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Visitors can ride the range at Bar Lazy J Guest Ranch in Parshall, Colo.

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Make next summer your dude ranch summer

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Tribune Media Services

PARSHALL, COLO. -- Ready to round 'em up and head 'em out? If you're already shopping for cowboy boots, you're halfway there. Now it's time to saddle up and make reservations for a week at the Bar Lazy J, a family-style dude ranch in northern Colorado west of Rocky Mountain National Park. Yep, they're already filling their calendar for next year. Or you can visit now, when the aspen groves turn the mountains red and gold.

Guest ranches have always been part of the cowboy myth, eulogized as much for their crimson sunsets as for their wide-open spaces. Now that overseas travel is looking dicey, riding the range has become one of America's fastest growing adventures, a chance to play "City Slicker" and bask in that old-fashioned western hospitality at the same time.

Four years ago we spent an unforgettable day at the Bar Lazy J, one of six guest ranches in Grand County, sampling the casual family atmosphere, riding horseback and joining the rest of the guests for a lively dinner in the main lodge. But was the fun just a fluke? To find out, we had to stay longer.

"One day just isn't enough," said our host, owner Jerry Helmicki, who with his wife, Cheri, bought the ranch in 1995 and has since refocused and expanded the

RESOURCES

IF YOU GO

- **When:** The Bar Lazy J is open from mid-May through September, with early and late weeks (when schools are in session) reserved for adults.
- **Cost:** Per person prices for one week are \$1,495 for adults, \$995 for children 7 to 12, \$795 for children 3 to 6 and includes all meals, snacks, horseback riding, fishing and sports equipment. Charges for outfitter-provided excursions are additional. The ranch does not have a liquor license, but you can bring your own.
- **More information:** Contact the Bar Lazy J at 800-396-6279 or 970-725-3437. Or visit www.barlazyj.com.
- **Nearby:** Contact the Grand County Tourism Board at www.grand-county.com or call 800-729-5821. For information on all six dude

activities. "We used to let people come out for a weekend until we realized they needed at least a week to relax, take in the scenery and experience what a western ranch is all about."

ranches in the area, visit www.dude-ranch.com.

Today, horseback riding is at the heart of the Bar Lazy J. Each guest is assigned his or her horse for the week; an arrangement that helps novices ride better and experts have more fun on a better horse. But it hasn't always been this way.

"When the ranch first opened, in 1912," said Cheri, "the first visitors were wealthy couples who brought their maids and came by invitation only. They were interested in hunting, fly-fishing and riding, in that order. But all that's changed. Today, everybody, parents and kids, want to ride."

Though trail riding is first and foremost, Jerry and Cheri also lead guided hiking, mountain biking and fly-fishing in the stretch of Colorado River that flows through the ranch. The newest addition is the "Spa Ride," a three-quarter day outing that starts at the ranch and ends at Hot Sulphur Springs, where a trailer waits to pick up the horses and the riders head for the hot springs and a massage. You can also book river rafting and Jeep trips through local outfitters, and most visitors spend a half-day driving into Rocky Mountain National Park.

Jerry, who rides with the guests nearly every day, seems to be everywhere at once, making announcements in the dining room, overseeing operations in the corral and chatting with guests by the swimming pool. He also leads the weekly evening campfire and sing-along and to everybody's delight, he ends the evening by heating the ranch's branding iron in the coals and imprinting a Bar Lazy J on boots, belts, leather hat bands and purses -- anything you hand him, in fact.

Cheri, a former schoolteacher and award-winning coach, demonstrates her comedic (and leadership) skills at the Wednesday night line-dancing party. The staff show, a weekly highlight, is very corny and a huge hit.

The main lodge, stables and guest cabins, rustic, unwinterized structures built between 1912 and 1940 (and updated as needed), are historic buildings furnished with peeled stick-and-pine furniture and decorated with arts and artifacts. The dining room, as much a museum as a gathering place, is a treasure trove of western gear, decorated with antique rifles, bows and arrows, mounted animal heads and antlers, old tools and cowboy sculptures. The antique stove in the corner has found a new use as a snack bar, open all day with hot coffee, tea, lemonade and cookies.

Meals are announced when the first child to show up gets to ring the dinner bell. The blueberry pancake toss on Wednesday mornings features Cheri tossing plate-sized blueberry pancakes to guests who line up to catch them. Delicious hearty meals are served at tables for four, six and eight; neighborliness is the byword here. Or check out the Bottomless Cookie Box, magically stocked with oatmeal-raisin, chocolate-chip and peanut butter cookies.



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