

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Bar Lazy J guests ride the range above Hot Sulphur Springs near Parshall, Colo.

Round 'em up... head 'em out!

*Western ways live at Colorado dude ranches,
with a style to suit every traveler*

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

PARSHALL, Colo. — I knew what I must look like, bouncing in the saddle on Chief, a paint horse with a stiff jaw and stilts for legs. Not a pretty picture, even for a greenhorn, my wobbly balance and frozen smile a dead giveaway.

But my outfit, I hoped, looked the part. Dude ranch chic, it included my mother's old felt hat with a rolled brim (and a couple of tiny moth holes), and a pair of boots with decorative stitching and knife-point toes that hugged the stirrups, but pinched like heck when I walked.

"That was your mother's hat?" asked Chad Yurich, the lead wrangler, turning casually in his saddle to look back at our group, riding single file. He raised his eyebrows. He was already on his second hat and the summer was only half over here at the Bar Lazy J, west of Rocky Mountain National Park and the state's oldest continuously operating dude ranch.

Then, gradually, the 12 of us on the morning's trail ride settled into a rhythm, and that

>> MYSA.COM awkward feeling melted away. As we reached the ridge top, my legs found a sweet spot on the saddle and Chief, noticing the difference, perked up his ears. Clouds sailed overhead, big puffy cotton balls on a turquoise background, and below us, the Colorado River valley stretched away, the Bar Lazy J's cabins lined up along the banks.

Try something new

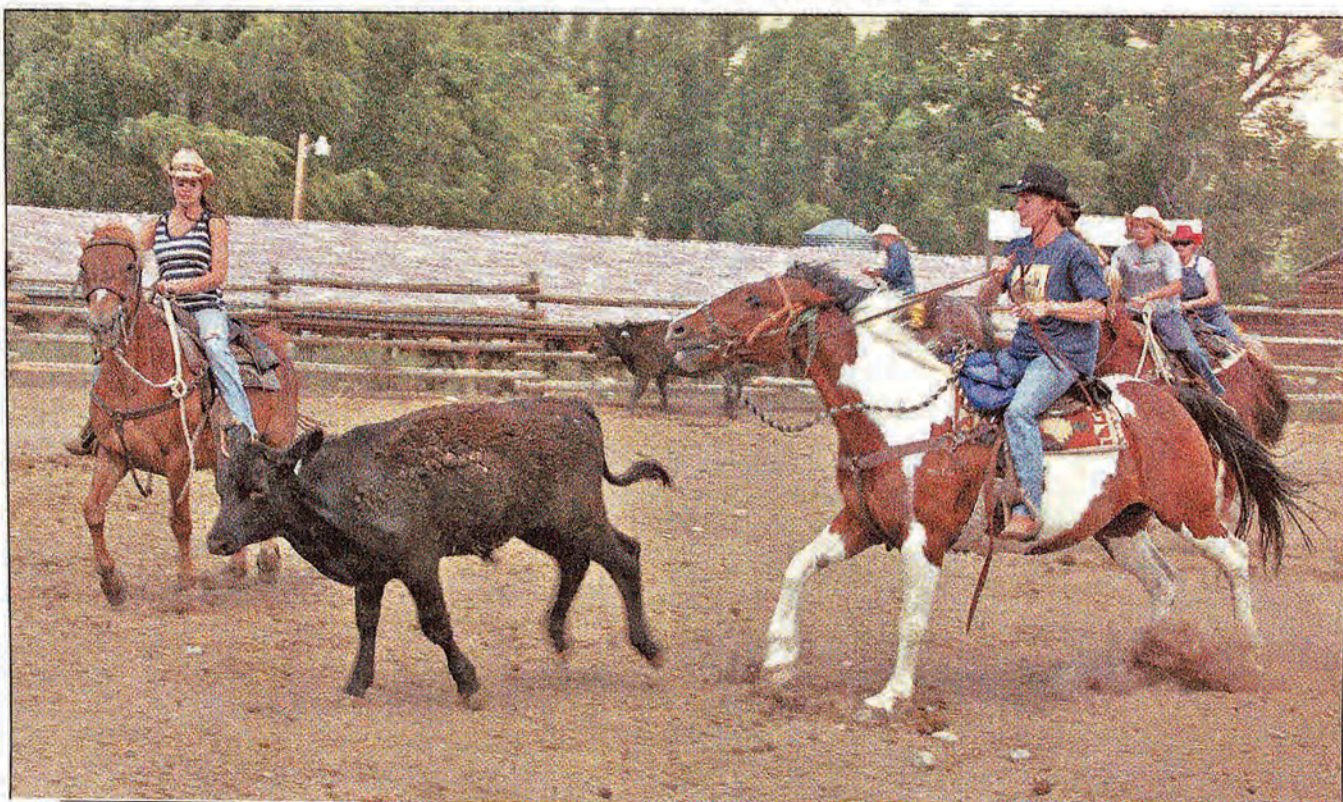
If your usual summer vacation — a theme park getaway, or a week at Aunt Hattie's cottage at the lake — is beginning to look tired, give yourself the best treat ever and head for one of Colorado's dude ranches. Most offer a spectacular Rocky Mountain adventure and a chance to play "City Slicker" in a place where Western hospitality is alive and well and every day ends with the sun setting over snow-capped peaks. Guest ranches have always been part of the Western myth. But in Colorado,

See TRAIL/3L



Kids kick up their heels at Wednesday night line dancing at the Bar Lazy J.

Teams compete at 'cow pushing' at the ranch. Guests are assigned one horse for use throughout the week.





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The Bar Lazy J Ranch opened in 1912 for guests who primarily wanted to hunt. The ranch now caters to families who want to ride horses.

Trail rides call at dude ranches

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where dude ranching is thriving, riding the ranch has a special flavor.

At the Bar Lazy J, one of six guest ranches in Colorado's Grand County, owners Jerry and Cheri Helmicki, who bought the ranch in 1995, not only live the dream, but re-create it each week in summer for a maximum of 40 guests, mostly families with kids.

"When the ranch first opened, in 1912," said Cheri, "the first visitors — wealthy couples who brought their maids and came by invitation only — were interested in hunting, fly fishing and riding, in that order. But all that's changed. Today, everybody, parents and kids, want to ride." That's why we assign a horse to each guest to ride for the week. You get to know him, and he gets used to the way you ride."

Colorado's alpine lakes

Though horsemanship, with daily trail rides and rodeo-style games, are first and foremost here in Parshall, just west of the Continental Divide, Colorado's alpine lakes and snowmelt-fed streams give dude ranching a unique flavor. At the Bar Lazy J, you can arrange day trips to mountain lakes, fish for trout, or go mountain biking on trails and forest service roads. If you don't feel like leaving the ranch, cast your lure (or fly) into the Colorado River, which runs through the center of the property.

Additional activities, which the Helmicki's arrange through local outfitters, include river rafting and off-road Jeep treks. The newest adventure is their "Spa Ride," a three-quarter day trek from the ranch, over a high ridge pass where you stop for a picnic lunch, and a mid-afternoon arrival at the Sulphur Springs, a spa with massage rooms and eight hot and hotter outdoor soaking pools. For parents who want some "alone" time, the Bar Lazy J's children's programs, staffed by three dedicated and creative "child wranglers," runs all-day activities every day, for no extra charge.

Jerry Helmicki, who joins many of the trail rides, oversees most of the ranch activities, starting with daily morning announcements in the dining room, followed by a session at the corral, where he makes sure that all the riders are safely mounted and each group leaves together. Jerry also leads the weekly campfire and sing-along, and to the delight of repeat visitors who look forward to the tradition, ends the evening by heating the ranch's branding iron in the coals and imprinting a Bar Lazy J on anything you've got on hand: your boots, belt, leather hat band, purse or shoes.

Cheri, a former schoolteacher and award-winning sports coach, demonstrates her comedic talents and considerable leadership skills at the Wednesday night line-dancing party. The farewell staff show, the highlight of each week, includes a variety of corny but hilarious skits, with the wranglers cavorting in crazy costumes, and Cheri, as master of



Warm Colorado afternoons can be spent at the ranch pool.

MORE INFO

The Bar Lazy J is open from mid-May through September, with early and late weeks (when school is still in session) reserved for adults. Prices per person, per week, are \$1,595 for adults, \$995 for children 7-12, and \$795 for children 3-6. Included are meals, snacks, horseback riding, fishing and sports equipment. Certain outfitter-provided excursions are extra. Alcoholic beverages are not offered, but you are welcome to bring your own. Call Bar Lazy J at (800) 396-6279, (970) 725-3437, or go to www.barlazyj.com. E-mail requests to BarLazyJ@rkymtnhi.com. For more, contact the Grand County Tourism Board at www.grand-county.com, or call (800) 729-5821. Also go to www.dude-ranch.com.

ceremonies, pulling it all together.

Historic cabins and chef cuisine

The main lodge, stables and guest cabins, historic structures built between 1912 and 1940 (and updated as needed), are old-fashioned rustic, furnished with peeled stick furniture and decorated with arts and artifacts collected over the decades. The dining room, as much museum as gathering place, is a treasure trove of Western gear, with antique rifles, bows and arrows, mounted animal heads and antlers, old tools and cowboy sculptures. The antique stove in the corner has been pressed into service as a snack bar, open all day with hot coffee, tea, lemonade and cookies.

If you come, plan to stay a full week. Like most ranches, the Bar Lazy J operates on a one-week schedule, and discourages shorter visits. The per-person fee includes all food, horseback riding, fly-fishing gear and other sports equipment.

Finding a ranch that fits

But before you book, do a little research. Ranch accommodations vary widely, ranging from rustic, old-timey cabins to luxurious hotel rooms, and from historic (read "old") log lodges with big-beamed dining rooms to motel-like buildings. Some ranches offer hearty American meals served at big tables; others offer a menu with individual tables and chef-planned cuisine.

"Ranches are as different as their owners," says Gene Kilgore, who personally inspects every ranch he lists in the book and on the Web site, which is updated weekly and includes profiles, prices, lists by state, and a reservation section where you can check availability and last-minute cancellations. There's even a place for bloggers who want to add personal recommendations

and comments. "Ranch life is a unique part of American history," says Kilgore. "It's important to keep that wonderful hospitality and outdoor lifestyle alive for people who've never experienced it."

Grand County ranches

In Grand County, prices are often a clue, with expensive places more likely to be geared toward couples without children, even to harried professionals seeking a change of pace and personal service. Ranches — like the Bar Lazy J — whose programs cater to children are both more casual and more affordable.

If your mood depends on scenery and surroundings, consider the location. Some ranches are in remote areas; others are close to a highway or town. Latigo Ranch, for ex-

ample, where we spent one night, is tucked into a secluded mountain meadow high in the Arapaho National Forest, in the Gore Range. Seven miles from the nearest paved road, it enjoys a special solitude and views of magnificent snow-capped peaks. Latigo is also one of the few ranches that stays open year-round, with winter trails for snowshoers and a groomed 65-kilometer trail for cross country skiers.

In contrast, the Bar Lazy J, in the same location for 95 years, now shares what was once a quiet river valley with U.S. 40, which follows the river, passing the ranch high on the opposite hill. The location isn't as isolated, but it's handy, close to Hot Sulphur Springs, the railroad depot at Granby, and to the town of Grand Lake and Rocky Mountain National Park. "It's so convenient, it's brilliant, really," said Julia Allbones, an expert rider who flew direct from London to Denver. "People are so friendly," she said, "you can't imagine how welcome we feel. Next year I'm bringing my son, who's 8."

For most guests, the highway is a nonissue. "The road? I don't give it a second thought," said Gene Deerhake, from Marblehead, Ohio, at the ranch with his wife, Mary, and grandson Brian, for the ninth year in a row. "With all these trees you can't see it anyway."

But it's the traditions you'll remember. Mealtimes, when one of the kids gets to ring the dinner bell. The traditional Blueberry Pancake Breakfast, where Cheri tosses — literally — plate-sized blueberry pancakes to anybody willing to catch them. And the Bottomless Cookie Box, miraculously full of oatmeal-raisin, or chocolate-chip, or peanut butter cookies. Summer camp was never better.

When they're not at their desks in Venice, Calif., Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are off exploring parts unknown.