



KAREN BOSSICK/For the Times-News
California visitor Anna Bratney spends a few moments with the cowpokes who take guests on horseback rides around the ranch.

Settle Into A Rhythm at the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch

By Karen Bossick

Times-News correspondent

At precisely 6:30 a tow-headed youngster races across the porch of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.

He climbs up on the railing and hammers an iron rod back and forth in the triangular dinner bell.

"Surf and turf's ready," notes one of the guests, who has been relaxing in a rocking chair, glass of wine in hand.

It's easy to settle into a rhythm at the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, nestled in the Sawtooth Valley between Galena Summit and Stanley.

Day starts as the sun emerges from the hills behind the ranch, its rays burning through the ground fog that hangs over the valley and highlighting the tops of the mountain peaks that ring Redfish Lake.

By 7:30 the ranch hands have set out a buffet of cinnamon rolls, bagels and fruit for early risers.

By 8:30 even the late risers are straggling in for breakfasts of French toast encrusted with pecans, eggs benedict and a tofu scramble with peanut ginger sauce, cilantro and scallions.

Breakfast gives way to horseback rides, hikes to nearby Hell Roaring Lake, fly-fishing and maybe even a trip to the nearby ghost towns of Bonanza and Custer.

And by the time guests have worked up an appetite, the dinner bell rings again.

The ranch is not a dude ranch in the strict sense of the word where guests feed the horses, rake manure and help bring in the calves.

Rather, it's a guest ranch where folks from New Hampshire and Idaho - and Germany, Italy and Sweden, too - can play in the outdoors while snuggling up in handmade quilts designed to fend off the chill of a Sawtooth Mountain morning, enjoy meals of lobster tail accented with mango chutney and relax the night away with a game of chess in front of a crackling fire.

All without the crowds one has come to expect in a national park.

"The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is an extension of the Western ranch tradition where towns were few and far between and ranchers extended gracious hospitality to those traveling through," says Ranch Manager Sandra Beckwith. "We do have horseback riding, Dutch oven cookouts, even a pond for fishing. But we also serve as a good base for guests to go out and explore on their own."

The property the ranch sits on was originally the homestead of Stanley Basin pioneer and mail carrier Dave Williams, one of the first climbing guides in the Sawtooths.

Captivated by the beauty of jagged peaks resembling a saw blade, New York Frigidaire distributor Winston Paul bought the property in 1929.

Over the next few months, 60 workers camped out in the open meadow, snaking logs up the creeks to build the 8,000-square foot lodge said to be inspired by Yellowstone's Old Faithful Lodge.

The ranch opened the following year as an invitation-only hunting club where guests could "hunt" the plentiful deer, elk and other game from the expansive front porch made of knotty pine.

As the ranch changed hands, guest operations were curtailed for a time, but that's scarcely the case today.

The current owners - financier Steve and architect Courtney Kapp, and financier David Singer and his wife, journalist Diana Kapp - recently refurbished the lodge and the 17 surrounding cabins. They endowed them with modern amenities like Oakley stone in the showers while maintaining the rustic charm provided by log burl chandeliers, wooden skis hanging on the walls and cowboy boots, lariat and branding irons that helped earn the lodge a place on the National Register of Historic Places.

"I remember when they used to put you up on Army cots. And the bathrooms were so tight you could hardly turn around," said Sue Beede, of Eagle. "Now the place has a luxurious feel - but still with all the rustic flavor you want in an Idaho ranch."

In addition to refurbishing the accommodations, the new owners built a new deck around the concrete natural hot springs pool, which maintains a comfortable temperature between 98 and 103 degrees. They also added heated changing rooms below the pool.

But, they stopped short of putting TVs in every room.

The absence of TVs frees guests to sit on the porch, just as the first guests did 80 years ago. But, instead of hunting game, they're hunting for the most dramatic sunsets to train their cameras on.

Beckwith organized a variety of workshops this summer, ranging from photography and fly fishing to wine tasting seminars and outdoor concerts.

Guests can also relive their childhood days with a game of Risk found on the shelves in the Great Hall or take advantage of the suggestions that the staff posts on the board each day.

With more than 300 lakes in the area and miles upon miles of hiking and biking trails that start right outside the lodge's door, there's no shortage of things to do.

"It's wonderful for three generations because there's something for everyone - usually, some of us go fishing or hiking while others may prefer to sit on the porch and relax," said Carolyn Leggett, a Richland, Wash., woman who was spending a week at the ranch with her husband, two teenage sons and her parents, Hugh and Karen Eddy of Caldwell. "We leave such hectic lives back home it's nice to have some down time to just sit."

Chef Andrew Machanic cooks up an elaborate array of dishes he calls "ranch fusion cuisine" every night.

Non-lodgers are welcome to join in the dinners, which pair American and Mexican flavors with European flavors - provided they make a reservation ahead of time.

One couple who spent their honeymoon at the lodge recently returned for their 50th anniversary, marveling at how much easier it was to get to the ranch since they no longer had to go by train to Shoshone.

Paul and Chris Mensinger, of Hagerman, celebrated their anniversary at the ranch this summer, horseback riding during the day and watching a cornucopia of stars appear in the sky as they soaked in the hot pool.

"It's pretty amazing how you don't have to go far to feel like you've really gotten away

from it all," said Paul Mensinger.

Bill Leavell, who manages the ranch, says it's not uncommon to see cougar, otter, fox, elk and wolves, especially on the lower half of the ranch near the hot springs.

"It's amazing," he said. "You'll be lying in bed and all of a sudden you'll hear a long deep wolf howl. It's a beautiful sound. And it's one you can't hear in the city."

Karen Bossick may be reached at kbossick@cox-internet.com.

If you go

Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch is located 50 miles north of Sun Valley and nine miles south of Stanley on Idaho 75.

Dinner, which begins with appetizers at 6 p.m., is by reservation. Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday feature gourmet dinners in the Lodge dining room. Thursday is barbecue night on the front porch with live music. And Saturday is the Surf and Turf Barbecue Buffet with musical entertainment.

Dinners are \$50 for adults and \$25 for children under 7.

There are several more events left in the 2009 Summer Showcase Series:

Aug. 12 and 22 will feature Sawtooth Valley author John Rember reading some of his stories about growing up in the Sawtooth Valley.

Bruce Innes and Jilla Web will perform Aug. 29. And John Alonge, founder of the San Diego Wine and Culinary Institute, will pair wines with Chef Andrew Machanic's hors d'oeuvres during a Sips and Bites event Aug. 23 and 28.

For information about these events or lodging: 208-774-3544 or e-mail info@idahorocky.com