

## TRAVEL



The lower lake, fed by Little Fountain Creek, is just big enough for boating.

## Colorado guest ranch keeps Western traditions alive

*It's called Emerald Valley, but no one is sure exactly whether it's because of the mines, or the terrain*

By ANNE Z. COOKE

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

**M**ANITOU SPRINGS, Colo. – I was returning from a hike up Mount Vigil, the peak you can see from the Ranch at Emerald Valley, near Colorado Springs, when a leathery-faced cowboy walked by, humming a tune and leading a horse.

At the same moment, a car pulled up and the driver, eyes masked behind dark sunglasses, leaned out and asked for directions to the ranch, which just happened to be where I was staying.

I would have answered, but at that moment the old cowboy stopped dead, looked at the license plate – “Texas,” he muttered – looped the reins around the saddle horn and unwrapped a piece of gum. Then he pointed down the road. “That way,” he said.



Photos by Tribune News Service

**Saddling up at the Old Stage Riding Stable, for a morning on horseback at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, Colorado Springs, Colo.**

“Thanks,” said the driver, hesitating. “I’m Tony,” he added. “Say, do you know why they call it Emerald Valley? Was there a gold mine here? Gemstones, maybe?”

Curious myself, and still out of breath, I stepped closer, the better to hear.

“Well now, I couldn’t say,” replied the cowboy, pulling a dented army canteen off his belt. “I’ve wondered on it myself. Might be for them green trees, a hideaway-like, where a person can git away and think.

“They used to call it Camp Vigil, after that mountain there. Real special for old Mr. Penrose, Spencer Penrose he was, the man who built the first lodge up there on Cheyenne Mountain. Back in the 1920s, that was.”

The cowboy paused for another long swallow. “The way they tell it,” he said, “he’d git down here with his friends, sittin’ up late,

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### Taking the Kids

## Getting unplugged in a super fun way

By EILEEN OGINTZ

TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Get ready to thread the needle! In whitewater rafting parlance, that means aiming your raft between obstacles in a rushing river.

No biggie for our experienced OARS raft guide, Lindsey Mersereau, 30, as she steers our yellow, inflatable raft down the Yampa River in Dinosaur National Monument, which traverses Colorado and Utah. As we glide by, soaring multi-colored cliffs loom on either side of us.

“Once I discovered rafting, I gave up backpacking,” said Mersereau, a ski school supervisor in Telluride, Colorado, during the winter. “Why carry all that gear on your back? Rafting has the experience of backpacking in the wilderness with the luxury of car camping.”

But it’s more than that. For busy parents, it’s the luxury of

not having to organize anything for a camping trip. Someone else has shopped for the food on this five-day trip and the always cheery guides cook everything from lasagna to steaks and mashed potatoes, quinoa salad one day for lunch, even a birthday cake for one of the rafters one night. They also offer special options for vegetarians, vegans, etc. The easy-to-put-up tents and sleeping bags (and mattress pads) have been provided. So have the waterproof bags for our gear.

For those seeking to get unplugged, there is no cell service or Wi-Fi and the kids are guaranteed to have too much fun to care. When is the last time they took a shower in a waterfall? Paddled through rapids? Ridden a stand-up paddleboard down a moving river? (The experts say a trip like this is suitable for kids as young as 7. At night, the guitars and ukuleles come out around the campfire.

Because of abundant snowfall

this past winter, this is expected to be one of the best seasons for whitewater rafting in the West with opportunities for day trips, as well as multi-day adventures. In California, for example, the high water means extended rafting on the North Fork of the American River near Sacramento and North Lake Tahoe and on the Merced River near Yosemite, which is a great one-day trip and add-on to those visiting Yosemite National Park.

This at a time when more families are camping, even teens, who say they appreciate the chance to get outdoors and unplugged, according to the 2019 American Camping Report.

That includes outdoors-loving grandparents. OARS reports that 20 percent of those on their 1,000 trips are baby boomers enjoying and sharing the wilderness with grandchildren. “Excellent,” said Jennifer Sims, from Vancouver, Washington, back for another trip after rafting with her grandkids

last year on the Salmon River. “Quality gear, exquisite meals and attention to all the things that matter – like safety and health.”

That’s no small thing on an active adventure where it’s not unusual for rafters to go into the water, especially from stand-up paddleboards and inflatable kayaks called duckies. We wear helmets; get lessons on bucking our safety vests tightly and also on getting back in a raft and helping someone else in. There is as much focus on hand-washing as on a big cruise ship.

Don’t be afraid to try this,” said Susan Shaler, an attorney in her early 60s from San Diego. “It’s accessible and you don’t need to be in the best shape and the scenery is so beautiful!”

No need to navigate yourself or look at a guidebook, though I found the Belknap’s Waterproof Dinosaur River Guide, a great way to mark the more than 70 miles we are traveling on the Yampa and Green Rivers, our campsites (no one but

us) – and the famous rapids. The guides are a wealth of information about everything from the famous dinosaur “Wall of Bones” in Dinosaur National Monument to the geology of the rock formations dating back millions of years to the ancient Fremont People, who lived here thousands of years ago, taking us on side hikes to see the pictographs and petroglyphs this area is famous for, even to a cave where we see their ancient stone containers used for storing corn.

But be forewarned that “river trips are real adventures that involve real risk. These are active participatory adventures that take place in wild and remote settings where exposure to the elements is a given,” said Steve Markle, a spokesman for OARS, now celebrating its 50th anniversary.

For more Taking the Kids, visit [www.takingthekids.com](http://www.takingthekids.com) and also follow “taking the kids” on [www.twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com).

## TRAVEL

## Slovakia's capital makes a remarkable comeback

Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia and once a nearly desolate ghost town, is one of the big surprises of my recent travels. Its compact old town bursts with colorfully restored facades, lively outdoor cafes, and swanky boutiques. Its ramshackle industrial quarter, just east of the center, is rapidly being redeveloped into a forest of skyscrapers. The hilltop castle gleams from a recent facelift. And even the glum communist-era suburb of Petržalka, right across the Danube, has undergone a Technicolor makeover. It's arguably the fastest-changing city in Europe.

Sitting quietly in the very center of central Europe, wedged between bigger and stronger nations (Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland), Slovakia was brutally disfigured by its communist regime, then overshadowed by the Czechs. But in recent years, this fledgling republic has found its wings. Locals brag that the region around Bratislava has the hottest economy and highest per capita income of any region in the former Communist bloc.

Bratislava has also forged a twin-city alliance for trade and commerce with Vienna — which is less than an hour's train ride away, and whose lights you can sometimes see from here — making this truly the nexus of central Europe.

Many Bratislavans fancy themselves the yang to Vienna's yin: If Vienna is a staid,

elderly aristocrat sipping coffee, then Bratislava is a vivacious young professional jet-setting around Europe. Bratislava at night is a lively place, thanks in part to tens of thousands of university students.

Though lacking blockbuster sights (you could easily have a great day here without paying a single admission fee), Bratislava is made for strolling. If you have just a few hours to spend, head straight to the old town and wander its mostly traffic-free streets, finishing with one or more of the city's fine viewpoints: Ascend to the observation deck atop a funky bridge or hike up to the castle for the views. With more time, stroll along the Danube riverbank to the thriving, modern Eurovea development — essentially a riverside park with luxury condos and a modern shopping mall. Enjoying a drink in one of its chic outdoor lounges, you'll get a glimpse of where Slovakia is heading.

From the end of World War II until Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution in 1989, Bratislava was a damaged husk. The communist regime had no respect for the town's heritage, selling off the old town's medieval cobblestones to cute German towns rebuilding after the war. Locals avoided this stripped-down, desolate corner of the city, preferring to spend time in the Petržalka suburb across the river.



Rick Steves

COMMENTARY

With the collapse of the communist regime, the new government began returning buildings to their original owners and over time, the city made the old town traffic-free, spruced up public buildings, and encouraged private owners to restore their buildings as well. In the last decade, life has returned with a vengeance and Bratislava's old-town charm is on full display.

Most visitors first encounter this charm via St. Michael's Gate, which is topped by the last surviving tower of the medieval city walls. It leads to the delightful Michalská Street, crammed with cafes and boutiques, and a symbol of how far the city has come. The town's modest main square, Hlavné Námestie, feels too petite for a national capital. Its style is a mishmash — every building around it seems to date from a different architectural period. Elsewhere in the old town, you'll find the Old Market Hall, which dates back to 1910, and is now a busy community center that hosts concerts and a Saturday market. Laurinská Street is Bratislava's fashion drag, lined with fun-to-browse boutiques. And look out for the many whimsical statues that dot the old town. Most date from the late 1990s, when city leaders wanted to entice locals back into the newly prettied-up and fun-loving center.

The imposing Bratislava Castle is the city's

most prominent landmark. Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa transformed the castle in the 18th century from a military fortress to a royal residence. Big and iconic as it is, frankly it's dull up close — and the exhibits inside are not too exciting. Still, it's almost obligatory to head up for the views. A recent renovation has breathed life into the castle, which is surrounded by a delightful public park.

Spanning the nearby river, just downhill from the castle, is the huge flying-saucer-capped SNP Bridge, the communists' pride and joy. ("SNP" is shorthand for the 1944 Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis, a common focus of communist remembrance.) Locals aren't crazy about this structure — not only for its questionable Starship Enterprise design, but also because of the oppressive regime it represented. However, it's been reclaimed by capitalists, and the restaurant and observation deck have been renovated into a posh eatery called "UFO."

I admit that Bratislava used to leave me cold. But changes over the last two decades have transformed it into a delightful destination. Bratislava's energy is inspiring.

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## Hiking trails add to the adventure

COLORADO • from F3

telling stories about mountain climbing and all. That's a purty fine log cabin he had, the one they still got. It's renovated now, with a real bar, all chinked up, nice and tight. You'll see. No rain gittin' in there.

"All kind of trees shades them log cabins, and your creek has a waterfall and lakes stocked regular with trout. The cabin on the hill is a palace, big enough for weddings and such. The cook's in the kitchen most days, handy with the fixin's. I stop in now and then and he makes me a plate."

When the cowboy took another swallow I spoke up. "Is Spencer Penrose the one who built the zoo at the bottom of the mountain, and every time there was a parade he rode the elephant through town?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the cowboy. "He bought the land for them animals. It's what happens to folks from the east when they git to this here west. The land took old Penrose and it's took the new owner, too. The rocks, the hills and your meadows, they call you to put down roots.

"You buy an acre, build a cabin, git some chickens and you think you're done. Then the place next door gits a sale sign so you buy it, git a rail fence and a cow and call it a ranch. Then that homestead down by the creek, well, you need water in these parts, so you buy it, too. That's history, hereabouts."

With that, the old cowboy tipped his hat, nodded to both of us, clucked to the horse and they disappeared down the road.

"Guess I'll see it for myself," said the driver, adjusting his sunglasses and revving the engine. "Can I give you a ride?"

"No thanks, I'll walk," I said. "The ranch is pretty close now, down around the corner."

Alone again, I got to thinking. That cowboy was right. Gossip is just another word for history, especially in ranch country. In the late 1890s, the dirt track here was known as Gold Road. I'd seen the mine tailings myself, a heap of yellow dirt pushed up past the trail, where our horseback ride turned toward the corral. And for all that, they never did find gold.

After the last gold strike petered out, arrivals included a settler, a Girl Scout Camp and finally Spencer Penrose, who leased the 16-acre parcel from the Pike National Forest for his newly created social club, the Pikes Peak Camping and Mountain Trails Associa-



Tribune News Service

Recording artist Jeff Houlton, 40 years a guitarist and a campfire tradition, entertains on Wednesday and Saturday evenings at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, Pike National Forest, Colorado Springs, Colo.

tion. The club didn't last, but the cabin survived the years, including an interval as a dude ranch, in the 1970s.

After the Broadmoor Hotel changed hands, in 2011, the new owner, Philip Anschutz, bought the property, eventually restoring and enlarging the lodge and building guest cabins, hoping to re-create the ranch and its era, along with an authentic touch of wilderness.

When the work was finished, it was so accurate that I couldn't tell the old walls from the new ones, or the antiques from the reproductions. The interior furnishings, custom made, not only echoed the era but added a decided touch of luxury. The 10 guest cabins — sized for two, four or eight guests — had their own chinked logs and period decor; all outfitted, of course, with modern amenities.

As for the so-called "palace," that's where I stayed. By the time I tried to make a reservation, every cabin was booked, except that one up the hill. Climbing uphill on a winding stone path, I thought I'd been banished to the barn. Then I saw the flagstone patio — large enough for a 50-guest reception, and opened the front door. The living room, furnished with hand-tooled leather chairs, luxurious sofas and a man-sized fireplace, begged me to sit down; the walls, hung with western and Native American art, insisted that I take a closer look.

The kitchen, large-party sized, included a long center island, surrounded by walls covered with cupboards, and counters with three sinks and the latest appliances. With bedrooms upstairs and down (and bathrooms for each) there was room for eight.

After that, no day was like another. You could sleep late, or eat breakfast early, then climb the ridge to see the views. Five or six other trails climbed peaks or crossed

through the forest, or you could ride horseback. A hot lunch and farm-fresh salad or sandwich was followed by a game of Scrabble, a walk around the perimeter or a nap in the hammock.

Come 4 p.m., I fetched the fly rod and headed for the lake where the rainbow and brown trout were breaking the surface. Used the wrong fly and came away empty. Cocktail hour followed, improved by the chef's hors d'oeuvres. Dinner time lasted as long as you could eat or talk, in the dining room or stargazing around the campfire.

Wednesday and Saturday evening campfires, when recording artist and cowboy singer Jeff Houlton entertained, were the biggest surprise of all. Corny, you're thinking? Maybe, but don't laugh yet.

I was watching the fire toss up sparks and sipping a smooth cabernet, expecting to hear the usual background thrumming, elevator music, usually, when Houlton tuned the strings and tore into the "Orange Blossom Special," astonishing everyone with his lightning-fast picking and perfect rhythm.

Not only did he wow us with some of the smartest flat picking ever — and faultless two and three-finger work — but he sang each song differently, turning the most ordinary lyrics into a drama with an ending.

As the guests called out requests, he called on the vast repertoire he hides under that cowboy hat and performed as asked. Country & western, pop, bluegrass, Pete Seeger, Elton John, the Grateful Dead — he knew them all.

Listening, I couldn't help wondering why it felt so familiar. Then I remembered. The evening reminded me of Stead's Ranch, founded in 1904 and long gone now, a historic guest ranch and lodge

tucked among the pines, beneath snowy peaks, in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park.

For many a golden summer, a worldwide procession of guests came through Stead's, from mountain climbers and presidents to stage celebrities, opera singers and families with kids, all sitting around the campfire together, sharing the West's special brand of hospitality.

Which is just how it felt that night at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, at the end of the track they once called the Gold Road. I think they've hit pay dirt after all.

## The nitty gritty

A half-dozen hiking trails and climbs start at the ranch and explore the surrounding Pike National Forest. For guests combining a visit to Cloud Camp and to the Ranch at Emerald Valley, the 5.3-mile hike from the top of Cheyenne Mountain down to the ranch is a favorite.

For information: Learn more about the Ranch at Emerald Valley; about Cloud Camp, the lodge atop Cheyenne Mountain; and about the parent property, the Broadmoor Hotel, in Colorado Springs, at [www.broadmoor.com](http://www.broadmoor.com). Rates vary depending on the season and weather.

Included in daily rates: Transportation between the Ranch at Emerald Valley and the Broadmoor Hotel, a nine-mile drive. On-site activities and equipment, trail hikes, nature walks, fishing gear, horseback rides, all meals, snacks, beverages, wine, beer and bar drinks. Because the Old Stage Riding Stable is a concession, long horseback rides, such as the popular cattle drives, are priced separately.

Author Anne Z. Cooke saves her cowboy boots for horseback rides at Colorado's old-time ranches.

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