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SUMMER MOUNTAIN ADVENTURES

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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 Farny 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

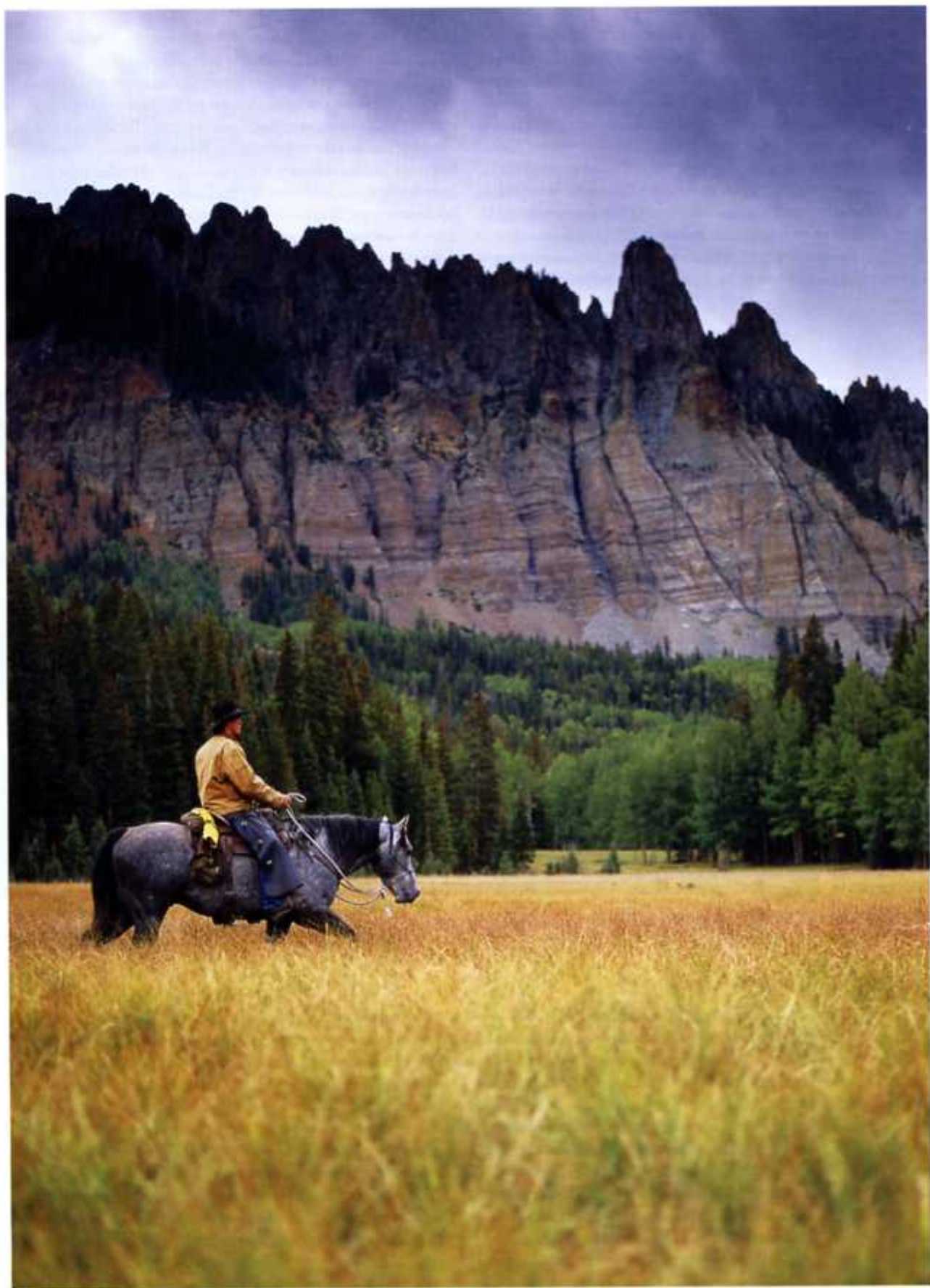


RANCH RHYTHMS Head wrangler Dave Ubeck checks his tack; saddles in waiting; when you're not on horseback, you're often on the water; the perfect start to the perfect day. Breakfast Meadow.

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.