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Horse play

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

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Picture me in the saddle: Stiff knees, bad balance, jaw clamped in that stubborn "I'm fine, dang it" expression, bouncing along the trail on Chief, a paint horse with stilts for legs.

My outfit, Colorado dude ranch chic, fits the part: A gray felt hat with rawhide trim and beaded hat band, and a pair of boots with decorative stitching and knife-point toes that fit the stirrups but pinch like a vise when I try to walk in them.

"That was your mother's hat?" asks Chad Yurich, our wrangler, with a look of surprise. "Wow. Well, it looks good," he adds approvingly. But as Chief picks up the pace, each jolt reminds me that I'm no better than a greenhorn here at the Bar Lazy J, Colorado's oldest continuously operating dude ranch, in Parshall, west of Rocky Mountain National Park.

As the 12 of us on the morning's trail ride settle into a rhythm and we reach the ridge top, the awkward feeling vanishes. My legs find a sweet spot on the saddle and Chief, noticing the change, perks up his ears. Cotton-ball clouds sail in a turquoise sky and below us, the green valley of the Colorado River appears, with the Bar Lazy J stretched out along the banks.

If the usual summer vacation -- a week at a theme park or a trip to Aunt Hattie's cottage at the lake -- is beginning to look tired, Colorado's dude ranches offer a spectacular alternative, a chance to play "City Slickers" in a setting where Western hospitality is alive and well, every day ends in a sunset and real cowboys still ride the range. Guest ranches have always been part of the Western myth. But with overseas travel looking dicey and more people vacationing at home, Western guest ranches are having their best year ever.

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 summer for 40 guests each week, most of them families with kids.

"When the ranch first opened in 1912," says Mrs. Helmicki, "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, wants 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."

Although each of the Bar Lazy J's guests is assigned his or her own horse for the week and trail riding is first and foremost, it's not the only activity. Ranch programs include mountain biking, hiking and fly fishing in the ranch's private stretch of the Colorado River. The Helmickis also work with local outfitters to arrange river rafting and Jeep trips. Recently they added a "Spa Ride," a three-quarter-day outing that goes from the ranch to the spa at Hot Sulphur Springs. And the children's program, run by three of the most likeable "child wranglers" you could ever want to meet, is available every day.

Mr. Helmicki, who rides with the guests nearly every day, is always on deck, making announcements in the dining room or overseeing operations in the corral. He also leads the weekly campfire and sing-along, and to the delight of repeat visitors, ends the evening by heating the ranch's branding iron in the coals and imprinting a Bar Lazy J on boots, belts, leather hat bands, purses and anything else that comes to mind.

Mrs. Helmicki, a former schoolteacher and award-winning coach, demonstrates her comedic (and leadership) skills at the Wednesday night line-dancing party. And the farewell staff show, the highlight of the week, includes a variety but hilarious skits.

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 carvings. The antique stove in the corner has been pressed into service as a snack bar, open all day with coffee, tea, lemonade and cookies.

If you come, plan to stay a full week. Like the other Grand County ranches, the Bar Lazy J runs on a one-week schedule, and discourages shorter visits. The per-person fee includes all food, horseback riding, fly fishing and other sports equipment. (For more on Grand County's guest ranches, see www.dude-ranch.com.)

But before you book reservations, check the differences. Room accommodations can range from rustic to luxurious lodge rooms, and from historic (read: "old") log lodges to contemporary resort buildings. Some ranches offer hearty American meals served family-style; others offer a menu with varied cuisine in a more formal setting.

Price can also be an indicator. The more expensive the ranch, the more likely it is to be geared toward adults without children, harried professionals seeking a change of pace and well-heeled executives who expect service. Ranches like the Bar Lazy J whose programs cater to children are 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 example, where we spent a day visiting, is in a secluded mountain meadow surrounded by the Arapaho National Forest, in the Gore Range. Seven miles from the nearest paved road, the solitude is delightful, and the scenery, distant snow-capped peaks, is magnificent. Latigo is unusual because it stays open year-round, too, with winter trails for snowshoers and a groomed 10-kilometer trail for cross country skiers.

In contrast, the Bar Lazy J, in the same location for 95 years, shares what was once a quiet river valley. U.S. Highway 40, which passes the ranch high on the opposite river bank. It's not as pretty, but it's handy, providing easy access to Hot Sulphur Springs, the railroad depot at Granby, Grand Lake and Rocky Mountain National Park.

"It's so convenient, it's brilliant, really," said Julia Allbones, an expert rider who flew directly from London to Denver. "People are so friendly here," she added, "you can't imagine how welcome we feel. Next year I'll be back."



bringing my son, who's 8."

And 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, for the ninth year in a row. "With all trees you can't see it anyway."

Why do so many guests come back year after year? The Bar Lazy J is like a one-week sleepover camp for adults and kids, a stress-free universe where everything's provided and planned but the activities are strictly optional. The activities vary, or you can sit by the river and relax.

Meals are announced by the ringing of the dinner bell, a treat awarded to the kids. Mrs. Helmicki tosses them literally -- plate-sized blueberry pancakes to anybody willing to catch them at Wednesday's breakfast. Dishes are served at tables for four, six and eight, perfect for meeting your fellow guests. And everybody's favorite Bottomless Cookie Box, stocked with oatmeal raisin, chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies, is always available. No matter how many you eat. Like the Bar Lazy J, it's a miracle.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.

IF YOU GO

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 are \$1,495 for adults, children 7-12 are \$995, and children 6 and under are \$795, and include all meals, snacks, horseback riding, fishing and sports equipment. Excluded are optional excursions and alcoholic beverages, which the ranch does not offer (guests may bring their own).

Call 800-396-6279 or visit www.bar-lazyj.com. E-mail BarLazyJ@rkytmnhi.com.

For additional information, contact the Grand County Tourism Board at www.grand-county.com, or call 800-582-5821. For all six area dude ranches, go to www.dude-ranch.com.
