

No pain, no gain, dudes

A ranch holiday raises the question: Why would anyone pay to roll around in the dirt?

Judith Ritter, **Weekend Post** Published: Saturday, August 30, 2008

When you live in an urban centre like Montreal, "livestock" isn't a word that pops up in conversation. Nor is there much occasion to chat about cougar prints or calf wrestling. So I was feeling a little disoriented when, jet-lagged from a cross-country flight, shaken from a bumpy small plane ride over towering mountains and a harrowing drive along switchback roads, I arrived at the wilderness ranch where my daughter and I had chosen to treat ourselves to a working holiday. After a meal and a good night's sleep, we woke to find ourselves on a remote 44,000 acres in the Nemaiah Valley in the Chilcotin region of British Columbia. Soon we were tiptoeing our way around piles of steamy manure in a corral with 47 snorting horses, surrounded by a field of several hundred lowing cattle. Here, at the Elkin Creek Guest Ranch, we would hurl lassoes, brand calves and -- on horseback -- herd big-shouldered cattle and their calves to fresh summer pastures. That neither daughter nor mother had a clue how to ride would be no deterrent.

In fact, we had joined the ranks of a growing number of travellers with a taste for adrenalin-charged getaways. It's one of the newest vacation trends, as people swap the dream vacation in Tuscany for a SWAT-team training session or bucking-bronco boot camp.

At Elkin Creek ranch we would run madly around the corral in the hot sun doing chores. We would corner and bridle reluctant horses. We would lug heavy bowls of table scraps from the ranch to our steeds. And when the water hose to the main trough suddenly broke, and dozens of very large, very angry cattle started pushing and shoving around an empty trough, we would stave off a stampede by hauling buckets of water. And we would pay for the privilege.

"My BlackBerry doesn't work," says my daughter, a workaholic from Washington, anxiously tapping a vacant screen. Right. Neither do cellphones. Electricity comes from a generator and water from a stream. The nearest cafe is an eight-hour drive away in Vancouver. Wild horses graze at the side of the road; black bears and grizzlies roam the forest around us. Taking in the stunning scenery, I feel as though I've just walked through my screensaver.

"Work on the ranch is never predictable," Ian Bridge, our seasoned ranch boss, drawls as he leans back on the corral fence and dispenses advice to our chaotic bucket brigade of rookies from Canada, Sweden, England and the United States. "Anything can happen out here."

I'm done in early on. But my daughter, along with several lawyers, a software designer, a TV producer and a banker, attacks her chores with delight.

"All this work and we're paying for it," laughs Denaige Rivard of Alert Bay, B. C.

"What do you holiday-makers love about this?" I ask.

"I love that it's not law. Not thinking," says Vancouver lawyer Garfield Staats, who looks so stunningly at home in his cowboy hat and boots that, at first, I think he is a ranch fixture. In fact, we're all dressed up cowpoke style. Staats aside, however, the rest of us look like the Village People.

My boots hurt. I stand back and watch the others saddle their horses and ride around separating calves from their frenzied mothers in preparation for our next chore: calf wrestling and branding. Suddenly there's a lot of shouting. The How to Rope a Calf Workshop has stopped. Over by the far fence, a sizable black bear is standing up to its full height and peering at the cows, and us. OK, a bear is no big deal and certainly not for the can-do B. C. guests, who are moving in closer to get a better view. But I'm backing away, trying to remember my bear instructions. Was it play dead? Climb a tree? Bare my teeth? Look away like a shy girl at a school dance? Never mind. Ranch owner Dave Milne leaps on to a horse and gallops directly toward the bear. He shouts and fires shots in the air. The bear skulks off. "Just scaring it," he says, as if it's all in a day's work (which it is). He smiles and points us to the main house where lunch is waiting.

Elkin Creek is a working cattle ranch in a struggling beef industry, but it is also a guest ranch, so meals are important. Chef Alan Schafer, fresh from duty on a millionaire's yacht, turns out scrumptious entrees and ambrosial desserts. In a kind of antlers-on-the-wall ambience, we newbie wranglers sit at long tables and chat, but for me the conversation is as if I am on Mars.

"Done much roping?" says Adam Trevor, a handsome young university student wearing the requisite blingy rodeo belt buckle.

I shake my head incredulously.

After lunch, under the tutelage of a bemused Ian Bridge (as a cowboy boss, he's straight from central casting), we spin ropes and practise lassoing bales of hay. The more skilful do this on horseback. Others help corral reluctant cattle in order to trim their horns, a kind of manicure with a chain saw. Finally we are off on what turns out to be a painful but exhilarating ride into the wilderness. My daughter and I simply hold on and hope for the best.

That night we bunk down in an old log cabin. At breakfast we wolf down stacks of pancakes and compare wounds, bruises, bumps and scratches and even a sprained wrist. There's a new camaraderie. We are proud of each other and ourselves.

"At least no one's lost any teeth yet," Bridge chuckles.

Today the bold will brand. Among the boldest is surely Theresa Trevor, a Victoria banker who is here on a mother-son vacation. Soft-spoken and rosy cheeked, Trevor and some of the others spend the day in the dust wrestling 50-kilogram calves, bawling and kicking, to the ground for branding.

"I'm not tired and I have no pain so I'll just keep at it," Trevor says when asked if she wants a break.

To my amazement, the feeling is shared by my daughter, who has thrown herself into the smoke of the red-hot iron and melee of mooing and kicking where, like a practiced vet, she administers vitamin shots to the downed calves.

That evening we enjoy another five-star dinner and talk about hay and grouse and our wounds of the day. I proudly flash several long scratches (not mentioning that I got them from riding into a tree). We are giddy with exhaustion and good food, and ready for the long cattle drive tomorrow.

The next morning our assignment is to ride alongside the herd and make sure the cows don't wander off and the calves don't fall behind. My daughter and I ride ahead of the herd under the protection of one of the wranglers, who makes us feel useful though it is clear we are not. The more expert and enthusiastic among us gallop after any cow that bolts. Calves lose their way, get tired and lie down. Cows take off into the woods. We ride for hours through forests and fields, by pristine lakes surrounded by mountains. There

is no Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal in this Canada. We have travelled back in time to some authentic place.

"Yes, I wanted to ride horses," says Yette Vandendam, a TV producer from Vancouver, "but I wanted to ride with a purpose." And there is something purposeful in each one of these few days.

My daughter and I came here as urban dwellers for whom Canada is that crowded strip along the U. S. border, for whom swaths of this magnificent country are as unreal as postcard images. Now, this place has forever stamped itself on us.

"This isn't work. It's my dream," says a very dusty and happy Theresa Trevor.

It's a dream we're part of, too. We're the cowboys of our TV childhoods and of the mythical Canadian West.

IF YOU GO - Elkin Creek Guest Ranch is accessible by car or plane from Vancouver. The drive from Vancouver is approximately eight hours via Williams Lake, the closest town to Elkin Creek. If you fly, there are two options: Pacific Coastal Airlines runs daily flights to Williams Lake, where you will be picked up by the ranch truck; another option, arranged through the ranch, is to fly charter on Thursdays or Sundays from Vancouver South Terminal directly to the ranch's grassy landing strip. - The nightly rate is \$275 for adults; \$50 for children ages three to five; special rates for seniors and children under three. - pacificcoastal.com - guestranches.com/elkincreek