



Cantering to the Chilcotin rhythms

Get lost in a land where getting hands dirty is a peaceful pastime

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Summer can be a hard time to escape the "I'm so bored" whine of school vacationers. But one place you can be assured not to hear it is in the Chilcotin's Elkin Creek Guest Ranch. Located an eight-hour drive from Vancouver, the Chilcotin's landscape of undulating hills and rolling meadows instills an instant relaxation, with not a hint of a 7-11 or any other kind of store the moment you pass Williams Lake and head into the Nehmiah Valley.

Elkin Creek Ranch is the kind of place where you can get your hands dirty. Here, children quickly find their comfort zone astride the property's 55 horses, venturing out with the wranglers on long rides into the bush. There are cattle drives for experienced riders who favour the idea of cantering after the cattle across wildflower-filled fields, and slow walks for those who prefer to traverse the hills and valleys at a more leisurely pace.

You never know what you might see out here. "I'm not worried about us running into a bear -- the moose are what I'm worried about," confessed Ian Bridge, a manager at the lodge, when he sensed my fear. This ecosystem is almost perfectly undisturbed and is home to deer, grizzly and black bear, lynx, cougar, wolf, wolverine and even a few herds of wild horses. But the chances of running into anything other than a darting chipmunk or a scampering rabbit, are fairly remote.

The only way to reach the lodge is via gravel road, two-and-a-half hours from Williams Lake. If you are lucky, as I was, you will spot a herd of wild horses grazing in a meadow, or watching silently from the shade of a clump of pine trees. Look carefully, for there is something undeniably special about these horses.

No one knows precisely where they come from. Some argue that they are descendants of the Conquistador's horse, the first horse ever brought to the New World. Others claim they have the physical characteristics of colonial Spanish horses. Wherever their origins lie, these horses embody the spirit of freedom. Skittish, proud, dignified and only slightly curious about their human onlookers, the herds bolt the moment they sense danger, galloping across the plains as their shaggy manes fly in the breeze. Watch them and you know you have seen true beauty.

But beauty is not hard to find in the Chilcotin. Guarded by the snow-capped peak of Mount Tatlow, the lodge locates you immediately in cowboy country. Female wranglers look natural in Stetsons, boots and denims, and at breakfast, a trapper

relates stories of life in the bush. The ambience at the lodge, where rustic log cabins are the predominant architecture, is casual, friendly and relaxed.

Yet there is never any dearth of activities. If they are not on horseback, you'll find the kids at Vedan Lake, some venturing out by paddleboat and others fishing from the pier. There are kayaks for a peaceful paddle, and motorboats for those who want a little more speed. With all amenities provided, all you have to do is arrive and enjoy them.

My first day on the lake, the only sounds beyond the rippling water were the haunting cry of the loon and the gentle bellow of cows on the hillside. The weather can change fast out here. Stillness and sunshine give way to frenzied winds in a matter of minutes. Foaming whitecaps replace the glass-like water and as thunder rolls dramatically across the sky, you get a brief glimpse of how rough and rugged this terrain truly is.

In addition to forking hay and caring for the horses, the wranglers keep the children stimulated and happy with scavenger hunts, fishing derbies, triathlons and kite flying. Friendships come naturally, among both the kids and the adults, particularly at mealtimes around the communal dining tables.

The all-inclusive lodge provides three hearty meals a day, with chef David Correa at the helm of the kitchen. Despite the two-and-a-half hour distance from the closest grocery store, Correa is a culinary mastermind, serving an array of gourmet food that belies the remoteness of his location.

But apart from the food, there are no frills at this working ranch where guests make their own beds in the morning and carry their dinner plates to the kitchen. Like any cowboy ranch, this one is dusty, filled with the earthy smell of horses and authentic down to the last stirrup.

For most ranch guests, it is a love of horses that brings them this way, a curiosity about this magnificent ungulate and a penchant to ride off into the sunset. But if you are not into riding, there's another way to appreciate their beauty, and that is to see and learn about the wild horse herds. Yes, it requires dollops of patience, for the horses are nothing if not elusive, and the landscape they inhabit is roughly the size of Luxembourg -- in other words, massive.

But should you have the good fortune to stumble across them, relish the moment. Listen for the hollow sound of their hooves beating against the earth, and see the proud swish of their tails as the horses disappear like fleeting ghosts into the distance. It is a memory that will stay with you forever.

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IF YOU GO

How To Get There: There are three options for reaching Elkin Creek: an eight-hour drive from Vancouver, a flight on Central Mountain Air (two flights daily; www.flycma.com) followed by a vehicle rental for the remaining 250 kilometres, or by chartering a plane or floatplane and landing on the ranch's private air strip.

- A three-night stay at the ranch costs between \$695 and \$795 for adults depending on the season, with discounts for children and seniors.

- For more information, visit www.adventurewestresorts.com or call (877) 3-GOWEST.

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