

HORSERIDING

Away on the range

Bernard Lyall sets aside his motorbike to discover the life of a Wyoming cowboy

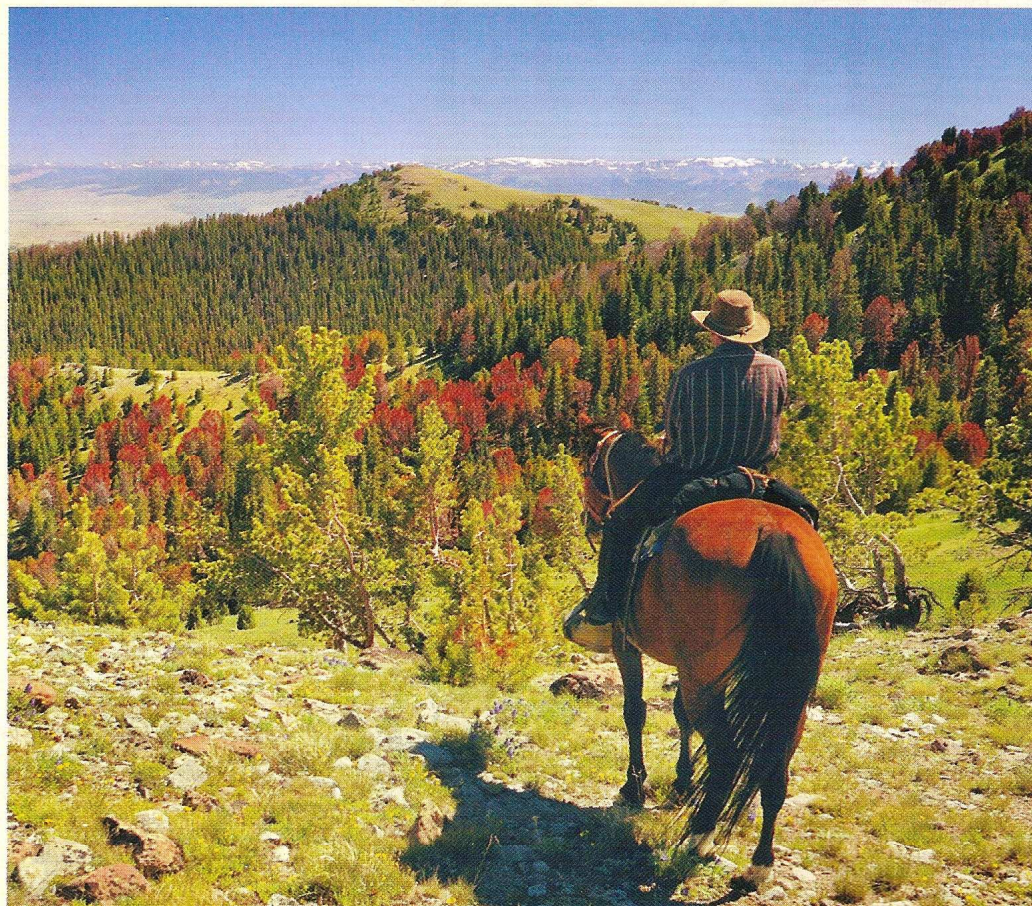
It's one of those things that needs no explaining. Like swimming with dolphins, maybe, or boating gently down the Thames in summer. So when I told friends I was going horseback riding in America, nobody asked 'Why?' What they said was, 'But you don't ride.'

This is not quite true. I do ride a motorbike. But horses are well-known for having minds of their own and do not respond to input from spanners.

Still, all those John Wayne movies had worked their way under my skin and, before long, I was flying into Denver, Colorado, heading for the Bitterroot Ranch in northwestern Wyoming, not far from Yellowstone National Park. Guest, or 'dude', ranches have been a part of the American West since the late 19th century, when the frontier closed and the mythologising of cowboy life took off. Some see guests as a useful addition to normal ranch life, others play up to expectations with all manner of western pursuits, from square-dancing to steer-roping, and others offer a full-on luxury holiday experience.

I'd prepared myself as best I could, with half a dozen lessons at a north London equestrian centre. I'd learned to walk the horses, which was fine, and I'd learned to trot, pretty much, though it still felt as unnatural as it looks. And then we'd tried cantering, which is when I learned what horses, as prey animals, are designed for: eating grass and running like hell. It was a smooth but awesomely powerful reminder of how much potential energy would be waiting beneath me any time we were gently walking in line.

That, not surprisingly, is how most of the time on horseback at the ranch was spent. The days were divided into two rides, morning and afternoon, of two to three hours each. So from having only had lessons of an hour, suddenly I was in the saddle for five or six, every day



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for five days. I needn't, and probably shouldn't, have ridden every day, and most ranches have other activities for off-days or non-riders. But though parts of my body complained loudly or simply stopped functioning, I found that it was doable: the Bitterroot, like many guest ranches, caters for novices, and there were even less experienced guests than I who were helped along with lessons but soon found themselves out riding. And it's a kind of riding not easily found in the UK, and certainly not in London, which is notoriously short of 10,000ft mountains.

Wyoming has an area of just under 100,000 square miles, but fewer people than Washington DC. Bluntly, there's hardly anyone there, so once you get out into the Rocky Mountains which comprise most of the western part of the state, you're gloriously alone. Even next-door ranches can be 50 miles distant. The topography dominates, demonstrating how sure-footed the horses are as they negotiate steep, rocky tracks on the way up, and providing astonishing views of snow-capped peaks — even in July. Though in summer it's hot and dry, it can be cold at night and there are plenty of reminders that this is very unforgiving territory. The season runs from April to Sep-

tember. In other months, roads close, cattle are moved downhill, and there is enough snow to support a healthy skiing industry. One nearby resort reports 43ft of snowfall.

The local riding was varied and beautiful, but the week's summit, in every way, was an optional 'pack trip' into the mountains. Accompanied by three excellent guides, four pack horses and a dog, a handful of us headed out for three full days in the wilderness. We camped under the stars, built huge fires and cooked on them, and communed with nature in that special way that is only possible with a spade and total privacy.

On the second day, we emerged above the treeline to find wildflowers, patches of snow, and at one point, dozens of elk. The views extended for the best part of 100 miles, the air was bright and clear, and the skies stretched unbroken from east to west. We were truly on top of the world.

● Bitterroot Ranch

Bitterroot Ranch: bitterrootranch.com, 001 307 455 3363. Ride Worldwide (www.rideworldwide.com, 01837 82544) offers horseriding holidays in America and across the world, including seven nights at the Bitterroot Ranch from £1,313pp