



The author with 27-year-old quarter horse, Bubba.

TALL in the SADDLE

at Colorado's Latigo Ranch

BY ANNE BOKMA

How old is too old to learn to ride a horse? Maybe midlife is the right time. By now you've likely learned a thing or two about brushing yourself off and getting back in the saddle. Maybe even developed some true grit. Life might be slowing from a gallop to a trot but that doesn't mean it can't still be an adventure.

We're four women, the youngest just shy of 40, the oldest almost 60, outfitted for a three-day western adventure at Latigo Ranch in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Beginners all, we're nervous as colts on our first day of an all-inclusive stay at this world class guest ranch in Grand County (two hours from Denver), the self-proclaimed dude ranch capital of the U.S. Careful Canadians, we've opted for helmets instead of the usual cowboy hats—and we've made sure to top up our health insurance in case of any falls. For-

tunately, the trip goes off without a hitch.

We've each been matched for the duration of our stay with a horse to suit our personality and riding style: Camilla with the regal Blaze, Rosalind with easygoing Concho, Jen with feisty Gunsmoke and me with Bubba, a 27-year-old quarter horse, slow moving, cautious, and yes, a little bit stubborn.

This 500-acre ranch has been in operation for almost a century, ever since founder Frederick Kasdrof arrived by covered wagon to homestead in the area—it's speculated that popular adventure writer Zane Grey was inspired to write "The Mysterious Rider" based on his stay here. Today, Latigo is featured on Top50ranches.com as one of the best in the world and voted one of the 12 best family vacations by *USA Today*.

Its popularity owes much to the hospitality of its hands-on owners, Randy and Lisa George. They've run the place

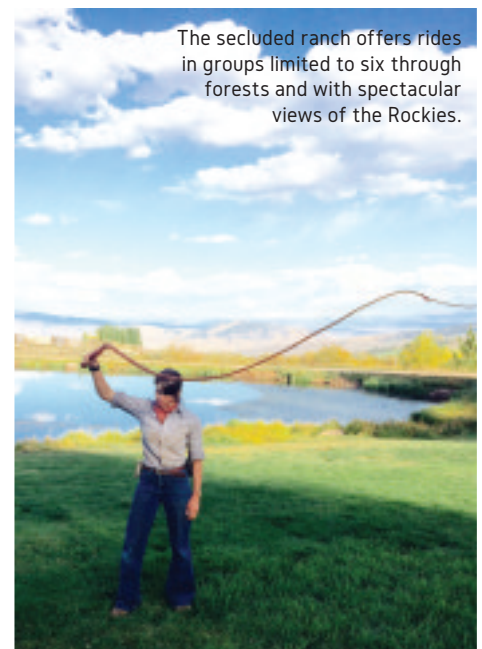
for more than 30 years, raised their family here and now their grown children work alongside them (daughter Hannah rustles up breakfast, son Spencer is head chef and his wife Amanda is the sommelier). This place is about as family-run as you can get—even Lisa's 81-year-old mother helps out in the kitchen.

A team of professional and personable wranglers, hand-picked from across the country, rounds out the 20-member staff. With a capacity for only 35 guests, you can expect outstanding hospitality, from expertly prepared "nouveau ranch cuisine," impeccably kept log cabins and enthusiastic lessons in everything from fly fishing to skeet shooting and country line dancing. You can also expect an expert riding program. While some ranches take large groups out for nose-to-tail rides, Latigo keeps their groups to no more than six, ensuring plenty of personal attention to help you develop your riding skills.

Before we head out for our first ride, Randy demonstrates how to lightly manoeuvre the reins so our horse will stop, go, and turn left and right on command ("they're so sensitive they can feel a fly landing on them") and explains why it's important to approach the horse carefully from the side (they have blind spots, just like cars). He reminds us to keep our hips, shoulders and heels in line (thus the expression, "tall in the saddle"), and to stay one horse length away from the animal in front (just as in driving, it's important to avoid rear enders).

"Good horseback riding depends on the effectiveness of the rider—the goal is to become one with your horse," pronounces Randy, noting that these animals are masters of nonverbal communication. "They are looking for direction from you—it's like they're testing a substitute teacher." Just as any good teacher knows, most often a gentle touch is all that's needed, although sometimes you have to be firm. I lean over to stroke Bubba's mane, take hold of the reins, give him a soft tap with my spurs and off we go.

I'm thankful for the cowpoke pace of our first day—it allows us to absorb the breathtaking postcard-worthy views of the Rockies, a spectacular vista of mountain peaks and vast pine and spruce forest, hillsides dotted with sage and alpine



The secluded ranch offers rides in groups limited to six through forests and with spectacular views of the Rockies.



meadows with crystalline streams where cattle snooze in the shade under stands of orange, green and yellow shimmering aspen, the state's native tree. More than once I find myself humming John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" while we meander through the heart of the Medicine Bow-Rout National Forest, land that Latigo uses for horseback riding in summer and cross country skiing in winter, when the ranch turns into a Nordic resort.

This vacation is a world apart from the manufactered amusements of theme parks and the excess of an ocean liner cruise. The closest neighbours are several miles away and my cellphone is out of reach, tucked deep into my saddlebag. Above me the clearest and bluest sky I've ever seen is periodically punctuated by swooping hawks. Here, it's all about the simple beauty of the great outdoors. "Huckleberry pleasures," Randy calls it.

After an almost three-hour ride with

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1,000 pounds of horseflesh between my legs, I'm as bandy-legged as a bit player in a spaghetti western when I dismount from Bubba. Luckily there's a heated outdoor pool and large indoor hot tub to soak away any aches and pains. Before cocktails and a cookout dinner, we have fun practicing our cowboy skills. I fail to hit the target when I try tomahawk tossing but let out a "yee-haw!" when I successfully lasso a dummy steer on my first try. And as it turns out, I'm quite proficient with a bullwhip—who knew? Later that

night, after some vigorous square dancing in the main lodge, we sit on the porch of our cabin, drinking wine and drinking in the dark beauty of the night sky.

On day two, just as we're getting comfortable in the saddle, Randy casually mentions that it's grouse hunting season and hunters with bows and arrows may be in the vicinity. Fortunately grouse are low to the ground and we're up high, but still, the idea of being a possible target is unnerving. By day three we're learning how to lope and trot. I plant my feet firmly in the stirrups and stand tall as Bubba quickly moves his massive weight. Trotting is tough on the tush and I only last a couple of minutes. We spend the rest of the day scaling up and down steep hills, ducking branches, navigating over fallen logs and squeezing through narrow passageways between the pine and aspen on the red dirt trails.

A horseback riding vacation is a lot like a ski vacation—consecutive days on the hills build your skill—and your confidence.

Once or twice Bubba stumbles on a rock, but he keeps up his dependable pace, which makes me feel safe in the saddle. After our final ride, I reward him by releasing the reins so he can munch on sagebrush and take a long cool drink from a small pond. I stroke his mane and offer him a nonverbal thank you. I'm reluctant to leave Latigo. It's a glorious place. Besides, Bubba and I have bonded. **50**