

Gathering  
IN THE  
Gila

EXPERIENCE THE  
WILDERNESS OF  
NEW MEXICO'S  
GILA NATIONAL FOREST  
FROM THE BEST  
PERSPECTIVE—  
ON THE BACK  
OF A HORSE.

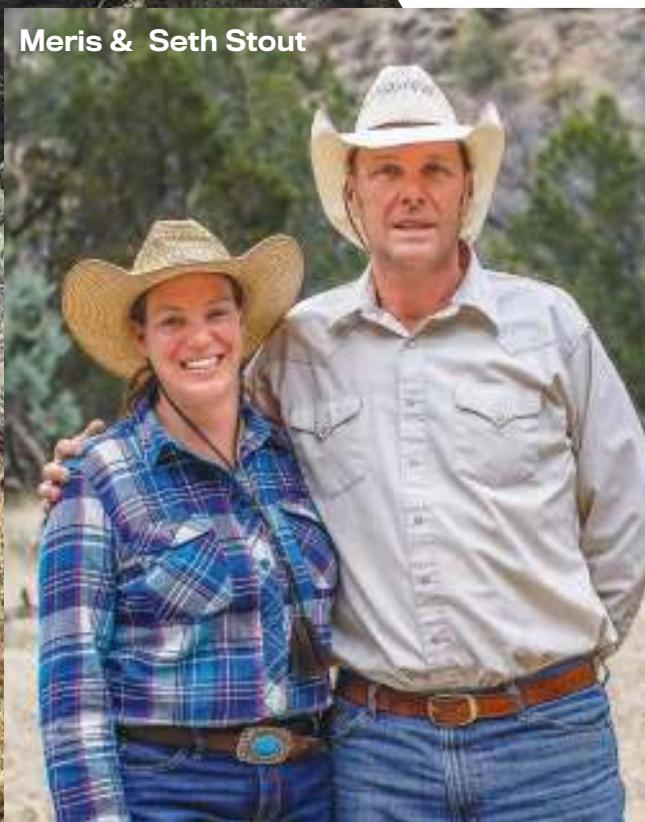
*Article & Photography by  
Abigail Boatwright*

**H**ours from any city, smartphone or GPS connectivity, Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch is an outpost on the edge of the largest range of wilderness in the continental United States. But guests visiting this New Mexico treasure aren't huddled in tents eating army rations. From the time you arrive at the ranch until you leave, you'll experience abundant hospitality, chef-prepared meals, comfortable lodging and quality time with good horses—all while surrounded by awe-inspiring natural scenery.

### Going Off the Grid

Meris and Seth Stout started Geronimo Ranch about 12 years ago with Meris' parents, Diana and Harry Esterly. The husband-and-wife team set up the accommodations, built an infrastructure to harness solar energy, hired a small band of staff and carefully acquired the right horses and tack to make guest rides safe and enjoyable. They also planned every step of the sometimes all-day trail rides they lead around the Gila (pronounced HEE-lah) National Forest.

Meris & Seth Stout



To get to the ranch, you'll take a winding road through desert mountain ranges, grassy meadows and sentinel stands of ponderosa pines. Cross the Continental Divide, heading west as you travel deeper into the Gila National Forest. Once you arrive—elevation 6,500 feet—you'll likely be greeted by Meris, waving and wearing a wide smile as she welcomes you home for the duration of your visit. Your accommodations will be one of several snug, immaculate cabins, decorated with equine accents and comfortable furnishings, along with a gas fireplace to keep you warm.

Seth's the appointed tour guide, helping guests orient themselves with the property as they learn about the ranch's dedication to life off the grid. Nearby, large pastures house the ranch's 29 horses, and several colorful Paint Horses add flashes of chrome to the mixed-breed menagerie.

Guest trips can be customized for length—most stay between three and seven days—and with multiple trails available, you could ride every day for a week and see a different part of the Gila Forest each time.

Scratch-made meals feature fresh, seasonal ingredients—an impressive feat, considering the chef, Fred Locklear, is working with solar/generator power, and the closest grocery store is 2½ hours away. Seth and Fred make

a weekly supply run, and Fred whips up delectable creations—Santa Fe chicken, potatoes au gratin, spaghetti squash, salad with homemade dressing, apple crisp with homemade salted caramel ice cream—for up to 16 people at a time, three times a day.

Guests choose Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch for a variety of reasons. A mother and daughter, Terri and 14-year-old Nicolette (Nicki) Johnson, came from Minnesota for a horseback adventure.

"We like to horseback ride on vacation when we can," Terri said. "We planned our vacation around coming here. And then figured out the rest of it."

Stuart Poltrock from Michigan, his 16-year-old daughter Maggie and her 17-year-old friend Ava Brown were visiting Geronimo for the first time. They wanted to find a guest ranch that wasn't snowed under in the spring to go riding; going "unplugged" was an added bonus for Stuart.

"It was really nice not to have any distractions," Stuart said. "I couldn't do any work, so I had to think differently. It was great to spend time with Maggie. We just had a good time."

The three girls ride regularly; the adults less so, but all were excited about their time in saddle the first day.



*“Some guests really love the feeling of the wide-open spaces and how much open land there is out here.”*

## Exploring the Wilderness

The silence in the wilderness can be deafening. It envelops you like a blanket, offering a chance to reset from the chaos of the city. The occasional snort from a horse, birds chirping and wind rustling through the trees catch your attention in ways not noticed in high-density, noise-polluted areas.

After a hearty breakfast—no light continental fare here—guests congregate at the barn for orientation before climbing into the saddle. After adjusting everyone’s gear, Meris, Seth and ranch-hand Joe Cronemeyer lead riders out the back gate straight into the Gila National Forest.

Riders travel through Ponderosa pine forests to the top of a mountain overlooking the Black Range on trails Seth and Meris created. As far as the eye can see is the Gila. Three different wilderness areas combined adds up to 3.3 million unspoiled acres. Because their ranch is the only one offering trail rides in this remote part of the Gila, Seth says they might go an entire year without encountering other humans.

“We’ve had people start crying when they get to ‘the top of the world’ on the mountain above the Black Range,” Meris said. “Some guests really love the feeling of the wide-open spaces and how much open land there is out here.”





On one particular trail, riders pass through Cox Canyon and then into what Seth and Meris call the Dwelling Canyon, where they stop for a picnic lunch. Meris points out cliff dwellings, pictographs from the Mimbres people dating back one thousand years, evidence of Basque people and tin miners who all used the same canyon over the centuries. On horseback, you're likely to get a sore neck craning to see all the scenery and multicolored walls of rock.

"There's so much history here," Seth said. "We show guests historic areas that have been here for a thousand years. But we also realize it's our responsibility to make sure it lasts another thousand years."

After riding all day, unsaddling and brushing off their horses, riders relax back at the ranch before enjoying a pork porterhouse dinner with a plethora of sides and dessert. After-dinner entertainment includes board games, music, dancing and other activities. If you step outside after lights out, you can lie back in a chaise lounge and look up at the stars—an eye-popping display unlike anything you can see in the city.

### An Introduction to Nature

Weaving through canyon trails—crisscrossing Taylor Creek Canyon and Beaver Canyon—the horses navigate dozens of small water crossings with ease, allowing riders to take in the springs and beautiful 500-foot canyon walls. The Narrows looks like something out of a movie—sheer walls 30 to 50 feet apart, with a creek in between and a couple of bends to make things interesting.

Riders spot cattle, birds or even a squadron of javelinas during the ride. After a picnic lunch, guests spend time exploring the area, wading in the creek or relaxing in a hammock or under the shade of a tree before mounting up to return the ranch.

Armed with encyclopedic knowledge about the area's history, flora and fauna, Seth and Meris sprinkle factoids into conversations as they guide guests along the routes. Appreciation for their natural surroundings sweetens the words that roll off their tongues, and it's clear they're grateful for the opportunity to share it with their guests.

"We are stewards of the land. We take care of this land and it takes care of us, too," Seth said. "We feel it's our job and our responsibility to show and educate our guests about this area while also teaching them how to preserve it.

"We have a deep connection with the land and we try to give that connection to our guests. We love when we ride to a spot and hear 'Wow.' That's why we're here. That's what we're working for. We love this land so much, and we are extremely fortunate and thankful to be here."

"We want to share our appreciation for it with others and teach people how to care for it, too," Meris added.

Returning through a portion of canyon nicknamed "The Amphitheater," Meris draws on her background in theater and sings "Back in the Saddle Again," the old tune reverberating off the canyon walls.

Being away from the Internet, TV and their smartphones gives guests a chance to take a mental break. At the ranch, there is ample opportunity to slip away and enjoy the solitude with a good book or just soaking in the quiet atmosphere.

Steak and all the fixings, plus homemade peanut-butter pie make for full and happy guests as they enjoy a campfire and sing-alongs as Meris



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tootles on a Native American flute. Meris and Seth have intentionally created a space where guests become like family. Even if you visit the ranch by yourself, you'll never feel lonely and you may very well leave with new friends, along with treasured memories of your time in nature.

“I loved the ‘off-the-gridness’ of it,” Stuart said. “I loved the beautiful scenery, especially the valleys and creeks. Maggie told me she’d like to come back here. If you’re looking to come, you can expect a great welcome from Seth and Meris, and you’ll quickly feel at home. There’s no pretense.”

Immersing oneself in a warm hug of Western culture is often a dream come true for Geronimo’s guests, and it’s an experience worth putting on your schedule.

“So much of the trip was fulfilling a childhood bucket list for me. I’ve always wanted to do this—trail ride and be immersed in the West,” Terri said. “I think missing this would be one of those life regrets.” 📧

#### Along for the Ride

Learn more about Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch.

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