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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SKI LIFE

SUMMER MOUNTAIN ADVENTURES

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JUNE/JULY 2005
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THE GOAL AT
THE SKYLINE
GUEST RANCH IN
TELLURIDE, COLO.,
ISN'T SO MUCH
TO GET THE
DUDE INTO
THE COUNTRY
AS TO GET
THE COUNTRY
INTO THE DUDE.

Photographs by Douglas Merriam

C O W B O Y U P

By Edie Thys



AT HOME ON THE RANGE When wrangler Mike McAber, a Jackson, Wyo., native, isn't putting a little horse sense into the Skyline Ranch guests, he's riding the rodeo circuit.

by

the third gong I register it as the come-and-get-it bell. In this case, signaling lunch—a lunch I have neither procured nor prepared nor even thought about until this moment—at Skyline Guest Ranch in Telluride, Colo. With a practiced cowgirl gait (disguising my determination to scuff my new cowboy boots), I mosey on down a dirt trail that leads from the barn toward the cluster of log cabins that are my home for the week.

Above and to my right, a zigzag log fence runs along open pasture, where 50 horses graze beneath the rugged tips of the San Juans. To my left, 14,001-foot Sunshine Peak reflects in the glassy fishing pond—a picture of postcard perfection. What the alpine splendor suggests, the dinner announces clearly: This is paradise, and for a week, it's mine.

Mind you, this revelation comes before I have even grabbed a saddlehorn and tried to swing my leg over a horse. My husband, Chan Morgan, and I arrived the previous afternoon and reported to the barn where Dave Ubeck, the soft-spoken head wrangler, assigned us our horses. I was matched with an unflappable gray named Charlie, and Chan with a sprightly bay named Stealth. I was OK with the Mr. Ed option for my first adult dude ranch experience. In his guide, *Ranch Vacations*, Gene Kilgore describes a dude as “any individual not in his or her natural environment.” That would be me, largely because my horsewoman/cowgirl fantasy was squelched at an early age by stiff jodhpur types and gritty Wyoming cowboys who made me feel that my dudeness was terminal. The goal of the dude ranch—and there are dozens like Skyline that stud the Rocky Mountain West—is to reconnect people with their inner cowboy. It's a connection you don't even know you're missing until you pull on a pair of boots and settle into a saddle. The growing popularity of “ranch vacations,” which tend to start at around \$1,200 per week, shows how disconnected Americans feel from nature and rural life. “A man that don't love a horse, there is something the matter

with him,” Will Rogers once said. I'm beginning to see his point.

Skyline's dedudification process starts in the corral, where our group has spent the first morning learning the principles of Natural Horsemanship, a philosophy employed at Skyline since 1992. Dave patiently gives us horse sense. He explains that horses, with eyes on the sides of their heads, can interpret humans—with their straight-on focus—as predators. We watch as he controls the horses by reward rather than intimidation. After three hours, our group—11 guests with varying riding experience—are not horse whisperers, but we have enough understanding to form a working partnership with our SEVs (sure-footed equine vehicles).



By lunchtime, my dudely apprehension is supplanted by confidence and an anticipation for something I can't yet describe. “Adventure” is too daunting a term considering the serenity and comfort, while “experience” blandly ignores the excitement and fun.

The Fanny family, Skyline's owners, call it Mountain Joy, and I'm hard-pressed to come up with a better term for whatever it is that immediately captivates my two boys, ages 4 (Oliver) and 6 (Chauncey). They arrive at the ranch primed for the nonstop parade of activities we feel compelled to jam into a family vacation. Skyline, however, ignores America's full-tilt obsession. Access to cell phones, fancy restaurants, television and the Internet aren't denied, but guests forget about them. Tuning out becomes a way to tune in—to yourself, your family and the outdoors.

As the kids downshift and coast into this world, treasures materialize around every corner—the canoe resting in the pond, the stream running through the front yard, a box of toy bulldozers, fishing rods, dogs, horses and, most of all, the friendly faces who wander by, introduce themselves and share an animal-husbandry insight or a nugget of wilderness wisdom.

Service is a guest-ranch hallmark, but not in the traditional sense. Sure, the staff will locate some toothpaste and direct you to a stash of worn-in boots if yours don't fit right (because you bought them the day before the trip, for instance). But the mission of everyone, from cook to caretaker to wrangler, is to show each guest how to capture—and be wholly captivated by—Mountain Joy.

"My job," Cindy explains, "is to show people how to enjoy being outdoors." She does that by providing good food and good beds, but more importantly by letting guests move at their own rhythms while encouraging them to get out of their rooms and connect with one another and the mountains. Breakfast is at 8:30, allowing time to take in the sunrise. Meals are served when the bell rings, at long common tables in a main cabin that feels like a huge living room, with couches and armchairs surrounded by bookshelves on all sides. In late afternoon, the hot tub beckons from its hideaway beneath giant aspen trees, and a crescent of Adirondack chairs rings the fire pit and faces directly toward Sunshine Peak. That unassuming spot, which I barely notice the

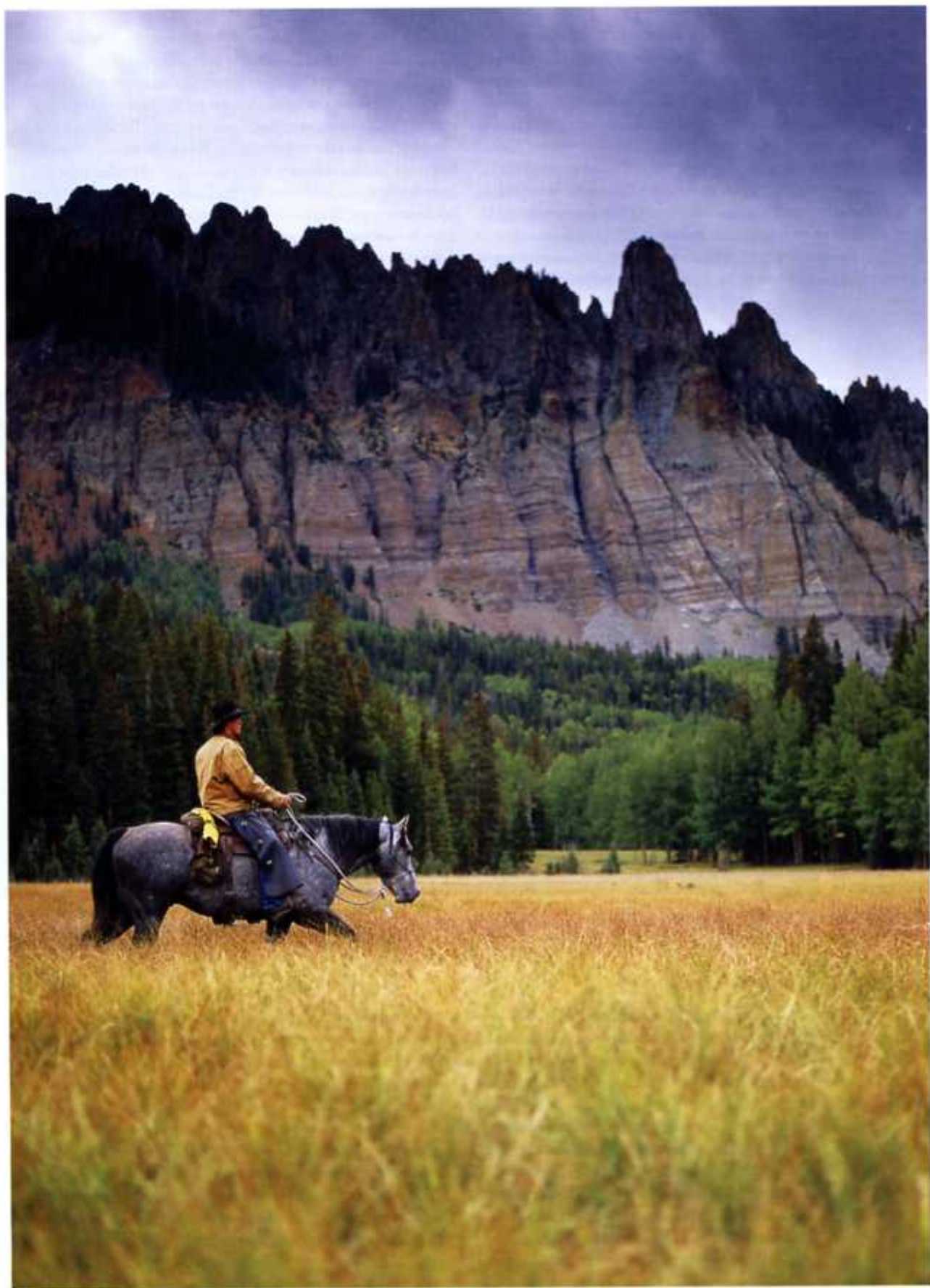


RANCH RHYTHMS Head wrangler Dave Ubeck checks his tack; saddles in waiting; when you're not on horseback, you're often on the water; the perfect start to the perfect day. Breakfast, Meadow.

Sherry Farny was so taken by Skyline Ranch when she happened upon it while hiking that when it came up for sale in 1968, her husband Dave—then heading the Aspen Highlands Ski School—bought it sight unseen. There is a familiar tale within the industry—a family affair and a labor of love, a story of discovering paradise and sharing it. They first ran Skyline as a mountaineering school. In 1981, Cindy, the eldest of four kids and the first female nordic racer at the University of Colorado, turned it into a guest ranch. Dave and Sherry added horses in 1983, and brother Mike, a former U.S. Ski Team downhiller, ran the ranch from 1992–2002. It was Mike who introduced Natural Horsemanship to the operation. Now it's Cindy who's everywhere—from office to kitchen to barn to trails—armed with energy, solutions and her camera.

first day, is where we'll gather after dinner most nights, revealing layers of ourselves in laughter and conversation as stars pop into a sky that fades from blue to indigo to wilderness black.

Before our first ride, we've exchanged only the barest information, and we're still strangers as we walk back to the barn after lunch, divide into groups, find our mounts and set off into the surrounding woods. Chan and I go with Courtney, a 24-year-old wrangler from Georgia. With us are Courtney's parents, Cindy and McGrath, here to visit for the week. McGrath hasn't ridden since a car accident in 1989 and, despite the fact that he races Porsches, his love for powerful machines does not extend to horses. "You can always turn the Porsche off," he reminds us. Dave's factoid that a spooked horse typically only bolts for



GO WEST Casey Smith doesn't mind heading to the office early for his wrangling job; Chauncey and Oliver Morgan do their best, John Wayne.



about 400 yards—the distance a mountain lion can run at top speed—offers him some solace. Courtney has degrees in international studies and animal science, and a Dr. Doolittle-esque gift for communication. Her soft, Southern voice lulls the wildest horse—or the most skittery rider. She calmly reminds us to lean forward up hills, to change our grip, post-up in our stirrups when the terrain gets rough and other equine basics.

After an hour in the woods, we reconvene at the meadow. Charlie is about as spontaneous as a politician giving a stump speech, but he plays the game and even jumps over a log rail. Our last exercise of the day is loping. Waiting our turns feels like standing atop the first ski run of the season. Will this be a Jesse

the mountains en route to a wedding. Julie, a nurse from North Carolina and a seasoned guest-rancher, chose Skyline for its reputation as an exemplar of horsemanship, while Cindy and McGrath came for a good time with their daughter. Beyond the specifics is a greater desire: to immerse oneself in the rhythm of the outdoors in a place where the routines have relevance and purpose. It's both revitalizing and comforting. The timeless allure of the ranch life hasn't waned even as it has modernized. Just because cowboys now check email, use cell phones and drink lattes doesn't diminish their connection to the natural world.

Horseback riding is not necessarily an end unto itself. Trail rides are optional and are offered in varying lengths, so there's



COUNTRY CLUB Courtney Keen (right) and Kathy Neal, cowgirl chic. Skyline's guest rooms stay in character; ranch staff sit a spell to enjoy lunch and discuss the day, what's waiting at trails' end.

James flat-out escape gallop or a casual Bonanza lope across the meadow? Then—just like when gravity takes over on the slopes—the natural flow of doing submerges our insecurities and we fall into the horse's earthbound rhythm. *Yee-haw-weeee!*

The allure of a dude ranch is different for everyone. For me, this vacation is the fulfillment of a long-standing mission. In the skiing world, the Farnys and their ranch are legendary, and our kids, though not old enough to trail ride, are ready for an authentic mountain experience. For John, from New York City, and his two daughters—Kyle, 13, and Claire, 12—on their fifth visit, Skyline is a family tradition. John's girlfriend Laura, an actor and helicopter pilot, has little horse experience but is game. Dave and Stefania, from Pennsylvania, want to maximize their few days in

plenty of time to hike, fish, bike and enjoy all manner of outdoor activities. That flexibility allows Chan and I to trade off long rides and short, spend time exploring with the kids and include them in the highlight of the week, the overnight at High Camp.

We promised the boys their first camping trip this year, so I load them into Cindy's supply SUV for their own rough ride to the Farnys' 320-acre retreat, nestled beneath Sheep Mountain at 11,000 feet. The cabin, which Dave Farny built from timber gathered on the property, overlooks two meadows where horses graze against the backdrop of the distant Lizard Head monolith. By the time I arrive with the group on horseback, the kids are beaming from inside the tent they've claimed beneath the canopy of pines. Even after hours of mountain-man Craig's stoking, the

spring-fed, wood-fired hot tub is not yet hot enough for wimpy adults, but it's perfect for little people. Before dinner, as the sun sinks low, two giddy towheads bob in the tub that sits in a meadow of September-yellowing grass dotted with blue gentians. "My boys," I assure them, "it doesn't get any better than this."

Later we sit inside the candlelit cabin at long wooden tables savoring stew and cornbread and the promising aroma of baking brownies. The staff complain that they are just now taking off the weight they put on the first month because the food is so good, and later, as I lick the remains of a third s'more from my fingers, I feel their pain. As the temperature drops, some retire to their tents, others to comfortable beds in the cabin and an adventurous

In the morning, the kids wake up from a dream only to realize in wide-grinning delight that it was true. Leaving High Camp, it's my turn for the long ride, on a trail that skirts the flanks of bare red and yellow mineral-streaked peaks. Tracing the rocky contour, we hear elk bugling across the valley, then dip below tree-line, weaving through forests and across streambeds.

Head-to-tail plodding can be a snooze, but passing the time is less on our minds than preserving it. When given a measure of freedom, horses turn a trail ride into a great cocktail party, with periods of contemplation instead of awkward pauses. Like good hostesses, they keep the conversations mixing as they shift order, lagging behind or speeding up to another group. After quizzing

Kyle and Claire on their school sports, I drift back and talk to John about what skis he wants for this season. Laura's horse quickens, catches mine and we share a half hour of trading New York stories before she moves ahead. I fall into step with Cindy, Courtney's mother, with whom I cover everything from horse breeds to family businesses to child rearing. On the trail, much as on a chairlift, wilderness, activity and fresh air conspire to create an openness, a communal freedom not found in more formal settings. In the course of a few hours we've all gotten a sense of one another's lives.

On our last day at Skyline we ride to a neighboring privately owned meadow for breakfast. Dave leads Chan, Julie and me on a loping ride gently upward through meadows and forest. We descend, wrapped in a towering grove of aspens, the ground a soft green carpet of meadow rue just yellowing at the edges. Except for the wind thundering high above, it is silent, awesome. "It's like riding through a cathedral," Julie whispers, and it does indeed feel sacred.

Emerging into the "breakfast meadow," sunlight beams peek through the moody sky, sweeping across billowing grass that stretches to the base of the stunning vertical rock formation known as the

Ophir Needles. Riders already across the meadow are so distant

crew to the now steamy hot tub. Transfixed by the campfire, Chan, Craig, Stefania and I tip our heads back to look at the stars, the satellites, the jets silently moving across the sky.

C O N T I N U E D O N P A G E 9 5

Hey, Pardner

With so many ranches to wrangle, consult the dude ranch bible, Gene Kilgore's *Ranch Vacations*, or his website, ranchweb.com, to narrow the field. Plan to book your visit a year in advance. Here are a few stand-outs from the herd. (Prices are per adult, per week.) **SPOTTED HORSE RANCH, JACKSON, WYO.** Home to the famous appaloosa horses bred by the Nez Perce Indians, Spotted Horse has endless trails near Yellowstone National Park. Wednesday is "Trout School" followed by a scenic float trip. \$2,200; spottedhorseranch.com **63 RANCH, LIVINGSTON, MONT.** This National Historic Site has been a family ranch since 1863. "The 63" provides the chance to move cattle and learn to lasso. Overnight among elk, moose and bighorn sheep at the Bear Wallow camp. \$1,350; sixtythree.com **THE HOMERANCH, CLARK, COLO.** Play cowboy, then enjoy world-class gourmet dining at this Relais & Chateaux ranch just north of Steamboat Springs. \$5,285; homeranch.com **HUNEWILL GUEST RANCH, BRIDGEPORT, CALIF.** The sixth-generation Hunewills have rides for every ability, plus the chance to learn cowboy skills like roping, branding, tracking and "doctoring" livestock on 26,000 acres east of Yosemite National Park. \$1,373; hunewill-ranch.com **THREE BARS GUEST AND CATTLE RANCH, CRANBROOK, B.C.** A stunning 35,000-acre spread in the Canadian Rockies means no one gets bored. The ranch offers blue-ribbon flyfishing, plus a kids petting zoo, a pool and a fort. \$1,470; threebarsranch.com —Jennie Lay



◆ COWBOY UP

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their horses look like little boys' toys left behind from a picnic. Someday soon there will be a house, likely with high vaulted ceilings and panoramic windows framing the spectacular views. But for the moment, it's ours.

After a blustery yet spectacular feast, Chan and I join Cindy, Courtney and Mike, a wrangler transplanted from Jackson, Wyo. Mike rides the mustang Diablo and Courtney is on Fighting Ferrari, a.k.a. Seabiscuit, the thoroughbred actor who retired at Skyline and mostly poses for photos. Being astride Seabiscuit, we are told, feels a bit like riding a stick of dynamite. But Courtney makes it look easy. Standing against the gray horizon, she and rodeo rider Mike are an image of an America I thought had passed.

A few days later, back on the grid, I dread hearing, "You have 16 messages," on voicemail and the computer's ominously cheery "You've got mail!" When friends ask about our trip, I need to cap my geyser of enthusiasm. We relaxed, had fun, made friends, learned horsemanship, visited new wild places, breathed fresh air, lived under the stars. Really, they had me the moment I heard the first dinner bell.

Several weeks after our trip, a card arrives from the Farnys, and a lone aspen leaf falls from a photograph of the ranch. The note reports that Skyline Ranch has been sold. The new owner intends to use it as a private retreat from civilization. My heart falls, and I try to figure out how to break the news to my boys without starting a riot. (They've asked nearly every morning since our return, "When are we going back to the ranch?")

Then I hear from a friend that Cindy Farny—never one to remain idle at the hitching post—has vowed to open a guest ranch on the beautiful High Camp property, which is staying in the family. Knowing Cindy for a week, I'd bet on her.

Despite my sadness over Skyline Ranch's fate, the call of the cowboy life—even for a week or a weekend—lives on as a lesson that busy doesn't mean better. Connected doesn't mean content. That tuning out means tuning in. Mountain Joy is still out there waiting, so come and get it while you can. ◆