



UNEASY RIDER

Miracle in the mountains: Latigo Ranch manages to get a fair-weather horsewoman comfortably back in the saddle.



BY ALISON GWINN

“You’re walking like real cowgirls now!” wrangler Lacey calls out after my daughter, Katie, and I dismount from our second horseback ride of the day—wobbly, saddle-sore and, yes, a bit bandy-legged, too.

It’s music to our city girl ears. Though both of us had taken riding lessons years ago, we learned English-style, not Western—smaller saddle, no horn, reins in separate hands—and at this point were un-easy riders. So it was with a bit of trepidation that we’d approached the horse barn at Latigo Ranch, a magical spot about a half-hour northwest of Kremmling and adjacent to the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest.

Owned for the last 30 years by the friendly, efficient Randy and Lisa George, Latigo (pronounced LAT-i-go and named for the leather strip that connects the cinch to the saddle) has been in operation as a dude ranch for almost a century. It all started with homesteader F.J. Kasdorf, who came to the area by covered wagon in 1923 and ran the place as the Snowshoe Dude Ranch for 32 years (rumor has it he even hosted Zane Grey at one time).

Kasdorf clearly knew a good spot when he saw it: The panoramic views, which include Mount Audubon, Apache Peak, Wolford Mountain and Mount Eva, look like they belong on a vintage “Welcome to Colorado!” postcard. And the miles and

LATIGO RANCH

LOCATION: Kremmling

ACCOMMODATIONS: The modern log cabins at this all-inclusive ranch include a sitting room, fireplace or wood-burning stove, refrigerator (stocked with soft drinks) and daily maid service.

SUMMER ACTIVITIES: Horseback riding, fly-fishing, mountain biking, hiking shooting, rafting, swimming, country line dancing

WINTER ACTIVITIES: Skiing, fat bikes, snowshoeing, tubing, sledding, hot tubs, indoor games

DINING: Made-to-order breakfast, buffet-style lunch, elegant dinner, cookouts, plus snacks including caramel corn, cookies, fruit and granola bars

SUMMER RATES (Through September 23): Start at \$2,775 from Sunday to Saturday for adults, \$2,155 for kids 6-13, \$1,725 for kids 3-5, kids 2 and younger, free

WINTER RATES (December to March 19, 2018): \$195 per night for adults, \$125 for kids ages 6-13, kids 5 and younger, free

INFO: latigotrails.com



miles of horse trails, where guests can go on two rides daily (including a breakfast ride, an after-dinner ride, an optional all-day ride and one overnighter), wind their way through breathtaking stands of aspens and pines, across Technicolor wildflower meadows and over burbling alpine streams. (Some of those same trails are used during the winter when Latigo turns into a Nordic ski center.)

Guests—often families—are encouraged to come for a week, and the Georges even host special-occasion visits (a Women's Week, an Adults-Only Week and a Fall Cattle Roundup). It feels like a working ranch, and that's one thing that separates Latigo from some of its brie-and-chardonnay brethren.

It all starts with the Georges' solid corps of summer wranglers, young men and women from across the country whose fresh-faced good looks could land them on the pages of a Western fashion catalog but whose real value is in their enthusiasm, work ethic and overall horsemanship.

After being assigned a horse for the week (the don't-worry-be-happy Gunsmoke for me, the more stubborn Canyon for Katie), we found ourselves quickly out on the trail, climbing higher and higher into the trees and catching both amazing views and equine tips ("hold your reins like an ice cream cone," "lean your belt buckle forward when your horse is going uphill," "stroke, don't pat a horse").

The Georges know learning is half the fun, so the ranch also offers a range of lessons: At a morning fly-fishing tutorial next to the ranch's trout-stocked pond, I learned the parts of the rod, how to choose and tie on a fly and how to reel in the fish. But mostly I learned that fish are smarter (or at least more cunning) than I. Though I did not get a single nibble, I did manage to snag Katie's down jacket. Score 1 for the trout, 0 for the neophyte.

At an equine session, a local vet, Dr. Lindy Bracket, let the Latigo guests borrow her stethoscope to hear a horse's heartbeat (naturally slower than ours), then showed us how to check his gums (healthy and pink) and take his temperature—on the back end. On another day, we watched three local farriers shoe a lineup of Latigo's horses, a precarious job if ever there was one.

But the highlight for me was probably the lessons in cowboy skills: throwing an ax Ed Ames-style (tip: don't flick the wrist), lassoing (much harder than it looks with that super-stiff lariat) and cracking a bullwhip (which I had an embarrassing affinity for). I even learned how to tie my pretty silk bandana into a "Buckaroo square knot."

Among the Georges' goals: to make guests love Latigo so much that they cry at week's end. I might not have been a true cowgirl after my stay, but I certainly felt a little weepy at leaving this slice of paradise behind.

