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APRIL 2014

THE TRAIL RIDER

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Land of Enchantment

BY CYNTHIA MCFARLAND

I grew up in Tucson, Arizona. But, I'm sorry to say, I've never spent time in neighboring New Mexico.

So, when my good friend and riding buddy, Mary McDuffie, and I started planning a riding vacation last year, I began looking at ranches in that beautiful state.

While online, I came upon Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in Winston, in the southwest portion of the state.

The Esterly family — Harry, Diana, and Meris — bought the ranch in 2007, but it's been in operation since the 1980s, when it originally started as a hunting lodge.

The Esterly family took regular ranch vacations together when daughter Meris was a teenager. They were so enamored of the whole idea, they eventually decided to buy a ranch of their own. They first traveled to ranches for sale throughout the West, often staying as guests to get the full experience.

When they discovered Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, they were awed by its incredible location and small size. The fact that it's a private ranch located in the middle of millions of acres of protected national forest land was a huge plus.

Set aside in 1924 as the

"world's first designated wilderness" at the urging of conservationist Aldo Leopold, the Gila National Forest contains more federal land than any other national forest outside Alaska. It includes the aptly named Aldo Leopold Wilderness, Blue Range Wilderness, and the Gila Wilderness. Together,

these areas comprise more than three million acres.

There are no roads and motorized vehicles aren't permitted. The only way to explore these areas is by horse or by foot. It's remarkable to ride for an entire day and encounter only wildlife and scattered small groups of cattle — the land is open range for grazing.

"We feel like there's no better way to show people the beauty of this Earth than by horseback," notes Meris, who has been riding since age 8.

As we chose our ranch vacation, my friend and I had several prerequisites. We were looking for a ranch that offered: (1) a limited number of guests, (preferably adults only); (2) indoor accommodations; (3) beautiful scenery; and (4) lots of saddle time.

Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch met every one of those requirements — and then some!

Inspiring Landscape

Whoever coined the state's slogan, "Land of Enchantment," must've been inspired by the landscape around the ranch.

The terrain varies from gentle, grassy foothills to towering mountain ranges. Around the ranch are woodlands studded with juniper and pines.

Higher up, there are mountain meadows and spruce forests. Many of these border steep, rock-walled canyons, some more than 1,000 feet deep.

This is the country where Geronimo roamed, the trails where the likes of Billy the Kid



MARY MCDUFFIE PHOTO

"The only way to explore the areas around Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, is by horse or by foot," notes Cynthia McFarland, shown here aboard her first mount, Casper.



CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

The entrance to Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch. The ranch is surrounded by towering pines in three million acres of wilderness areas and national forest land.

and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid once rode to stay ahead of the law. It was a thrill to ride here.

"It's an honor and a privilege to share this land with our guests," says ranch worker Seth Stout. "This is one of the last remote, untouched, yet protected, places in the country. It's so rare to have private property in the middle of national forest land."

The area is rich in history. The Mimbres, a prehistoric North American people, were residents of the Gila Mountains centuries ago; the height of their culture was somewhere between 1000 and 1150 AD.

Getting There

About six months ahead of our trip, we made reservations and placed our deposit. Before we knew it, it was time to pack and catch our flight.

It's not hard to get to Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, but it does take some time, due to its remote location. But that's one of the things that makes it special.

We flew into Albuquerque and took In-

terstate 25 south to the ranch. Some guests opt to fly into El Paso, Texas. Either city is a four-hour drive from the ranch.

We rented a vehicle in Albuquerque and set off in (we thought) plenty of time to reach the ranch for dinner and before dark, something the Esterly family strongly recommends.

Be sure to fill your gas tank in Truth or Consequences (the station in Winston isn't open late). And keep in mind that cellphone coverage is spotty in the area. Your phone *will* quit working, likely just west of I-25, about two hours from the ranch.

Alas, we took our time along the way, thinking we'd cover the final 50 miles in an hour at most.

Wrong! Those last miles are on narrow, two-lane, winding roads in open range, hence, the handsome Hereford bull we encountered coming around one turn. We also saw a mule deer and a large elk.

The last 10 miles or so, the pavement ends and the road turns to a well-maintained gravel surface. (You can ignore the

sign that says, "Travel Not Recommended Beyond This Point." Just drive carefully!)

Upon arrival, we were warmly greeted by Meris Esterly and Seth Stout, who showed us to our cabin and then to the cantina, where dinner was waiting.

Nestled under the towering pines, there are four separate units in two roomy cabins at the ranch. Each has a covered porch, an indoor sitting area, bedroom (or bedrooms), a private bath, and propane fireplace heaters for cold nights.

We found freshly baked cookies in a jar in our cozy cabin, along with water bottles and a coffee maker.

Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch is off the grid. That's right. No electric wires. But not to worry! A diesel generator, solar panels, and battery system provide power.

(*Tip:* You won't find a hairdryer in your cabin; their use is discouraged because they pull so much current.)

Exhausted, we didn't last long after dinner. The beds are comfy, and there are

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CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

Geronimo Ranch guests get ready for the morning ride. "Several of us were experienced riders with our own horses," notes McFarland. "We were delighted to be matched with mounts that met our expectations."

Land of Enchantment

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plenty of blankets and extra pillows. With no glaring outdoor lights, it was easy to fall asleep quickly.

Trusty Trail Mounts

The next morning, eager to meet our horses and get in the saddle, we all met at the barn after enjoying a hearty breakfast.

The ranch has a maximum of 16 guests at a time, so you'll never feel "lost in the shuffle." There were only eight guests the week we came, which we felt was perfect.

Children and families enjoy the ranch during spring break and summer; the ranch has excellent horses for novice riders. When we visited in late September, all guests were adults.

Several of us were experienced riders with our own horses and ride regularly at home. We were delighted to be matched with mounts that met our expectations.

"You come here to ride, and that's what we do; the focus is riding," says Seth, who has been with the ranch since June 2008, and works alongside Meris as wrangler and co-host.

"I was really impressed with how well-trained and responsive the horses were," says my traveling companion, Mary, who owns two trail-savvy mares, a Paint and an Appaloosa. "And the wranglers did an excellent job of matching people and horses.

"I'd like to have taken home my mount, Comanche. It was like riding my own horse. He was a pleasure to get on and go.

"The tack was high quality and well maintained, which isn't always the case at a guest ranch," she adds. "They took care to have quality saddles that not only fit the horses well, but also were comfortable to ride in."

Among the guests were Gaele and Arnaud Ollivier-Jacob, who hail from France. Gaele trains endurance horses for a living and was quite happy with the large Appaloosa gelding Meris put her on. Arnaud rarely rides, but his mount was steady and reliable.

Gary and Sandra Cocks of Norfolk, England, vacation regularly in the United States



CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

and were eager for a ranch trip after having enjoyed one in Texas. Neither Gary nor Sandra has had much riding experience, so they relied on Meris and Seth to match them with suitable horses. They also loved the fact that they were allowed to help groom their horses after riding.

"We wanted something small with hands-on experience with the horses," explains Sandra. "This ranch more than exceeded our expectations; it's everything we wished for, and we loved our horses!"

"We felt safe with our horses from the first ride," adds Gary. "My horse was so steady, even on rocky downhill trails."

David and Linda Ward of Newcastle, Pennsylvania, were back for their second visit, having first come in 2009. Now in their early 70s, the couple was looking forward to getting in plenty of riding on this return trip.

I enjoyed my first day's ride on Casper, a trusty gray gelding. Then Meris suggested I switch to a bay with the unusual name of Lips. I loved his steady, yet outgoing, nature.

Meris does a great job giving basic horsemanship instruction to riders before the first ride. Horses are outfitted with hackamores, which prevents young and/or inexperienced riders from being heavy-handed on a horse's mouth.

Riders mount from a sturdy wood

Ranch owner Meris Esterly (in front of the group) stops to give guests a brief history lesson on the trail. "Meris is a fountain of information and intriguing facts about the area's history," says McFarland.

platform to make it easier on the horses' backs. I appreciated this attention to detail. I noticed that Meris and Seth's goal was always to keep

horses and riders as safe and comfortable as possible.

For example, when the footing was suitable, Meris asked if we wanted to trot and lope. The less experienced riders opted out, so Seth rode with them at a walk, while the more experienced riders joined up with them again a short time later.

Ancient Lands

On our first morning, we took an easy 1½ hour orientation ride to get to know our horses.

We wove our way through an immense forest of stately Ponderosa pines with their distinguishing reddish trunks. These trees smell like butterscotch, especially when the weather is warm.

We soon found that Meris is a fountain of information and intriguing facts about the area's history.

As we came upon the remains of Mimbres pit houses, possibly dating as far back as 200 AD, Meris pointed out pottery shards. Primarily farmers and small-game hunters, the Mimbres were known for their distinctive pottery with graphic black-on-white designs.

We returned to the ranch through Hoyt Canyon, marveling at an impressive stand of craggy rocks known as Faces of the Ancients. In truth, they did resemble rugged human profiles.

As we rode closer, we spotted a Mimbres cliff dwelling, its wall neatly constructed of adobe-like clay nearly 1,000 years ago.

As Mary and I positioned our horses for a photo, I noticed a constant background noise that sounded like trickling water.

“What you’re hearing is the sound of grasshoppers on the rocks,” Meris said.

Sure enough, there were dozens — probably hundreds! — of large, colorful grasshoppers jumping through the grass and over the rocks. Our horses paid them no mind at all.

‘Top of the World’

During lunch at the ranch cantina, we were told to meet up at the barn about 2:30 for the afternoon ride.

This two-hour ride took us to an area called Top of the World, where we had a stunning 360 degree view of the surrounding mountain ranges.

It’s hard to imagine how enormous 3.3 million acres truly is, but this ride really brought that fact home. We began to understand the vastness of the Gila National Forest.

At the first overlook (elevation 7,000 feet), we looked down into Akes Meadow and Taylor Creek Canyon. Sprawling before us was a panorama that included views of Black Mountain (elevation 9,303 feet) and Beaver Points (elevation 8,400 feet) to the west, and the Black Range (elevation 10,000 feet) to the east.

We could even see the Mogollon Mountains, 30 miles away to the southwest, which reach an elevation of nearly 11,000 feet.

We rode past alligator junipers, so named for their scaly, rugged bark that looks much like alligator hide.

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The Dwelling Canyon

After the first day, we enjoyed all-day rides. Ranch chef Tim prepared made-to-order sandwiches, and packed them in saddlebags, along with cookies, chips, and drinks.

I can't say enough about those long rides, and it's impossible to pick a favorite. This was why we took the trip!

The Dwelling Canyon Picnic Ride took us along scenic meandering trails through Hoyt Canyon, up and over a ridge, and down into Cox Canyon.

We followed Cox Canyon to where it dead-ends into Taylor Creek, a sun-splashed, shallow stream that leads into a picturesque area known as the "dwelling canyon."

Meris noted that Basque shepherders came through this region with their flocks a century ago and often took shelter in caves where the Mimbres people lived long before. We were about to visit their dwelling places up close and personal.

Riding into the canyon, we passed a marker for the Evening Star tin mine, which operated from the 1930s until 1980. The only evidence of this once busy enterprise was rusting metal relics and boarded-up entrances.

We ate lunch on the creek bank, soaking up the warm sunshine beneath endless blue skies. Afterward, we explored the dwellings, including one large cave where we found an old fireplace, a bed frame, and pieces of a table.

In another cave, we found pictographs painted on the walls 1,000 years ago. The Mimbres ground up red and orange rocks, then made a primitive paint by adding water, urine, sap, or plant juices.

It was exhilarating to think of the native peoples who painstakingly rendered these images on the smooth rock walls.

A few of us hiked up to another cave containing the still standing wall of a Mimbres cliff dwelling. This cave offered views of the entire canyon, including what looked precisely like a huge frowning face carved by time and the elements into rock.

Riding back to the ranch that afternoon, we came upon Docking Head, a signature landmark rising



CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

Canyon trails lead through countless creek crossings. "We feel like there's no better way to show people the beauty of this Earth than by horseback," notes ranch owner Meris Esterly.

dramatically from the valley floor. We also passed stands of lush, thick grass that testified to the warm natural springs seeping through the rocks.

We followed Taylor Creek downstream and made our way back to the bright-blue, still waters of Wall Lake, then home to the ranch.

"I never get tired of seeing this scenery," says Meris. "How could you get tired of Taylor Creek Canyon?"

She's right; I don't think that would be possible.

Geronimo Country

The next day, we rode through another portion of Taylor Creek Canyon. Meris led us along a trail that took us up through forest and meadows until we were high above the canyon. We gazed down at the glittering creeks below that meet and become the East Fork of the Gila River.

We left the high trail behind and wound our way down to the headwaters of the East Fork, the very place where the famed Apache chief Geronimo was born and raised.

Before the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, the Gila River was the boundary to Old Mexico. Sitting there on my horse, surveying the valley and river, I imagined a young Geronimo skipping stones on its surface and hunting rabbits in the jumbled rocks.

Huge narrow-leaf cottonwood trees offered a shady place to tie our horses and eat lunch. Some brave souls actually swam in the river where it formed a quiet, deep pool at the base of several massive rocks. I was content to sit atop those rocks and daydream.

Later, we hiked up a nearby hill to explore another Mimbres dwelling site. We found the remains of several pueblo-style homes, dating back to 750 to 1100 AD.

Our ride back to the ranch that day is one of my favorites. We took



CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

Early morning sunlight through the pines awaits riders.

the East Fork of the river back to Taylor Creek and continued through this canyon, crossing the creek so many times I lost count.

At the Narrows, the towering canyon walls close in on the creek. Their solid presence gives a protected, sheltering sensation.

But I'm also reminded of the eerie feeling explorers must've had centuries ago as they rode onward to see what lay around the next bend.

Back at the Ranch

After several hours of riding, it felt great to just kick back at the ranch. It was relaxing to sit on the porch and read, or wander down to the corral and visit with the adorable Miniature Donkeys and Miniature Horses, Winston, Elliot, Nacho and Taco.

My favorite barn buddy, a sweet, golden kitty named Clementine, always offered friendly greetings.

There are unlimited hiking trails, if



CYNTHIA MCFARLAND PHOTO

you still have energy after all that riding. I started each day with a short hike and enjoyed seeing the early morning sunlight streaming through the pines and tall golden grasses.

Meals are served family-style. Every night, Chef Tim whipped up a great variety of entrees and side dishes, and of course, a homemade dessert.


In the evening, we'd gather around the campfire and eat s'mores as we'd tell stories and sing a few cowboy songs, while Tim strummed along on his guitar.

Faces reflected firelight, while overhead the inky black skies were strewn

Horses resting during an all-day ride. "I can't say enough about those long rides, and it's impossible to pick a favorite," says McFarland. "This was why we took the trip!"

with countless stars. Bull elk would bugle in the distance, and the flames would crackle before us.

On the last night, I closed my eyes and thought of all those who had sat around the fire over thousands of years, looked up at the same stars, and listened to an elk's beckoning chorus.

Their souls, like mine, found peace in this enchanted place.  TTR

For more information, contact Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, (575) 772-5157; www.geronimoranch.com.

Cynthia McFarland is a seasoned trail rider and full-time freelance writer based in Central Florida. She regularly contributes to national equine magazines and is the author of eight books.