

Earn Your Spurs

COWBOY CULTURE AND COWHAND TRICKS ON A COLORADO RANCH BY MARGOT BIGG

Brian was the quintessential cowboy, the living image of a Western movie hero. He was six-foot-something, with a white handlebar moustache and a cowboy hat the colour of butter. His brown leather boots were tipped with sprocket-like spurs from which hung tiny bells that jingled when he walked. Except that Brian didn't really walk—he moseyed, with the sort of slow, controlled, bowlegged saunter that comes from spending much of your life on horseback. After all, this was the Wild West and Brian was a career cowboy.

I'd come to Gateway Canyons Palisade Ranch, high in northwest Colorado's canyon country, to immerse myself in cowboy culture. My idea of ranch life had been entirely shaped by Hollywood, and the occasional country music video on MTV. So when I heard that Palisade offered "cowboying lessons," I jumped at the chance to find

out if the job was indeed as advertised.

Upon my arrival, Brian greeted me with a firm handshake while using his free hand to tip his hat in a gesture straight out of Wild West movies. This is the real deal, I thought.

I'd hoped that Palisade would offer a glossy version of cowboy life, with training wheels—tailored to city folk who want a taste of the culture without the hard work. But when I shook Brian's weathered hand, rough and chapped from many decades of serious labour, I began to envision cleaning sweat scum off saddles, dragging huge bags of horse feed through dusty barns, and getting bucked off temperamental horses to land head-first into spiky tumbleweed.

To my relief, my induction into cowboy culture was a mild group trail ride through the scrub and oak-covered hills around the ranch. Riding through this landscape was like entering a panoramic painting. Dark granite cliffs,

partially carpeted by dark green bushes, surrounded us—deceivingly lush for a high-altitude desert. The skyscape was confusingly diverse, with a blinding patch of sun overhead and threatening violet-hued storm clouds a few kilometres in the distance, and silver rain streaking from them like wispy brushstrokes.

I wanted to spend the ride admiring the landscape from my high perch atop Splash, my splotchy black-and-white horse, but ended up mostly focussed on fielding his attempts to sneak bites of the purple flowers that added vibrancy to the otherwise muted landscape.

Later, I sat down to dine with my fellow equestrians, while Ross, the ranch manager, and his brother serenaded us with traditional campfire songs:

*Bacon and beans most every day
Soon we'll be eating this prairie hay
Come a ki yi yippee yippee yay yippee yay
Come a ki yi yippee yippee yay*

Wannabe cowboys of all ages gather for lessons around the corral at Palisade Ranch in western Colorado.

PHOTO COURTESY: GATEWAY CANYONS

Many of these songs essentially served as bovine mood music. “A lot of these songs are melodic,” Ross explained between crooning about “drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds.” “Cowboys would sing to keep the cows calm, to keep them from getting too riled up.”

The summer sun sets late in the Wild West, and as there was still a little daylight left, Brian gave me my first lesson: in the art of the lasso, or lariat as cowboys call it. I learned that use of the term lasso was one of the easiest-to-spot linguistic markers of a “dude,” cowboy slang for urbanite. Brian handed me a small, stiff loop of rope and led me to my target, a miniature metal bullock statue. He showed me how to twirl the rope by flicking my arm in a triangular formation over my head. Once my twirling was passable, I had to release the rope out toward the statue’s metal horns, jerking my shoulder forward and out as if I were attempting to dislocate it from the socket. I’m embarrassingly uncoordinated, so as much as I enjoyed swinging the lariat over my head until it cut the air with a whooshing sound, this particular aspect of cowboying just wasn’t my forte.

The next morning I made my next attempt at cowboying. I was astride Splash, with Ross as my instructor. My mission was to learn the basics of cattle herding, which in this scenario meant following a dozen or so calves around a small arena, attempting to steer them between a couple of overturned buckets. Although the calves were small, no more than a metre or so, they bore intimidating, potentially leg-impaling horns. The secret, Ross explained, was to convince the animal at the lead to go where I wanted. The rest of the herd would instinctually follow.

While I couldn’t imagine how creatures with such daunting appendages could possibly be coerced by a city girl on a horse, I wasn’t about to back down.

“Now get up on their right,” Ross barked as I awkwardly coaxed Splash to the right of the group, only to see a straggler behind me. “Don’t let the yellow one get away! Quick, make sure the one in the lead gets through the buckets,” he continued, while I was still trying to work out which of the multi-hued calves was the yellow one. I trotted Splash up to the front, just in time to block the lead calf’s chances of going



The writer’s first tentative attempts at cattle herding (top); The stables (bottom) at Palisade Ranch give a glimpse of the culture of the Old West, with a giant fireplace, leather covered armchairs, and rough-hewn wood furniture.

anywhere but through the buckets. My first attempt was a success, and though I failed at every subsequent obstacle Ross set up for me, at least a bit of beginner’s luck got me through one cowboying exercise.

When class was over, I tied Splash using a “robber’s knot,” a variation of a quick-release knot that Brian had showed me. “If you’re a robber, you aren’t going to have time to untie your horse,” he explained. While I hoped he’d follow this up with a bank robbery story fit for the silver screen, my brief stint here had taught me that life in the Wild West was not about romantic rides into the sunset, or fast-paced shoot-outs at old saloons. It was about serious hard work and the

cowboy’s unwavering reverence of both his steed and the land.

THE VITALS

Getting There The nearest airport to the Gateway Canyons Palisade Ranch is a 70-minute drive northeast, in Grand Junction, Colorado. Grand Junction has regular flights from Denver, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah.

Stay The Palisade Ranch is owned by the nearby Gateway Canyons Resort (+1-970-931-2458; www.gatewaycanyons.com; doubles from \$339/₹22,750). Custom horsemanship and cowboying packages are available directly through the resort (trail rides from US\$85/₹5,700 for 90 minutes). ●