

GETAWAYS

Dude, That's My Horse

Visit a dude ranch in winter? A Nebraska family packs its goose-down gear and finds a warm reception at the Double E Guest Ranch in Gila.

Story and photos by Susanne Bloomfield

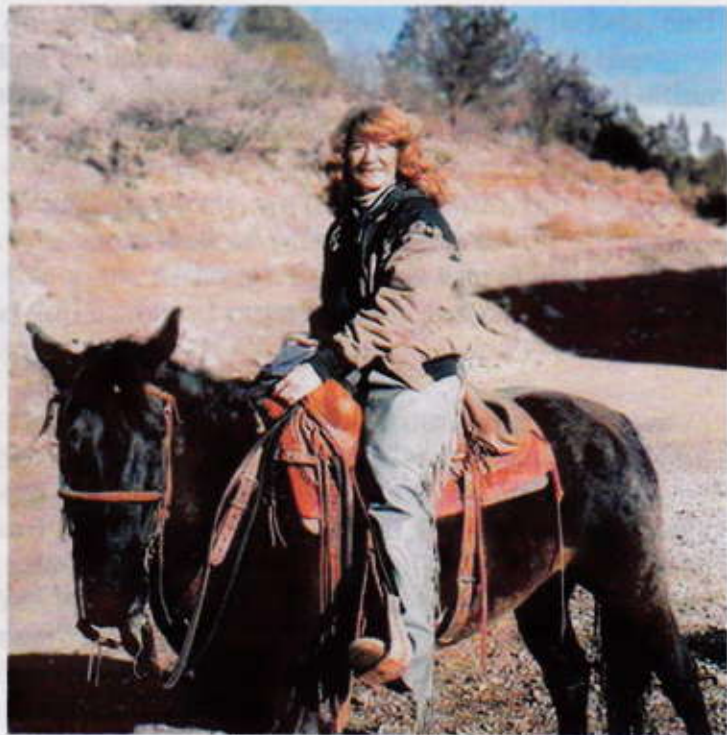
"I think I'll put all of the coats, stocking hats, gloves and thermal underwear in one suitcase," I explained to my husband as I began packing for our anniversary vacation at the Double E Guest Ranch in Gila. I folded my new goose-down parka with its fur-trimmed hood, thinking how warm I would be on the New Mexico mountaintops in January. In surfing the Web, several sites suggested that even the Southwest could be nippy in the winter time, so I wasn't taking any chances. Besides, the Double E site (www.doubleeranch.com) suggested bringing a "heavy riding coat" during the winter months. You don't have to tell anyone from Nebraska about heavy coats.

"It shouldn't be that bad," my husband diplomatically replied. "I don't think we'll need all of that." I decided against my battery-heated wool stockings.

When we arrived in El Paso, gray skies blanketed the city, and as we wrestled the four suitcases into the rental car, I had to admit that even though it was drizzling, I might have over-packed. It certainly wasn't as cold as I had imagined. However, I rationalized, we were still far from the mountains.

We headed west across sand and sage until we turned onto Hwy. 180 and

approached Silver City. Real mountains appeared on the horizon as we continued north, and soon we could see the trees and mountains of the Gila National Forest. We crossed the Continental Divide and officially left the cornfields of the Great Plains far behind.



The author on her dude-ranch vacation.

The rain stopped, and we began anticipating our afternoon ride. We parked in front of the ranch headquarters and met Debbie and Alan Eggleston, the owners. Retired from their jobs, Debbie as an administrative assistant and Alan as an airline pilot, the couple are living their dream on a 30,000-cattle ranch near Gila. When the drought and economy caused them to downsize their cattle operation, the Egglestons decided to share their ranching experience and expertise with others. The experiment mushroomed as satisfied guests spread the word, many of them returning regularly to the working ranch. In addition to allowing guests to help with the cattle and the daily activities of a ranch or just simply trail ride, the Egglestons began hosting a Cowboy College, a Cowgirl Camp and Mounted Shooting Clinics throughout the year. Many groups also began holding conferences and annual meetings at the ranch, combining business and pleasure. Preston Johnson, the foreman, showed us to our cabin and said we could go for our first ride that very afternoon. Our "Hideout" cabin was cozy and rustic with horseshoe accessories, Indian blankets for rugs and curtains, and lamps made out of antlers. We even had our own small refrigerator, coffee pot and microwave. Our special off-season weekly rate (less than the one-night, one-person rate of \$185) made this very affordable, especially since we would have unlimited riding and, I would later learn, more-than-you-can-eat family-style meals three times a day. I did notice, however, that goose-down comforters covered the beds.

We unpacked the necessities quickly, changed into jeans, boots and jackets, and hurried to the barn. The saddled horses awaited us, and after adjusting the stirrups, we followed Alan down Bear Creek Canyon. Rocky bluffs flanked either side, and we crisscrossed the stream that meandered beside us. Suddenly, the overcast sky began drizzling, and Alan asked if we wanted to head back, since neither of us was dressed for rain. Reluctantly, we turned around, but not soon enough. The mist turned to a downpour and we raced home, weaving through willows and splashing across the creek. Although the gallop was exhilarating, we arrived at the corrals wet, cold and hungry. I unpacked my goose-down coat and prepared for the worst.

After changing to dry clothes and draping our wet ones around our cabin, we joined the other guests for supper. People from New England, Canada and New York shared a hearty supper and their adventures with us. Then everyone expressed his or her desires for the next day. Since we regularly camp and trail ride with our own horses, we asked if we could go for an all-day adventure. Stan Copeland, an historian and Civil War re-enactor, agreed to guide us in exploring the gullies and mesas on the north side of the ranch.

The next morning the sun greeted us, and I left my new coat behind. As we picked our way across a rock-strewn mesa, I basked in the southwestern warmth and admired the deep blue of the sky that complemented the reds of the newly washed bluffs. Stan stopped and pointed to some rubble on the ground. He explained that the ranch was once the home of the Mimbrenos, a highly artistic prehistoric Indian culture dating back 10,000 years. Alan, working cattle nearby, joined us and gave us a Native American history of the area. Hunters and

farmers, the Mimbrenos, part of the Cochise Culture, lived in pit houses, shallow caves and small cliff dwellings along Bear Creek and the Gila River. Hunting and grinding artifacts had even been found in this area, he said. As we carefully looked around, we could see remnants of several stone dwellings that we would have overlooked if we had been on our own.

"Follow me," Stan said. "I have something more to show you." After a while we came to a narrow canyon, tied the horses to some cottonwoods, and started in on foot. The trees turned to shrubs and then to sheer rock as the deep gulley narrowed at the top. "Up there," Stan said, "is a small cave and a cache where the Mimbrenos rested and stored supplies." He pointed up a sheer rock wall. "Let's go!"

My husband, Terry, only made it up half way because of his slick-soled cowboy boots, but mine had rubber soles. I was able to scale the rock wall to peer into the small cave, whose ceiling was stained black from campfires, and examine the small niche next to it. "Look here," Stan remarked, pointing to some indentations in the mud that had been used to enclose the storage spot. "Those are fingerprints made by the Indians who enclosed this secret spot." I softly touched my fingers into the indentations and a shiver of excitement ran through me. "Wow," was all I could say. I looked down the rock cliff and saw what a protected location this was. I also realized that climbing up was probably easier than sliding down was going to be. That night at supper, Terry and I had our own adventures to recount to our fellow guests!

The sun accompanied us again the next day as we took two half-day rides with the other guests: the morning in the mountains surrounding headquarters and the afternoon exploring Bear Creek. We spent New Year's Eve in the ranch's cantina with the young couple from New York, learning all about life in the Big Apple and sharing a bottle of champagne.

On a sunny New Year's Day, Stan took us farther down Bear Creek to where it cut through immense rock walls with amazing formations and shades of color. He showed us a large cave, set back from the creek and camouflaged by cottonwoods and brush that once, according to local legend, might have served as a hiding place for Billy the Kid, a former Silver City resident.

The Navajos and Apache who once roamed this area also probably found refuge in the cave. Perhaps even Geronimo may have hidden there. One story recounts the theft of some mares stolen by Geronimo and his band over a hundred years ago from several ranches in the area. Local ranchers pursued them to the base of the mountains near Turkey Creek, where they found a mare with her throat cut. The men decided that the Apaches could just keep the horses, and they turned back home.

After a lunch of burritos packed for the occasion, we headed from the canyon bottom up to an altitude of over 5,000 feet to ride "Telephone Ridge" back to the ranch headquarters. We followed the faint outlines of the historic road between Gila and Silver City and had a panoramic view of the Double E Ranch, over 100 years old. Originally part of the Gila Apache Indian Reservation and then a part of the famous LC Ranch founded by Joseph Hooker after the Civil War and covering nearly 100 sections, the Double E stretches into the southwestern edge

of the Gila National Forest and the western edge of the Gila Wilderness. We could even see into Arizona. Wow.

The next two days were rainy, a welcome gift after several years of drought. Even we could appreciate the moisture since Nebraska, too, has been suffering through a dry spell. We feared we would not be able to ride, but Preston assured us that they saddled up "rain or shine." Furnished with full-length oilskin slickers, we rode to the Gila Wilderness one day and to the Gila National Forest the next, averaging about 20 miles each day. I was surprised how warm I was in just the oilskin coat and a hooded sweatshirt, although my hat did not keep my head dry. I solved the problem the following day, much to the amusement of everyone, by putting a plastic garbage bag over my head and tying the handles under my chin. I also discovered just how difficult it is to negotiate a pit stop in the rain and mud wearing chaps and a full-length coat! I resolved that dilemma the next morning by foregoing a second mug of coffee.

Finally our week came to an end. Our "dude ranch" adventure had been more than we had hoped it would be. We had ridden all day every day on horses that had the endurance of pentathlon athletes and could out-climb mountain goats. We had eaten hearty meals centered on ranch-raised beef. We had made new friends. But most of all, we had fallen in love with the Southwest, its history, its landscape and its people.

Although we had lugged around baggage full of winter woolies that never left the cabin, we needed them when we returned home to a half-foot of snow, a wind chill of 20 degrees below zero, and a frozen automatic horse waterer. While my husband assessed the damage and scooped snow, I started a fire in the fireplace and unpacked.

That evening, as we sat with our cold feet on the hearth and listened to the Nebraska wind howl at the windows, we warmed ourselves with memories of New Mexico.

For more information on the Double E Guest Ranch, write Box 280, 67 Double E Ranch Road, Gila, NM 88038, call (866) 242-3500 or see www.doubleeranch.com.

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