

# Return of the Cowgirl

Driving cattle. Riding the trails. Wearing a *stampede cord*. At the Double E Ranch in **New Mexico**, work and play get roped into one By LAUREN WILCOX

Photographs by  
CAROL GUZY

THE DOUBLE E GUEST RANCH IN SOUTHWESTERN NEW MEXICO is 30,000 acres of scrub-covered hills and sandy creek-bottom land, broken here and there by steep ridges from which the landscape unrolls to the horizon in smoky vistas. But the scenery, at this particular moment, is lost on me, as I scramble to stay on the back of a horse named Buster, who has just shot several feet into the air.

Being on a bucking horse is profoundly disorienting. My field of vision collapses; the horizon swings back and forth, like a stormy sea seen through a porthole. The familiar polarity of head and tail vanishes. Suddenly, at a slapping trot, Buster recovers the earth, like a drummer emerging from a solo.

Preston Johnson, a 19-year-old ranch hand with a drooping mustache and sad, sky-blue eyes, materializes at my elbow. "Have you ever been on a bucking horse before?" he asks. He floats serenely in his

**Horses in motion  
at the ranch,  
outside Silver  
City, N.M.**



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**Pat O'Neill of Colorado mounts a horse for a group ride as ranch owner Alan Eggleston, right, stands by. Opposite: The guests ride through the ranch's vast acreage.**

saddle, regarding Buster and me with benevolent concern. "If that happens again," he says, "whatever you do, don't lean forward. Reach behind you and grab the back of the saddle." I look at my hands, in which I am clutching a snatch of Buster's auburn mane.

I have come to the Double E for a dose of the cowboy life. I first ventured out West a decade ago, from North Carolina. On a whim, I accepted a poorly paying job in Santa Fe, packed a suitcase and pointed my truck toward the Pacific. On the high desert plains of northern New Mexico, after four days of driving, I stopped on an incandescent stretch of grassland, and stepped out into a silence so broad and deep my ears rang. Beneath the atomic blue of the sky, my unfocused restlessness intensified, like a pinprick of light under a magnifying glass. This was cowboy country.

And so I discovered Johnny Cash, rode around in pickup trucks, wore big belt buckles and a red leather shirt. For a while, I lived in a teepee. At roadhouse bars on Saturday nights, I stomped around the dance floor with quiet men in tight jeans and pointy boots, unsure whether I wanted to be with a cowboy or simply *be* one, scraping out a living in exchange for the good loneliness and indisputable cachet of the cowboy life.

In the end, I went back East. I took a series of jobs in a series of cities. I learned about subway systems, "business casual" and cubicle etiquette. It wasn't boring, exactly. There was a soothing regimen to my days that crowded out peskier impulses. Still, I missed the West, so when I had a chance to spend a few days at a working cattle ranch, I leapt at it. This, I thought, dreaming over the dusty, sun-dappled trail-riders on the Double E's Web site, would deliver me to the true heart of the cowboy life.



I doubt that at this moment I much resemble a cowboy. I have arrived at the ranch during a rare rainy spell, and rather than risk getting us soaked on the trail, Preston has been shepherding me and several other guests around the ranch's big arena, which is sloppy with mud. Our horses are soggy and our boots spattered, and there is not a steer in sight.

Preston is a 2004 Silver City Team Roping Champion, as his belt buckle, a gleaming rococo platter, declares. He is trying to teach us the finer points

of a sport called barrel-racing, a speed-and-agility rodeo event in which riders weave around a triangle of barrels in a loose cloverleaf, flogging their heaving steeds with the leathers, leaning into the turns like motocross riders, knees almost touching the ground.

But my nerves are rattled from the bucking, and Buster is twitching peevisly at the bit and dancing in place. Better that I walk him along the fence for a while, listening to Preston patiently explaining the routine. I shift in the saddle, trying to find a comfortable bone to perch on. Underneath me, Buster exhales wearily.

What kind of person takes a vacation on what is, essentially, a glorified farm? We are a motley bunch—the horse-obsessed, the congenitally adventurous, the alpha athletes—but we share a Mitty-esque infatuation with the cowboy life. Jerry Heck, who is here with his wife, Betty Anne, and has just returned from a stint as a civilian contractor in Iraq, trots endlessly in circles wearing a look of boyish delight. Through determined leg-flapping, he coaxes his horse into a higher gear and jiggles gamely through the barrel course in a pattern of his own devising. The man blistering by on a muscled palomino is Konrad Cartini, a German, who often stays on the ranch for months at a time. He is soft-spoken and bespectacled and rides like an outlaw: his shoulders hunched and his reins held high in front of him, like Jesse James overtaking a stagecoach.

After a while, Preston removes the barrels and sets up a line of orange poles, through which Buster and I execute a halting slalom, like a sot listing down a sidewalk. A woman from Illinois, through constant cajoling, urges her mount through a nimble run. "You almost knocked down that pole," her husband teases when she lopes up.

"Almost only counts in horseshoes," she retorts.

"And grenades," Betty Anne points out, from the fence. There is a general murmur of agreement from the group.

I haven't ridden since I was a teenager, so it is nice to be on a horse again, but there is a limit to the charms of riding around a

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"Welcome to the Wild West," a ranch hand announces as we mount up and jockey for position in the road. "Everybody got their Chapstick?"



**Lois Sanders, left, of Pasadena, Md., and Pat O'Neill take riding lessons. Opposite, Alan Eggleston descends a hill at dawn.**

most uncowboy-like fashion, the 100 yards or so up to the house where meals are served, on a rise overlooking the barns and the horse pens. I catch a ride with the couple from Illinois in their extra-cab diesel pickup, hoisting myself into the back seat and arranging my muddy boots carefully on a newspaper.

A WORKING CATTLE RANCH since the 1920s, the Double E was, until recently, Hooker Ranch, cobbled together from failed homesteads by a man named Joseph Hooker. In 1996, Joseph's son Donald sold it to Alan and Debbie Eggleston (the two E's), whose lifelong dream was to run a cattle ranch in their retirement. The ranch came with the old Hooker homestead and 100 Herefords, to which the Egglestons added 150 Texas longhorns. But the beef market, then in precipitous decline, barely earned them enough to pay the mortgage, and a lengthy drought made it tough to expand the herd. In between branding and calving, Debbie and Alan fixed up a few of the buildings as guesthouses and posted a Web site, and people began to come.

Debbie and Alan are not ranchers by trade—Alan was a commercial airline pilot for years, and Debbie worked as an administrative assistant—but they are the kind of durable, resourceful

ring. When it is time for dinner, our entire company, horses included, seems relieved to return to the barn. After putting away the horses, we drive, in

people to whom outdoor pursuits come easily, and with the Double E they have put together a fairly realized vision of the cowboy life. "Some people golf," Debbie told me. "Some people play tennis. We wanted to own a ranch. We weren't planning on running a guest ranch, but we just decided to do it like a place we would want to visit."

Meals are served, boarding-house style, on two broad plank tables in one of the ranch's newer structures, a brick ranch house. Like all the ranch's buildings it is decorated in a charming

Nouveau West style: fringed leather pillows, lamps wrapped in what look like pieces of lariats, and cowhides, the hair still on them, thrown over the sofas. A bookshelf along one wall has several linear feet devoted to a gilt-embossed set of Louis L'Amour books, a hardcover titled *No Life for a Lady* and a scale model of a Lockheed P-3 Orion airplane.

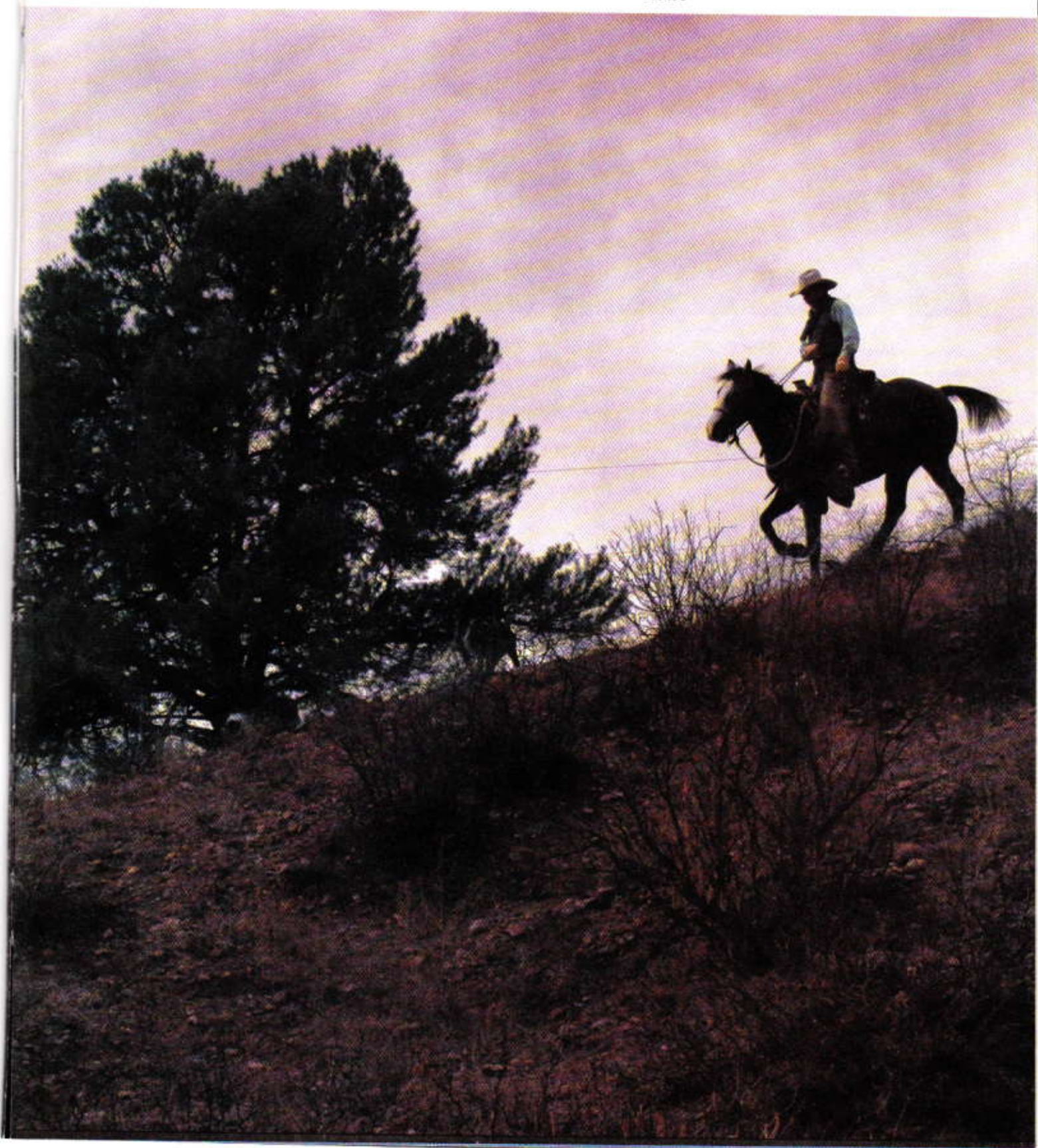
It is pleasantly noisy and chaotic at the table. Two British couples, who spent the day shopping in nearby Silver City, nod knowingly as we describe our attempts at barrel-racing. "Yesterday," one woman says, "Preston showed us how to rope cattle. We figured it out right away, didn't we, Helen? We picked three that were lying on the ground and began shuffling them down the fence. Everyone thought we were brilliant for doing three."

"Poor things were almost asleep," says Helen.

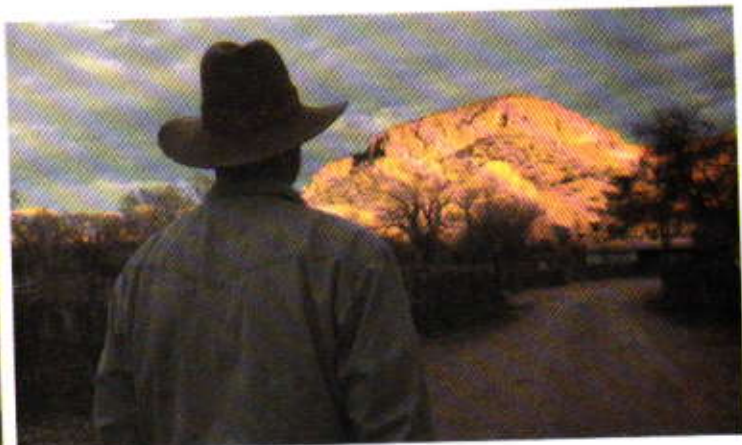
"I roped four," says Helen's husband, Colin, beaming. He and Helen raise cattle, as it turns out, and the other couple, Peter and Ann, raise sheep. They have always, they tell me, wanted to try their hand at being cowboys. (Helen and Colin also run a B&B. "This is a bit of a busman's holiday for us," she acknowledges.) I ask Colin if he uses ropes when he herds his cattle at home. "Oh, no," he says. "People would think I'd gone mad if I started roping my cattle. I use four-wheelers and a dog."

After dinner, I return to my cabin, which was one of the first structures built on the ranch, a low clapboard house with creaking

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Donald is a cowboy because, at 75, he still brands his cattle—still has cattle to brand—and at 10:30 in the morning on his day off, he is wearing spurs.



**Horseshoes decorate the walls of the barn at the Double E; ranch hand Stan Copeland watches the sunset illuminate distant rocks.**

floors and a wide porch. In its new life as a guesthouse it has horseshoes nailed to the walls, the collected essays of Frederic Remington on the shelf, and a bed with a fluffy meringue of a down comforter. It is barely 8 o'clock, but a wind is whipping up, and the bony places where

I connected with the saddle are beginning to complain. As I slip into bed, I give thanks that I did not choose to go on one of the more authentic cattle drives, where guests sleep on the ground in bedrolls. All night, the wind blows showers of little nuts onto my tin roof. I dream of tiny cattle, stampeding in the distance.

SADDLING UP BEGINS at the barn at 7 a.m. At that hour, the sun has yet to clear the ridge, and the ranch's low white buildings are bathed in a bluish half-light, as though they were underwater. The day is clear and chilly. Dressed and ready, the dried mud knocked off of my boots, I see a light in the barn and head over a few minutes early, but it is just the glow from the Mountain Dew machine. There is no one around. After a minute or two, Preston's purple Ford F-250 motors over the ridge, its diesel engine thrumming. In the pens beside me, the dark shapes of horses prick their ears and snort softly.

After breakfast we scrape our feet, stiff from yesterday's exertions, and make our way down to the barn. Our group is sharply turned out: felt Stetsons, crisp white hats, shirts with pearl snaps. A young actress from California has on a battered straw hat and a faded red bandana knotted charmingly around her neck, and a physician from Albuquerque and his wife are wearing matching fringed chaps. I have on an old pair of cowboy boots saved from my last tenure in the Southwest, but I have been too self-conscious to affect any other cowboy gear, and I am wearing a wool stocking cap and a sweater.

"Welcome to the Wild West," one of the ranch hands announces as we mount up and jockey for position in the road. "Everybody got their Chapstick?"

We take a trail that winds back through narrow canyons and shallow washes, a landscape shaped by water but dry as a bone. The horses pick their way placidly through sand and rock, some-

times hitting a trot in the open stretches. Riding on the trail is a far cry from riding in the ring. The ranch's vast acreage swallows us. Cottonwood trees shiver over the creek beds, and the hills are a thatchy expanse of what Preston tells me is cat's-claw—a bush with hooked, needle-sharp thorns. I have no idea where we are going or how far we have come. There is nothing, down in the wash, that an urban person can use to orient herself: no receding four-point perspective of streets and buildings, no clear dichotomy of "here" and "there." Progress is made imperceptibly, each scene replaced with one subtly different. This is oddly soothing. You are at the center of the visible world; wherever you are feels like your destination.

We see one cow today, in a stand of cottonwoods. It lumbers to its feet and watches us as we pass. Our guide leans over to get a look at it. "That's not one of ours," she calls.

"Where are ours?" I ask. She shrugs.

"There's 30,000 acres out here," she says. "They could be anywhere."

This is, I am beginning to think, a hell of a way to make a living.

The Egglestons run a cow-to-calf operation, which means that they make money by producing calves. The number that matters the most in this business is the number of cows that are retrieved in roundups with a calf tagging at their heels.

Well-fed, healthy cattle breed better, of course. On this kind of land—rocky, largely barren, and dry—each animal needs at least 100 grazing acres to get enough mesquite and grass to eat. This is a very high number—Colin's cattle, in the rich grasslands of northern England, require only one acre apiece—and during a drought, the number can be even higher. In a good year, the Double E's grasslands might support 350 cattle. This year, the Egglestons are running about 200 head. For a ranch the size of the Double E, with all its operating expenses, the income from a herd that size no longer covers the cost of raising it.

At dinner, Alan Eggleston tells me that cattle ranching, unlike many other animal-production businesses, has not been corporatized. This puts ranchers at a disadvantage when dealing with monopolized industries such as meat packing, he says; the selling price of beef

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