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View From the Saddle
By KEVIN SACK



WHAT, I wonder, must Butch be thinking?

At the moment, I am lying flat on my back in the dry dust of a riding ring at the Aspen Canyon Ranch, near Parshall, Colo. My rear end is squeezed into the center of an old tire, and I am gripping Butch's tether in one hand.

Wincing into the glare of a Magritte sky, I can make out his long, equine nose hovering over me. I'm pretty sure he is smirking. We are competing in a game of musical tires, a highlight of the guest rodeo staged each Thursday afternoon at the ranch. We riders have already paraded into the ring to an amplified national anthem, waving our hats to an appreciative crowd consisting mainly of our children. We have barrel-raced and clover-leafed and flag-relayed, men against women. In the final event, the 18 adult guests (a kids' rodeo will be staged two days later) circle their horses around a ring of 17 tires. When the music stops, the riders must dismount and plant their bottoms in a tire. Things can get ugly when two Type A personalities — say, an Army medic and a Chicago businesswoman — dive for the same Firestone. The odd rider out leaves the ring, a tire is removed, and so on and so forth for 17 knee-aching rounds. It is fun, a lot of fun actually. But when Butch and I are eliminated in the late going, neither my legs nor my backside particularly object. The streamside hot tub awaits.

Until my arrival at Aspen Canyon, I had always thought of dude ranches as a bit cheesy. In my misconception, they were places where urban cowboys paid for the privilege of herding someone else's cattle and then sleeping off their soreness in a hard bunk. I didn't see the appeal.

But a delightful week spent at 8,500 feet in the Rockies last summer proved me wrong. Today's dude ranches are multipurpose resorts, pure and simple, and the roughing it is voluntary. While their reputations are based primarily on their riding programs, most also devote great attention to lodging, food, entertainment, children's programs and other outdoor activities like hiking, rafting, fishing and skeet shooting.

They dot the West by the hundreds, with more than 40 in Colorado alone. I picked Aspen Canyon after some electronic research, using the Colorado Dude & Guest Ranch Association's Web site (www.coloradoranch.com) as a link to dozens of individual ranch sites. Another valuable resource is "Gene Kilgore's Ranch Vacations" (John Muir Publications), a regularly updated guide to guest ranches in the United States and Canada.

The selection of Aspen Canyon, which is not far from the Winter Park ski area, was driven largely by its proximity to Denver, only 90 miles away. With a daughter who was nearly 7 at the time, there was a premium on finding a ranch that would not require a lengthy drive following a taxing flight.

It helped that the all-inclusive rate was relatively modest, at least compared with other ranches I looked into.

Once you arrive, you toss your wallet in the suitcase. There is nothing to buy. Even the untended ranch store works on the honor system, with guests signing for what they take and paying at checkout.

Aspen Canyon is set in a vast and largely isolated valley along the Williams Fork River, where the night sky is splattered with stars. Our weather in July was essentially perfect, with sunshine each day, highs in the mid-80's and lows around 40.

Guests stay in clean and comfortable log cabins (both individual, two-family and four-room private quarters) with fireplaces, coffee makers, small, modern bathrooms with showers and decks overlooking the river. Meals are hearty and well-prepared, and the owners, Steve and Deborah Roderick, are attentive to detail and to special requests.

They can handle 52 guests but prefer to keep the crowd at 35 to 40.

As a relative beginner who had not done much riding in years, I figured I might spend half of our vacation on horseback and the other half on a porch, a book in my lap. But like most of the guests that week, I quickly became addicted to our lazy trail rides through the hills. The Rodericks own 360 acres surrounding the ranch and lease an adjacent 72 square miles of the Arapahoe National Forest. Whether bushwhacking through a thicket of aspen or charging up a trail in a full, mud-kicking lope, I could not get enough.

The staff is skilled at designing a varied series of rides that make every day different. One day we woke early and took a breakfast ride to a gorgeous overlook for a fabulous skillet-cooked meal of eggs, bacon and hash browns. On another, we took an all-day ride to an alpine meadow atop Williams Peak (elevation 11,616), and relaxed in a field of lavender wildflowers while admiring the Gore Range.



Each day, on our return to the ranch, the adventuresome among us joined the wranglers in "jingling" the horses, whooping and hollering as we chased them at full gallop out of the corral and up to a hillside pasture. Our crowd ranged from absolute novices to competitive equestrians. Riders were evaluated the first morning and divided by ability and ambition. On any given ride, the wranglers were careful not to attempt any terrain or gait beyond the skills of the least accomplished rider. (Family members may stay together; but while you may join a group below your ability level, you may not join one above it.)

The riding was not risk-free. While most of the horses, like Butch, were gentle and dependable, several experienced riders were thrown by skittish mounts during the week. No one was hurt. But as at all ranches, the Rodericks insist that guests sign a rather intimidating liability waiver. "Horseback riding is the only sport," it states, in part, "where a much smaller predator animal (human) tries to impose its will on another much larger, stronger prey animal with a mind of its own (horse) and each has a limited understanding of the other." Steve Roderick began the week with some basic riding instruction, but nothing too complicated. "Either you can be the boss or the horse can be the boss," he said, "and it's a lot more fun when you're the boss."

The Rodericks, who lease most of their 65 horses and ponies each summer, take all the work out of riding for their guests by handling all the tack and by cooling and grooming the horses. They pride themselves on the variety and flexibility of their riding program. Some trail rides, for instance, segregated children from grown-ups. Others were limited to members of individual families. Private lessons could also be arranged. There were pony rides for children under 6 who are too young for the trail, and counselors available to keep them busy while parents are riding. My daughter, Laura, fell deeply in love with her docile mount, Munchkin, who lived up to his name by chomping incessantly on grass. Laura, who had done some riding on the flatlands of her grandparents' farm, was at first a bit intimidated by the steep terrain, particularly on the rare occasions when her horse could be bothered to trot. Her short legs provided little help in gripping Munchkin's expansive belly, and some tears flowed the first day or two. But Laura stuck with it, emboldened by encouragement and instruction from the wranglers. And that made it all the more rewarding as the week passed to watch her cantering confidently across an open prairie, a stylish cowgirl hat bouncing atop her head. By week's end, the only tears came at having to bid Munchkin farewell.

If I had a complaint about the Aspen Canyon riding program, it would be that the wranglers did not volunteer enough criticism and instruction out on the trail to those of us who needed it. Nonetheless, by the end of the week I had the vague sense that I knew what I was doing, if only because of the number of hours spent in the saddle.

Riding, of course, builds up an appetite. We were fortified each morning with outstanding breakfasts that ran from French toast to huevos rancheros. For lunch there was bratwurst or burgers, along with salads, and for the dinner barbecue, steaks or enchiladas, and occasionally fish and pasta. Most meals were served at long communal tables in the dining hall, where the nice touches include boot-handled butter knives. Some were served outdoors, with the children eating in a covered chuck wagon as the adults socialized.

The food, which was healthy and well prepared, managed to satisfy adults and children, though peanut butter and other staples were always available for the hard-to-please. The ranch does not serve alcohol, but guests are welcome to bring their own for consumption in either the dining hall or the cabins.

A ranch is a magical place for children, not just because of the scenery and the horses but also because of the freedom. Laura had the run of the place and had the time of her life playing with her new friends, Georgia and Maddie Cook, from Anniston, Ala., and the Rodericks' daughter, Leah. They loved exploring the ranch petting zoo, studying the hummingbirds on the dining hall's back deck, and hanging out in the game room in the barn loft. Their mornings often began with a trip to the kitchen's back door to collect carrots and apples for their horses. One night they stayed up late roasting s'mores and then camped out in a tepee.

The grown-ups feel the same childlike weightlessness. There are no televisions in the rooms, and the single guest telephone is in the lodge, so work and worldly cares are best left behind. And they were, except for one businesswoman on our trip, who was constantly tying up the telephone line with her laptop, and actually tried — and of course failed — to place a cell-phone call while riding through the wilderness. She did not seem to be having much fun.

Aspen Canyon offers activities other than riding. Wranglers will take guests into the mountains to shoot skeet and will provide fly-fishing instruction. Rocky Mountain National Park is less than an hour's drive down the road, and a day trip to see its purple peaks and enormous elk herds is a nice midweek break. Evenings are filled with line dancing, storytelling and campfire sing-alongs. If they want, guests can drive into nearby Fraser to an authentic small-town rodeo where the fences carry advertisements for chiropractors and physical therapists. There is also a choice of two raft trips, one a white-water adventure on the Arkansas River's Class 3 and 4 rapids, the other a gentle float on the Colorado River. They cost an extra \$60 to \$70, but that was not the reason no one chose to go during our week. They simply wanted to ride. •