

HORSES ARE THE HEART OF THIS MOTHER-DAUGHTER GETAWAY AT THE C LAZY U

HORSING AROUND

STORY DARLA WORDEN

Riders cross meandering Willow Creek from which the ranch got its name. There's plenty of room to roam on the 8,500 acres of preserved land. >>

PHOTO COURTESY C LAZY U RANCH



At 7:30 a.m., frost covers the grass, and steam rises from the guests' coffee cups as they line up behind the split-rail fence, waiting for the show that is about to begin. The first thing you hear are the wranglers, yip, yip, yipping; then the thunder of hooves, and the sound of cowbells giving the "jingle" its name, an event that takes place on the C Lazy U guest ranch at 7:30 a.m. Monday-Saturday as horses come to the barn for their day's work; and again at 4:30 when they head home to the pasture for the night. Sundays are their day off.

Located near Granby, Colorado, the ranch began more than a century ago when two pioneering families, the Smillies and McQuearys, developed land along a creek in the Rocky Mountains into a working guest ranch to host two dozen visitors for horseback riding, trout >>

Grilled Cheese (left) and Karl (right) are natural models when our wrangler snaps a photo at the top of a hill where Anna and I rode to take in the panoramic view.

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fishing and bear hunting. Named for the meandering shape of Willow Creek, the ranch has changed hands several times through the years. The current ownership team, who came as guests for years with their families, purchased the resort to preserve its 8,500 acres and maintain its level of service that earns accolades on prestigious travel lists.

While available activities range from fly-fishing to hatchet throwing, my Brooklyn-based daughter, Anna, and I came for the horses—the most popular attraction. Since

we don't ride often, we were a little nervous, but general manager Jeremy Belnap put us at ease.

"We have a world-class dude ranch horseback riding program and more than 200 horses," he says. "Our team of professional wranglers pair human to horse based on >>

LEFT: After a day of horseback riding in the fresh mountain air, riders are hungry, and there's no shortage of delicious fare on the ranch prepared by the culinary team. RIGHT: These pint-size bodyguards, Tilly and Wilbur, are mini donkeys who make a racket when predators are near.

PHOTOS COURTESY C LAZY U RANCH





TOP: The horses at the C Lazy U are well-matched to each rider's ability. BOTTOM: Accommodations include individual rooms and one- to three-room private cabins, varying in size and décor, all within walking distance of the main lodge. >>



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many factors, including guests' experience, skill level and desires while on the ranch."

The horses—extensively trained Paint, draft, Appaloosa and Quarter Horse breeds—are selected for riders by wranglers who know the animals' quirks and personalities like family members. I'm matched with Grilled Cheese—"Cheese" for short—and Anna is on Karl. Our wrangler leads us on a winding trail that gains elevation with a prize at the top: a magnificent view of the valley and the Indian Peaks in the distance. Dude

ranch horses can get a bad reputation for "nose to tail" trail rides, but not at the C Lazy U, where the horses have been trained in ground work, round pen work, desensitizing, and arena/trail work. They have to be athletic and sound, and they may be required to go on two trail rides a day, which is no small task in the mountains.

At dinner, we meet guests who have been coming to the ranch with their families for generations. "Many >>

Lodging decor is decidedly Western with many photos of horses, of course. This cabin has a cozy seating area and fireplace for lounging after a day on the trail.

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guests have had some type of transformative experience while creating indelible memories here,” says Belnap. “When a boy comes to C Lazy U with his grandfather and has that type of experience, he only desires to share it with his son when he becomes a father.”

The well-cared-for horses even have bodyguards: mini donkeys Tilly and Wilbur, who have natural guarding instincts, using braying and aggressive behavior to scare predators away. At 4:30, Anna and I are back at the split-rail fence for the afternoon jingle. We spot Tilly and Wilbur

running with the crowd, oblivious to being a tenth the size of some of their companions. The galloping horses, ringing cowbells and whoops of the wranglers create an experience that is, as Belnap says, transformative, a memory etched in my brain forever. ○

At the 4:30 “jingle,” horses waste no time heading from the barn back to the pasture after a long day’s work. Shown here, they’re passing the pool area and guest cabins on their way home.

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THE SCOOP

GETTING THERE

The C Lazy U is located near Granby, Colorado, a two-hour drive from Denver. Guests can also fly privately into nearby Kremmling or Granby airports.