from guests is too big or too small. Not to mention, the safari-style canvas tents truly put the “glam” in glamping. With up to two bedrooms, they are furnished with distinctions such as copper tubs in en suite bathrooms and access to a camp butler.

But with 37,000 acres to its name, Paws Up still preserves what American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark must have taken in, with awe, during their expedition out West that supposedly included a stop at the on-site Lookout Rock near Blackfoot River. (I stayed in “Pompey’s Pillar,” a three-bedroom Big Timber Home named for a young member of the expedition party.)

There is also the consideration of total privacy, which is a reason why so many celebrities check into Paws Up. Despite the close-lipped employees, I know this for a fact: At the bathroom of Trough Restaurant, I washed my hands next to model Hailey Bieber, who was at the ranch shooting a campaign. (Justin Bieber, her husband, was presumably elsewhere at the ranch.)

No matter where a property ranks on the luxury scale, though, one thing is certain: A dude ranch that doesn’t include a horseback experience isn’t a dude ranch at all.

I’m not an experienced rider by any means, but atop my gentle horse, Jet, I worked my way through a chunk of the 100 miles of trails that meander through Paws Up. My private ride culminated in a scene that looked like it had been lifted from an oil painting. In a vast open field, a herd of hundreds of bison — including a teeny calf born only the day before — was a hop, a skip and a fence away. There were no other guests around.

“Imagine a space twice the size of Manhattan, but with maximum capacity of 275 people,” said Cliff Boltz, resort manager for Paws Up. “We provide a true escape to nature — consider it your own private national park.”

From their inception, dude ranch vacations have required at least a weeklong stay to immerse guests in the Western lifestyle. This remains the standard for most properties, specifically from Memorial Day through Labor Day (high season); however, Paws Up doesn’t



demand more than four nights per stay throughout the year.

On a media visit, I only had about two full days to earn my stripes. Still, I attempted with gusto to tackle the resort’s staggering list of activities, which climbs to more than 40 in summer (most are offered at an additional cost). I drove a four-wheel drive Polaris RZR through the nearby Garnet Mountain Range, maneuvering melting snow mounds while chasing after my guide’s vehicle. I clumsily herded stubborn cattle into pens during a hilarious game of “Cow Croquet” (think cows instead of wooden balls, and people on horseback in lieu of mallets). Channeling my inner Annie Oakley, I squinted my eyes over the barrel of a shotgun, aiming at sporting clays that zoomed into the endless sky.



Of course, not every ranch is run like Paws Up. In the thick of summer on a road trip through Colorado, I drove in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, through the statuary town of Granby (population 2,074) and onto the 8,500-acre grounds of C Lazy U Ranch, another dude ranch among the creme de la creme. Peals of laughter from children greeted me, and the smell of barbecued meat wafted through my open windows.

“Welcome home,” a guest named Cathy later joked to me, after she spotted me sipping a Moscow mule alone and waved me over to her group. The trip marked Cathy’s 20th visit to C Lazy U, which is celebrating its centennial this year. Her daughter, now 27 years old, has been coming to the ranch every summer since age 9.

Guests here wear their number of return stays like a badge of honor. Having arrived on a Friday afternoon for my first-ever stay, I felt like the new kid on the block (all other guests had checked in on Sunday). But that pit in my stomach was fleeting: During an adults-only, family-style dinner, I was invited to pull up a chair and share stories over dishes such as lobster sauteed with mushrooms and basil, and charred, lemony romanesco. (Kids and teens are generally separated from adults from sunup to sundown with counselor supervision, to the delight of both parties.)

The property features 40 tastefully Western-themed accommodations — including individual rooms and one- to three-bedroom cabins — with front doors that can only be locked from the inside. Trust also plays a role in the invaluable bond that blossoms between guests and their four-legged partners while at the ranch: Everyone is assigned a suitable horse to ride the entire week, which includes two daily trail rides separated by age group or skill level. Advanced riders are welcome to trot, canter and gallop. The week-long stay culminates with a beloved, all-ages “Shodeo,” where kids display their newfound horsemanship skills, and adults compete for ribbons in different categories.



During my stay, it was hard to discern an



employee from a fellow guest — everyone was eager to check in on how everything was going. I saw relief on several faces upon my return from C Lazy U's Conestoga Wagon, where I lived out my 1985 "Oregon Trail" computer game dreams for one night. There were no bouts of dysentery, but there were sticky s'mores by a campfire, plus heat and electricity. The large covered wagon even fit a king-size bed, a bunk bed and a table for two. (Panic had set in as soon as I was shown bear spray and a bear horn, "just in case," so perhaps the relief was my own.) I also received more than one consolatory pat on the back when I revealed my count of rainbow trout caught while fly-fishing on Willow Creek: zilch.

Indeed, community is at the heart of the ranch — a five-star summer camp of sorts, thanks to no in-room televisions or phones and important daily announcements scrawled on a blackboard (such as when to gather for the ice cream sundae bar). Guests play exceedingly well together, unified by a mutual adoration for horses and the surrounding outdoor playground. The Wi-Fi worked fine, yet it was rare to see any heads bowed down, looking at a cellphone. And the Friday night barn dance had folks whooping and hollering to live music, with their arms interlocked.

"We are in a world of instant access," Ranch Vacations International's Kilgore said. "But what ranches provide are lasting memories that are more valuable than something tangible that you can buy in a store. You fish, you hike, you enjoy one another, and you build friendships. That's pretty powerful stuff." ●

The Details: C Lazy U Ranch (www.clazyu.com), Dude Ranchers' Association (www.duderanch.org), Gene Kilgore (www.genekilgore.com), The Resort at Paws Up (www.pawsup.com)



Clockwise from top left: The Resort at Paws Up's Wilderness Estates have three bedrooms; C Lazy U Ranch offers an overnight stay in a covered wagon; Tanque Verde Ranch in Tucson, Ariz.; the Lazy U Spa features massage tents; guests at Brush Creek Ranch can try fly-fishing; enjoy "cowboy coffee" at C Lazy U; kids can learn how to throw a lasso at Paws Up.