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TRAVEL USA

Finding Gold in the Emerald Valley: Tales from a Colorado Guest Ranch

By Anne Z. Cooke



Steep peaks, rocky ridges and quiet, solitary wildness envelope the Ranch at Emerald Valley, Pike National Forest, Colorado Springs, CO. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

Foreign countries may close their borders and airlines cut their flight schedules, waiting for Covid-19 to disappear, but that doesn't mean you can't treat yourself to a vacation this year in a Colorado hideaway as safe and solitary as it is remarkable.

At the Ranch at Emerald Valley, on 100,000 acres in the Pike National Forest, near Colorado Springs, ten fabulously rustic cabins and a maximum of 32 guests makes outdoor activities - and social distancing - as comfortable as if you owned the place.



Decorative flags and a manicured patch of grass celebrate a national holiday. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

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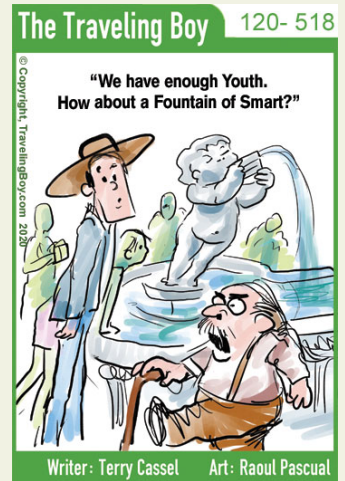
GUEST WRITER: ANNE Z. COOKE



Anne Z. Cooke, a travel and adventure writer, covers the world from digs in Los Angeles and a log cabin in the Rocky Mountains. A regular writer for the Tribune News Service, a wire service, her stories appear in travel and lifestyle publications in the U.S. and internationally. A some-time blogger and columnist, she covers a range of topics, ranging from luxury lodging to Arctic exploration and wildlife conservation, always with an eye out for the back story.

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A couple of months before the pandemic hit, my husband and I spent our anniversary at Emerald Valley Ranch, playing pioneer in a luxurious but rustic log cabin, hiking the back country trails, photographing wildflowers, fly fishing for trout and sitting under the trees with a book, soaking up nature. Not much cowboy grit about it, but I hadn't expected any. Emerald Valley it isn't that kind of ranch. And then the old cowboy appeared.

I'd spent the morning by myself, hiking on Mount Vigil, the peak behind the Ranch and was on the road back to the cabin when a leathery-faced old cowboy hobbled around the bend, leading a horse and muttering to himself. Just as he reached me, a car pulled up and the driver, eyes masked behind dark sunglasses, leaned out to ask directions.



Saddling up at the Old Stage Riding Stable for a morning on horseback. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

I was about to answer when the cowboy stopped, wrapped the reins around the saddle horn and squinted at the license plate. "Texas, hmm, humph," he grunted, frowning. Then he pointed down the road. "That way," he said. "Thanks," said the driver, hesitating. "I'm Tony," he added. "I'm going to the Emerald Valley Ranch. I've got a reservation but I'm lost. Say, do you know why they call it Emerald Valley? Was there a gold mine here? Gemstones, maybe?" Curious myself, I stepped closer. "Well now, I couldn't say," said the cowboy, pulling a dented army canteen off his belt. "I've wondered on it myself. Might be for all them green trees, a hideaway-like, where a person can git away and think."



Pine Cabin, in a come-hither setting beneath shady trees and a waterfall, was built for two. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

"They used to call it Camp Vigil, after that mountain there," he said. "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 took a swallow and paused, warming to an unexpected audience. "The way the folks around here tell it," he went on, "he'd git down here with friends, sittin' up late, 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, tables, all chinked up, nice and tight. You'll see. No rain gittin' in there.



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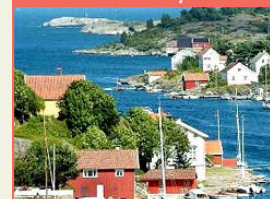


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Small but well-equipped, the bar is a vestige of the 1940s and an earlier dude ranch. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

"All kinda 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 the like. 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 he paused, I spoke up. "Is Spencer Penrose the one who built the zoo at the bottom of the mountain and when the town organized parades he'd ride 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."



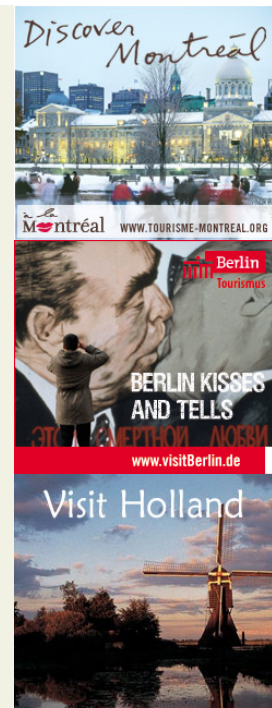
Western paintings and figurative art compliment the walls in the lodge, the oldest building on the site. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

With that, the old cowboy tipped his hat, nodded to me, clucked to the horse and they clumped away down the road.

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

"No thanks, I'll walk," I said.

"But you can't check in here. You have to go back to the Broadmoor, in town. It's not far."



Alone again I got to thinking. The old cowboy was right. Story telling is just another other word for history, especially in a hidden valley like this one. Back in the day, when gold miners explored Emerald Valley, the road to the Ranch was called the Gold Road. I'd seen the tailings on our horseback rides, mounds of yellow sand piled up between the trees.

But the mines were a disappointment, leaving the valley in peace until a local Girl Scout troop rented it over a couple of summers. When that petered out, Spencer Penrose leased 16 acres from the Pike National Forest to build a log cabin headquarters for his newly-created social club, the



Modest signage signals private property and a guests-only rustic retreat. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.



Horseback rides on the Pipeline Trail, past mine tailings, confirms the last century's goldmine prospecting. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.



Anglers test their skills on two small lakes, stocked with brown and rainbow trout. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

Pikes Peak Camping and Mountain Trails Association.

After the club disbanded, the log cabin sat empty until a family-run dude ranch decided to try their luck. Finally, in 2011, after multi-millionaire Philip Anschutz bought the Broadmoor Hotel, he purchased the property, enlarging the lodge, building ten new, sumptuously decorated pioneer-style cabins, and hiring a staff and a chef.



As for the “palace” on the hill, the one the old cowboy described, it was vacant on the day I checked in, so I wangled a tour. Trudging uphill on a winding path, I thought I’d been banished to the barn until I spotted the two-story cabin and the flower-decorated flagstone patio, with an outdoor grill and space large for a 25-guest reception.

Big glass windows lit the living room, decorated with hand-tooled leather chairs, big sofas, wood floors and a man-sized fireplace. Western and Native American art decorated wood-paneled walls and furniture. The kitchen, with an island long enough for a restaurant, included 20 feet of cupboards, counters, sinks and appliances. Four bedrooms and baths, upstairs and down, were intended for families and friends.



The Hillside Cabin, with a private patio, fireplace, lavish kitchen views and luxurious bedrooms on two floors, sleeps eight. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

Your time is your own except for dining, set at specific hours. But even that is flexible. If the hike was longer than you expected or you slept late, you wouldn’t miss a meal. The lodge manager can provide maps, contacts, advice, suggestions and guides. This summer’s special riding experience (priced separately) is the “city slicker,” a genuine cattle drive.

According to Ranch Manager Craig Hilton, this year’s guests will experience social distancing with some masks on some occasions. “Tables are a little more spread out, both in our inside dining room as well as our two outdoor dining areas,” he told me. “Cleaning protocols are enhanced and followed according to the CDC and local Health Authority guidelines, including the use of electrostatic sprayers.”



Singer Jeff Houlton, a master guitarist, recording artist and a campfire tradition, entertains twice a week. PHOTO ©STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD.

Twice a week we gathered around a crackling campfire at dusk for a nightcap and to watch the stars blink on in the sky. A mike and speaker in the corner suggested an evening of background music, earning an “oh-oh,” frown from some. But the arrival of guitarist Jeff Houlton, in his signature cowboy

hat, a professional musician and accomplished singer, earned smiles. Wowing us with a real show, he played both new and old favorites, and all requests. If I ever wondered whether Colorado's unique brand of western hospitality lives on, I had my answer.

GLAD YOU ASKED: Check-in is not at the ranch but at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, after which you are chauffeured to the ranch. Guests who stay at the lodge atop Cheyenne Mountain first, can hike down to the ranch on a marked 5.3-mile trail.

Included in daily rates: The Ranch at Emerald Valley is expensive but all meals, drinks, fishing gear and activities are included. Additional horseback rides cost more.

For more: Visit [Broadmoor](#), [The Wilderness Experiences](#), [The Ranch at Emerald Valley](#)

Getting there: Fly to Denver, then drive or fly to Colorado Springs.

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