

Cowboy junkies: saddling up in Wyoming

Michael Kallenbach saddles up and heads for the wide-open spaces of Wyoming



Riding near Dubois, Wyoming

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I am in the heart of America's Marlboro Country, taking in some of the most breathtaking scenery and getting the chance to see it from a different horse each day. If only I owned a cowboy hat, a pair of tasselled chaps, a plaid shirt and a leather waistcoat, I could imagine myself as John Wayne — this part of the Rockies where I am spending five days on horseback is his territory. Instead, for health and safety reasons, I'm in a hard riding hat, a pair of gloves to prevent blisters, a long-sleeved shirt and my regular worn-out jodhpurs.

Were I not on horseback, I doubt there would ever be a chance to experience such a panorama. I feel almost possessive, as if somehow all this, and the horse I've been

allocated for the ride, belong to me and that I actually want to own some of this territory. I am able to take it all in without giving a thought to the heat on my back because my horse, an Arab, is sure-footed — they all are — and knows precisely what to do. They are undoubtedly more at ease on this terrain than I would be on foot.

Just above the Bitterroot Ranch, where I've come to experience riding in America's Wild West, you can look down on to the fork of Wyoming's Wind river, which curls around the ranch. The nearby place names of Buffalo Draw and Bone Lake bring back memories of Westerns and as well as John Wayne Gorge, there is Butch Cassidy's cabin. Legends about the bank robber are plentiful and the cabin he used as a hideout was discovered here some years ago. Now it is part of one of the regular trails, but with rides of up to three or more hours offered twice a day, there are many opportunities to explore different landscapes. Although I'm riding in a small group, I'd actually rather be alone: just me, my horse and this extraordinary sense of freedom and exhilaration.

It's not easy to find the Bitterroot Ranch and there are no passers-by who just drop in



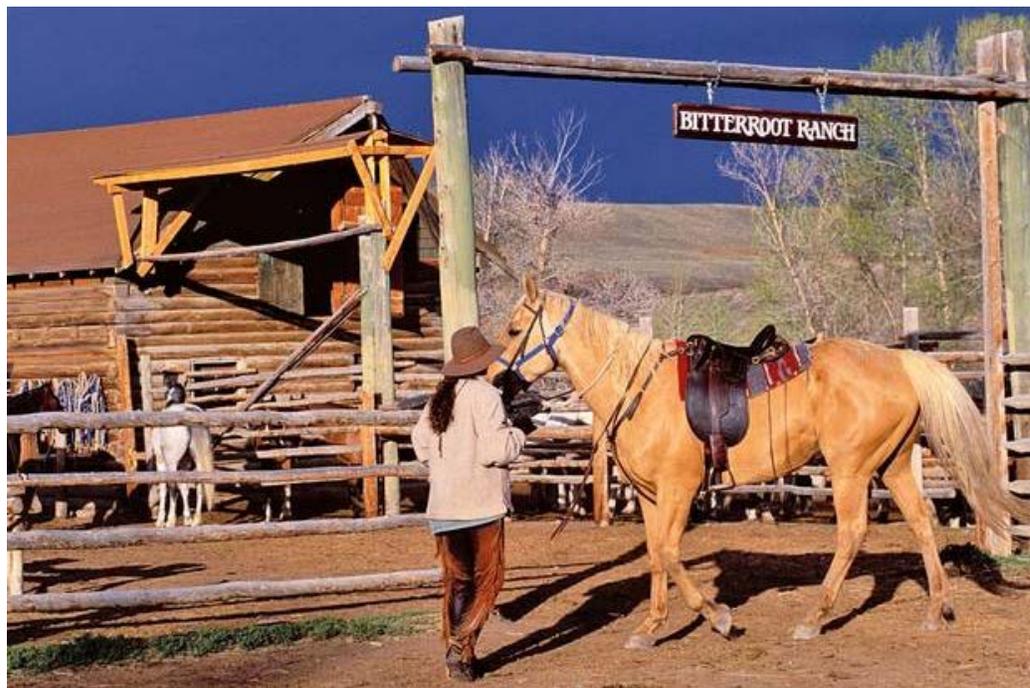
A bedroom at the Bitterroot Ranch

for coffee, a chat or perhaps even to chew a bit of tobacco. The nearest town is Dubois and if you miss Bitterroot, you are in the two-and-a-half-million-acre Shoshone National Forest. The signpost to the ranch is barely visible and to get to it, you have to drive along a 16-mile dirt road after a three-hour drive from the airport at Jackson Hole.

Bayard and Mel Fox have been running the ranch for more than 40 years, and this is where they met. Mel, who grew up in East Africa, came to work for Bayard as a wrangler on the ranch and not only fell in love with the horses, but with Bayard, too. He is originally from Pennsylvania. Growing up he used to see his father, a family doctor, go to work by horse each day. Now their son Richard and daughter-in-law Hadley, an ex-Yale medical student, are involved, too. But even though Bayard is 84, there's no talk of retirement. When he's not leading a group on horseback, he's taking guests fishing for trout. At sunset, before dinner, he's the first on the wooden deck to enjoy a glass of chilled white wine and regale guests with his adventures as a former CIA agent (but that's another story).

The guests are a mixed bunch, with varied riding capabilities. They are mostly Americans, but there's also a tourist from Bath, an Israeli lawyer who lives in Los Angeles and a Parisian family with four teenage children who are all beginners. On the first day, Mel gives us a short 'test' in an outdoor arena and then we are divided up into beginners, intermediate and advanced.

Octavia Pollock gave up living in London and her job at Country Life magazine to



Sadling up at the ranch

spend some months working as a wrangler and guide at Bitterroot. She hunts regularly with the Clifton-on-Teme pack in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, and was told that going to a 'dude ranch' was one of the thousand things that one must do before one dies. It's her first week here and several of the guests comment on her brightly painted red fingernails, the result of her recent stay in San Francisco. But Octavia is aware that her daily duties of mucking out the stables and tacking up horses will mean that her city look will soon disappear.

The wranglers who spend their summers here are not leathery tobacco-chewing types, but rather college graduates who have been brought up on ranches. Luckily for them, the ranch has a Wi-Fi connection — although there is no mobile reception — and during their spare time they huddle under a tree looking for a good connection to the internet.

Rides are led by Mel, Bayard, Richard or Hadley, with a wrangler at the back. There are about 180 horses, mostly Arabs and quarter Arabs, on the ranch, of which 130 are in work, making it possible for the 25 guests to have a different horse on each ride. One morning, Mel arranged for me to take part in a mini cross-country ride, with about 40 jumps. Unlike riding in the UK where one holds on to the reins, Mel tells me to let go and hold tightly on to the horse's mane. I did exactly that, but wondered afterwards what my riding teacher back in Wiltshire, Olympic medal-winning eventer Jonelle Richards, would think of it.

There's no pressure to go out for the afternoon ride as well. Fishing, or just resting



A cowboy with a lasso

your aching muscles, is quite acceptable. The ranch also has 200 or more head of Scottish Highland cattle, and part of the trip is going on a 'round-up' led by Richard. It was nothing like my idea of a bit of cantering, with the cattle obediently obeying commands. In fact, it proved to be the most tiring experience of the week, with five wranglers helping us move the cattle — not listening to us and not moving either — from one ravine to the next. Eventually, several of us had to break branches off trees and use them to nudge the animals along.

On the way to our picnic lunch, Richard obviously felt we needed to be rewarded. He spotted a patch of wild strawberries. Gallantly, he jumped off his horse and picked a handful for each of us. I had never thought of wild strawberries in Wyoming, but

needless to say, they were delicious. But you don't come here for the wild strawberries or the creature comforts — even though one guest shouted out at dinner on our first night, 'Where's the spa?' — you come for the wilderness.

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