



Travel

A day in the life

Wranglers have it good—they live and work where others pay to go on vacation. Writer **Will Grant** rides for the brand at New Mexico's Double E guest ranch.



At dawn we lean against a pickup and make a list of the horses to be ridden today. The desert is damp and cool from last night's rain, and with the first pangs of light, we set to the chores. Feed the current barn cat, the sole feline survivor of owl and coyote predation. Saddle a young horse that's not yet settled into the routine. Load bales of alfalfa onto the trailer. Fill the wheelbarrow with grain. Sweep the tack-room floor. Half an hour later, the guests emerge from their cabins with mugs of coffee in their hands.

After a week in the saddle, some are walking better than others. Peter de Kort, from the Netherlands, is on his second cup of coffee and thinks every morning in the Gila River country is wonderful. Heino Hagge, from Germany, and his girlfriend, Vanessa Schmidt, are pursuing cowboy life with due German diligence and discipline. They're clean and showered and never miss out on helping with chores. The trio of flight nurses from California has shown no fear of wine this week and lingers in the barnyard

GUESTS ENJOY RIDING THROUGH THE RUGGEDLY BEAUTIFUL NEW MEXICAN LANDSCAPE.

rubbing eyes and yawning. A pair of middle-aged women from Australia aren't sure they've got what it takes to be cowboys and stiffly hobble to the pasture to catch their horses. It's a typical crew of guests that might show up at any dude ranch in America—eager and unfamiliar.

Every morning before breakfast, the horses are tied in the barnyard, fed, and groomed. It's a chance for the wranglers to look over the horses (and for the guests to wake up). Hooves are cleaned. Nicks and scratches are doctored. Manes and tails brushed clean. With the horses tended to, we walk up the hill to the ranch house for breakfast, where the smell of frying bacon pulls us in from the front yard. The house fills with the sounds of spurs and boot heels on the wooden floor. Hot dishes of scrambled eggs and pancakes are delivered to the table. Ranch owners Alan and Debbie Eggleston sit beside each other at the head of the long table and lead a discussion the day's schedule. We eat the kind of breakfast needed for a full day on the ranch, and after we drink our last cup of coffee, Alan stands up.

"Going to be another great day. See everyone at the barn in 15 minutes," he says and ambles out.

The Double E sits on a small tributary of the Gila River in southwestern New Mexico, about 20 miles from Arizona and 100 miles north of Old Mexico. I've come to the ranch to join this crew of three wranglers for a few days in mid-September. Though I ran a horse-training operation for six years and have worked as a cowboy since I was old enough to reach the gas pedal of a pickup truck, I've never

explored the guest-ranch side of cowboy work. Wranglers make a living of helping others enjoy the richness of the world viewed from the back of a horse, which is something I've always taken for granted. It was amazing to simply provide this for the guests and to see them light up from the experience. Despite their sore knees, awkward stirrup lengths, and unfamiliar-

ity with thunder and lightening, they took to it like clockwork. Just add horse.

My boss, Mark Rinsler, has worked for the Double E for a decade. He's 63 years old and has the kind of good-natured, easy-going attitude required of wranglers who lead strings of novices. He's quick to tell me that our priorities on a guest ranch are different than those of a work-

ing cattle ranch.

"It's real simple," he says. "I'm here to make sure these people have a good time. Everything else is secondary to that."

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This is rugged country, full of thorns and rattlesnakes. The rocky ridges support more cactus than grass. Water, both as rain and surface runoff, is scarce. Agriculture

has never been easy here, and up until the early 1900s, the Apache outnumbered everyone. In fact Geronimo was born about 20 miles north of the Double E in 1829, near the headwaters of the Gila River. Four tribes of Apache—the Warm Springs, Chiricahua, Jicarilla, and Mescalero—called this area home, and they played hell on the Spanish,

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Mexican, and Anglo settlers. In 1853, the U.S. government set aside the Gila country as Apache land. White settlement began with permanence in 1886, when the Apaches returned the land to the U.S. government and 13 years before Geronimo surrendered. That's about the time that the Double E land saw its first cattle.

Encompassing the present-day Double E, the LC Ranch was a 70,000-acre spread in Gila country that may no longer have been Indian Territory at the turn of the last century, but it still had its rough points. Members of the outlaw gang the Wild Bunch, which included the Sundance Kid, worked as hired hands for the LC, and they would reportedly leave the ranch every so often to rob trains or banks and then return for day work as cowboys. In 1905, Horace Hooker, who was working as a teamster for the LC, leased land on Bear Creek and established the Hooker Ranch headquarters where the Double E buildings now sit.

Alan and Debbie Eggleston bought the Double E in 1996 to raise a small herd



MP ROCKETWOOD IS A QUIET, 7-YEAR-OLD GELDING THAT THE DOUBLE E BOUGHT AS A 2-YEAR-OLD.

PHOTO BY WILL GRANT

of cattle and enjoy retirement. They had no intention of harboring guests at that time. But raising cattle here is hard, and even though the roughly 7,000 deeded acres came with grazing rights to an additional 23,000 acres, they could only graze about 300 cows, not enough to cover costs. After owning the place for a year, they built a series of log cabins, refurbished the old ranch house, and started buying up gentle horses.

"We're working very hard at retiring," jokes Debbie.

After our hearty breakfast, we saunter down the hill from the ranch house. A dozen of the Egglestons' most patient horses wait in the barnyard. The guests are about to get their feet wet at herding cattle, and not one of them has a lick of experience. But these animals know the routine.

"I have a world of respect for our horses," says Debbie. "I wish some people were as tolerant as they are."

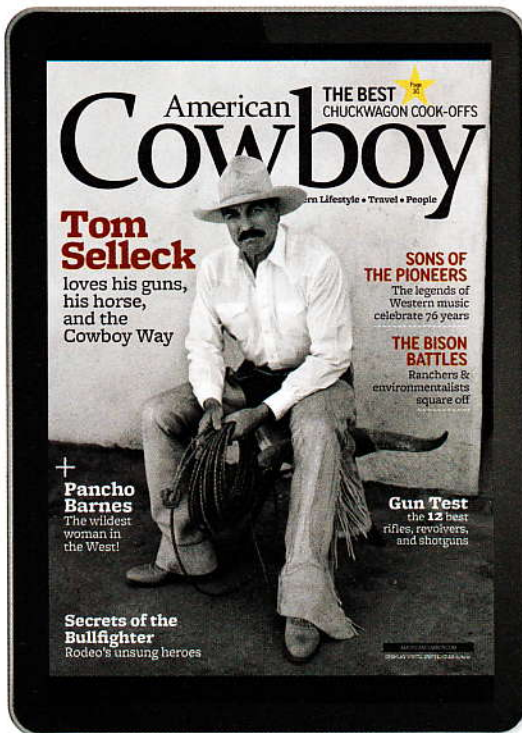
Rinsler has spent the past 10 years en-



A STRING OF DOUBLE E GUEST HORSES STANDS PATIENTLY DURING LUNCH.

suring that saddle horses at the Double E suit the guests. He's a quiet hand with livestock, and these animals reflect his slow and steady pace of work. He's the reason that the horses are so compliant with guests. As important it is to handle horses, though, a wrangler needs to be even better with people. Rinsler's gentle

touch allows the Double E guests to easily take to ranch life. Without being judgmental, he gladly helps people saddle their horses, shows how to bridle them without banging the bit on the horses' teeth, and reminds everyone to check that their cinches are tight before stepping into the saddle. He more or less holds everybody's



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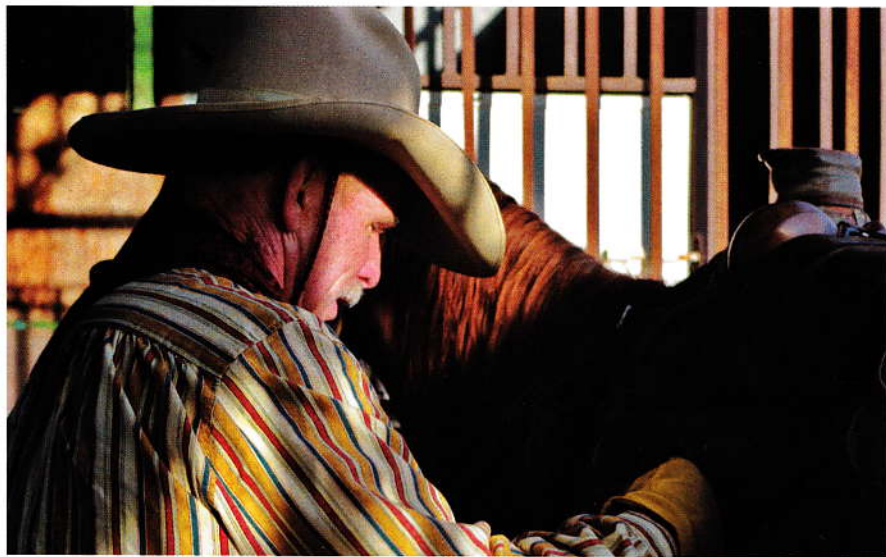
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hands and seems to enjoy doing it. With the crew horseback and smiling, we head out to gather a few cattle.

“You can talk all day about how to move cattle,” Alan says. “But we like to give you a few pointers and let you jump in and just try it to see what works and what doesn’t.”

At the Double E, there aren’t many rules for handling cattle and no agenda that must be adhered to. The wranglers let you choose your own pace and path. They’re there to help. Perhaps the biggest difference between doing this on a working ranch and doing it on a guest ranch is that no one loses their temper. There’s no yelling or criticizing. You do what you feel comfortable doing, and Rinsler and Alan focus on making sure you’re having fun and that everyone stays safe. It’s a protected bubble of cowboying. Wranglers are the intermediaries, so you can have all the acreage, the livestock, canyons, and creek bottoms at your disposal. He (or she) needs a thorough knowledge of gear and tack, a basic knowledge of veterinary care, and expert horsemanship. You just need to show up.



DOUBLE E CO-OWNER ALAN EGGLESTON SADDLES A YOUNG HORSE.

A guest-ranch wrangler works hard for low wages, freezes in the winter, and burns in the summer. Health insurance? Never on any ranch I ever worked for. Retirement? Not by a long shot. Housing? Poorly insulated, mice-ridden bunkhouses, with families of skunks living under the porch. So what are the benefits, other than calloused hands? A life so rich in nature and freedom that wranglers keep it like

a secret. But unlike working cowboys, guest-ranch cowboys must maintain good humor at all times. Frankly, if a wrangler loses his temper, he’ll lose his job. They need to be clean-shaven and wear clean clothes, and they should have more teeth than tattoos. There’s no room for cursing, spitting, or drinking too much beer—even if some people dismiss that as classic cowboy behavior. During long days in the



THE DOUBLE E'S SURE-FOOTED HORSES ARE IDEAL FOR THE GILA WILDERNESS AREA.

saddle, the wrangler represents the ranch to the guests, and, like cattle on a working ranch, the guests are what pay the bills.

"It takes a very special kind of person with unique versatility to work in this environment," says Debbie. "Remember, we aren't very near to any population centers."

Any wrangler worth his salt needs to have the local lore as handy as a canteen of water for a thirsty guest. Rinsler knows his Indian and outlaw history and also gives quick-and-dirty primers on local geology. He'll jump off his horse, drop to his knees, and pick through the dark volcanic soil to find the rock type he's looking for to make a point. With a dozen guests sitting their horses in rapt attention, Rinsler will spin a saga of lava, calderas, Indians, arrowheads, and how the trickling rivulet of Bear Creek cuts and polishes the cliff face.

If you want to see Indian cave dwellings and pit houses, the wranglers will take you there. If you want to look for bighorn sheep, Rinsler will give you a surefooted horse and take you up rocky shelves high above the valley floor. If you want to read a book on the porch of the ranch house, Debbie will make sure you have a pitcher of iced tea or lemonade at your side.

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The morning the guests decide to try their hands at penning cattle, it's clear the horses have a better idea of how to do it than the riders. We put the cattle in the arena, divide the guests into teams of three, and let everybody learn on the job. The cattle scat-

ter, the horses stay quiet and get to work, and the guests have a riotously good time. They're starting to feel like, and sometimes vaguely resemble, genuine cowhands.

After the morning's gather, we ride back to the barn at noon and loosen the saddle cinches for lunch. At the long table with Alan and Debbie again, we eat bowls of chili with melted cheese and hot cornbread straight from the oven. Debbie does

"We got views so long you can see into next week. There's a lot of wild country out there, and I never tire of seeing it."

a lot of the cooking at the Double E and gets help from Lucy Acosta in the kitchen. After lunch, the dishes are cleared and more coffee is poured. Tomorrow we'll ride all day and pack lunches in our saddlebags, so we pass around a pad of paper and the guests write what they want on their sandwiches.

We let the horses get a final drink of water before starting up Bear Creek for higher country. Earlier in the week, a bear track in the sand had piqued everyone's interest, and about half the group hopes to see a bear. The other half of wants to see a bear about as much as they want to get bucked off their horses.

"I don't want to get eaten by a bear," says Vikki Donnelly, of Tamworth, New South

Wales. "Nor do I care to even see one. A footprint is enough for me."

As we leave the ranch headquarters, we see a bighorn sheep silhouetted atop a cliff about one mile in the distance. Tall cottonwood trees and sycamores shade the lush banks of Bear Creek. Prickly poppies bloom in the understory, and jimson weed (those white, conical flowers made famous by Georgia O'Keeffe) turn out in thick clusters. We cross the creek a dozen times, the riders strung out over a quarter mile in quiet conversation. There's not as much of the head-to-tail trail riding that you find at most guest ranches. Guests basically ride the horses how and where they want at the Double E, while Rinsler and his crew keep a close eye. As the afternoon wears on, we climb the high ridges to the foot of the mighty Gila Wilderness Area. Serrated mountains and deep canyons lie before us in every direction. Thunderheads boil and tower in the distance.

"We got views so long you can see into next week," Rinsler

says, as we stop to open water bottles. "There's a lot of wild country out there, and I never tire of seeing it."

With the horses hanging their heads and the shadows growing long in the afternoon light, we finally ride into headquarters. The sweat on the horses' necks has long since dried, and the guests are ready to be out of their saddles. The horses are tied in the barnyard, and everyone slides from their saddles. The guests congregate beneath a broad oak tree to stretch their legs and recount the day. Netherlands Peter doles out cold cans of Budweiser to happy recipients.

Meanwhile, the wranglers and I pull the saddles and blankets from the horses. The tack room takes on the smell of horse sweat, and we hose down each horse to clean it up. The horses are turned out to pasture for the night and roll and flop in the dust and groan with satisfaction. Then they turn to the gate and wait for the feed wagon. (Again, the Germans, Heino and Vanessa, are eager to help.) Only after making

Plan It: Double E Ranch

GETTING THERE

The Double E is an hour northwest of Silver City, New Mexico, or about five and a half hours southwest of Albuquerque. Both cities have airports and rental car facilities, though the airport in Silver City is small. The Double E will pick you up in Silver City for \$100.

SEASON

December and January can be cold and June can be hot. Other than those months, the climate is generally mild and comfortable.

RATES

Sunday through Saturday (six nights): \$1,500; or three nights: \$840.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

The Ranch offers weeklong, women-only Cowgirl Camps and mounted shooting clinics at the standard rate of \$1,500 for six nights. Inquire for dates.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Debbie Eggleston handles all reservations and guest inquiries. 866-242-3500, double@gilanet.com, doubleeranch.com.

the rounds with alfalfa and grain, can the wranglers say that the ranch chores are finished for the day.

Dinner is at six o'clock sharp every evening. Tonight, we're having chicken enchiladas smothered in green chile and cheese, and everybody is hungry. Food restores our vitality, and the conversation moves from herding cattle that morning to talk of black bears in caves to helping Netherlands Peter understand the term "metrosexual," for which there is apparently no equivalent in Dutch. After dinner and talk of tomorrow's long ride, we scatter to the guest cabins as the setting sun turns the hills pink.

So ends another day in Gila country, a day like most others when guests are around. Through an open window in my cabin, I hear the coyotes howling at the moon and the owls softly hooting in the creek bottom. I lie there half asleep with a gentle breeze furling the curtains. Lightening flashes in the distance, and the Milky Way spills across the clear sky. The pace of life varies little here, and that's a good thing.

I'm happy to let the guests have the ranch cantina tonight, a refurbished bunkhouse where folks gather to talk and drink or surf the Internet or use the phone. The life of a wrangler is likely not in the stars for me (I'm too ornery), but I get it. There's a magic to the cowboy lifestyle, and there's honor in offering it to people who want a taste. ★

