

Heaven on a ranch

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Home on the range never was so good.

Back in the old days, looking for lost cattle included long rides on a sorry cayuse. Dinner would be warmed over beans with a crust of bread. If you were lucky, the bread had a good dollop of lard.

Well, those days are gone, Bucko, and if working the open range is still on your to-do list, then saddle up at the **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch**.

The cattle still need to be found the hard way, but there is no need to lose the creature comforts of five-star service.

Up a long, dusty road winding through the Brittany triangle west of Williams Lake, B.C., is the broad Nemaiah Valley, home sweet home to the **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch**.

As city slickers in crisp blue jeans tumbled from a dusty Suburban, the last of the spring snow swirled around the towering summit of Mount Tatlow.

"Someone must have pointed at the mountain," says guest services co-ordinator Susy Chaston as she welcomes the new guests.

"Snow isn't the only thing swirling around that mountain. It's said that if you point at the mountain, the weather changes for the worse."

With that, most greenhorns stuff their hands deep in their dungarees and look skyward for the weather to shift. It does -- but for the better. They all came to ride, wrangle and be pampered.

As if on cue, the screen door on the cookhouse is kicked open and chef David Correa walks across the huge wooden deck holding a tray of fresh fruit kabobs for the weary travellers to devour.

The fruit soon washes away thoughts of the road.

After tossing the duffle bags into luxuriously appointed cabins, the greenhorns mosey over to the corral to meet their equine companions for the week. A short orientation, followed by a ride around the corral, make for a quick saddle-up in the morning.

Speaking of morning, the wake-up call is the sound of thundering hooves as the wranglers bring in the horses from their lush evening pasture. As you enjoy yet another gourmet meal created by Chef Correa, you'll decide what activity you'll enjoy for the day. If ranch boss Mike Hawkrige is looking for cattle on the 11,200-hectare expanse, be prepared for a long day out on the range.

But don't despair; it's the highlight for every city slicker. The saddle is good, the vista is impressive and Hawkridge has stories, lore and good old country charm to wile the miles away.

The day I accompanied him on the trail, we were way up the valley checking the herd. Hawkridge was keeping a close eye on the cows because calving season was wrapping up and the calves can get separated too easily in the dense cover.

The range cattle don't see too many riders in bright Gortex, so they tend to bolt when a gaggle of newbies come charging in. The horses know the drill, however, and move silently through the thick willow.

Out of the peaceful air I hear a calf bawl. I spin in my saddle to look, but to my surprise, it's ranch boss Hawkridge. He's bawling like a mournful calf. From across the dale, we hear the mother's deep voice call back as she walks out from the trees. Suddenly, a calf pops up and sounding remarkable like Hawkridge, it cries out and trundles over to the mother.

Hawkridge's tanned face breaks into a grin, "Works every time."

It was a long day in the saddle, but we located everyone. To me a cow is a cow, but Hawkridge knew almost every cow we counted. By the time we rounded the last corner, the trees were casting long shadows over the ranch houses and it wouldn't be long until a gourmet meal was on the table. No kidding. Chef Correa has worked for politicians, royalty and rock stars -- including Mick Jagger.

Other activities are bountiful, from trail rides, biking, canoeing, fly-fishing, picnicking, hiking and paddle boating to sitting and admiring the serenity. One day is designated Gymkhana Day, where everyone shows off his newfound riding skills.

And if you don't want to sit at the campfire each night, head on down to the hot tub to soak those saddle-weary butts under the biggest, starry sky in British Columbia.

Off the ranch, the activities are endless. Hike to the top of Cardiff Mountain and check out the brick-like basalt formations. Whitewater rafting on the Chilcotin River is a wonderful, wet, white-knuckle ride. Not only is the scenery diverse and breathtaking, it's a river where you actually lose count of the eagles flying by.

If the rapids are too wild, but you still seek where the wild things are, wranglers Kim and Carrie will help you locate the famous wild horses of the Brittany Triangle.

A glimpse of these elusive mustangs is awesome. They are linked to the original Spanish herds that migrated north to the Cariboo Chilcotin region in the 18th century. Have your camera ready -- they are sure-footed, sleek and fast!

- The **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch** caters to families, couples, corporate retreats and weddings and anybody else who wanders in. Cowgirl weekends, branding weekends and horsemanship clinics are offered throughout the May-October season.

If You Go:

- First, check it out at www.adventurewestresorts.com. The ranch is just over two hours from Williams Lake, but much of that is a dusty, 90-kilometre road past wild horses, raging rapids of emerald-coloured glacial meltwater and straying range cattle lounging on the gravel. If that is too far, then either charter a plane for a one-hour flight from Vancouver or use your own to land at the ranch's private airstrip. If you are lucky enough to own a floatplane, that can be accommodated, too. The ranch borders Vedan Lake where, once the plane is roped to the dock, the bull trout impatiently wait for your bait.

- If you do catch a few trout, Chef Correa will incorporate it into the nightly dinner, where most everything on the menu is locally grown. If you walk away from the table hungry, you walked away too soon.

- At the end of the week, it's actually hard to leave your trail partner behind. But there is a Cessna on the runway or a Suburban on the dusty road full of cowboy wannabes who will bond with Cody, Buddy, Star, Coal and the other 45 horses just as fast as you did.

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Joanne Elves, For the Calgary Herald / The **Elkin Creek Guest Ranch** near Williams Lake, B.C., is every bit as picturesque as its promotions promise.
- Colour Photo: Joanne Elves, For the Calgary Herald / Greenhorns are given a short orientation course in riding on arrival. Obviously, some need more orientation than others.

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