

Hard ridin' wranglers by day, pampered city folk by night

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Home on the range was never this good. Back in the old days, looking for lost cattle meant lonesome trails, saddle sores and a sorry meal of warmed over beans with a crust of bread. If you were lucky, the bread had a good dollop of lard. Those days are just a dusty memory if you choose to saddle up at the **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch**, where working the open range and looking for lost cattle never means giving up the creature comforts of five-star service.

Take a long, winding road through the Brittany triangle west of Williams Lake to the broad Nemaiah Valley and the **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch**. As city slickers in crisp blue jeans tumble from a dusty Suburban, the last of the spring snow swirls around the towering summit of Mount Tatlow.

"Someone must have pointed at the mountain," says guest services co-ordinator Susy Chaston. "Snow isn't the only thing swirling around that mountain. It's said that if you point at the mountain, the weather changes for the worse." With that, most of the greenhorns stuff hands deep into dungarees and look skyward for the weather to shift. It does -- but for the better.

All have come to ride hard and wrangle -- tempered with a generous dose of pampering. Right on cue the cookhouse screen door is kicked open by chef David Correa bearing a tray of fresh fruit kabobs to wash away any lingering discomforts of the road. Duffel bags are tossed into luxuriously appointed cabins, and we all mosey over to the corral to meet our equine companions for the week. A short orientation and a quick ride around the corral, make for a quick saddle-up in the morning.

We wake the next day to the sound of thundering hooves as wranglers bring in the horses from their lush evening pasture. Over a gourmet breakfast, guests can ponder which activity to choose for the day. If ranch boss Mike Hawkridge is looking for cattle on the 11,200-hectares of the ranch, be prepared for a long day on the range. But don't let that deter you -- it's the highlight for every city slicker. The saddle is good, the vista is impressive and Hawkridge has stories, lore and lots of country charm to wile away the miles.

The day I accompany him, it's the close of calving season and Hawkridge is keeping a close eye on the cows and calves who might have got separated. Range cattle don't see too many riders in bright Gortex, so they tend to bolt when the newbies come charging in. Fortunately, the horses know the drill, and move silently through the thick willow brush. I hear a calf bawl and spin in my saddle to look, but to my surprise, it's Hawkridge. He's rewarded with the mother's deep voice calling back as she saunters out from the trees. A calf pops up, sounding remarkably like Hawkridge, and trundles over to join mom. Hawkridge's tanned face breaks into a grin, "Works every time," he says.

It's a long day in the saddle, but finally every critter is accounted for. To me a cow is a cow, but Hawkridge knows just about every one. By the time we round the last corner, the trees are casting long shadows over the ranch houses and the promise of another

gourmet meal beckons. Chef Correa has worked for politicians, royalty and rock stars, including Mick Jagger.

Other activities include trail rides, biking, canoeing, fly-fishing, picnicking, hiking and paddle boating to just sitting and admiring the serenity. One day is designated Gymkhana Day, where everyone shows off newfound riding skills. At night, hang out by the campfire, or head down to the hot tub to soak that saddle-weary butt and admire the big, starry B.C. sky.

Off-ranch, you can hike to the top of Cardiff Mountain and check out the brick-like basalt formations, or go whitewater rafting on the Chilcotin River for a wet, white-knuckle ride. The scenery is breathtaking and you'll soon lose count of the eagles flying by. If the rapids prove to be too wild, seek out the wild things with wranglers Kim and Carrie who will help you locate the famous wild horses of the Brittany Triangle.

The **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch** caters to families, couples, corporate retreats, weddings and anybody else who wanders in. Cowgirl weekends, branding weekends and horsemanship clinics are offered throughout the May-October season.

Illustration:

• Photo: Joanne Elves, CanWest News Service / Chef David Correa has served up delicious dishes to politicians, royalty and even Mick Jagger. At **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch** in British Columbia he promises to serve up the same.

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