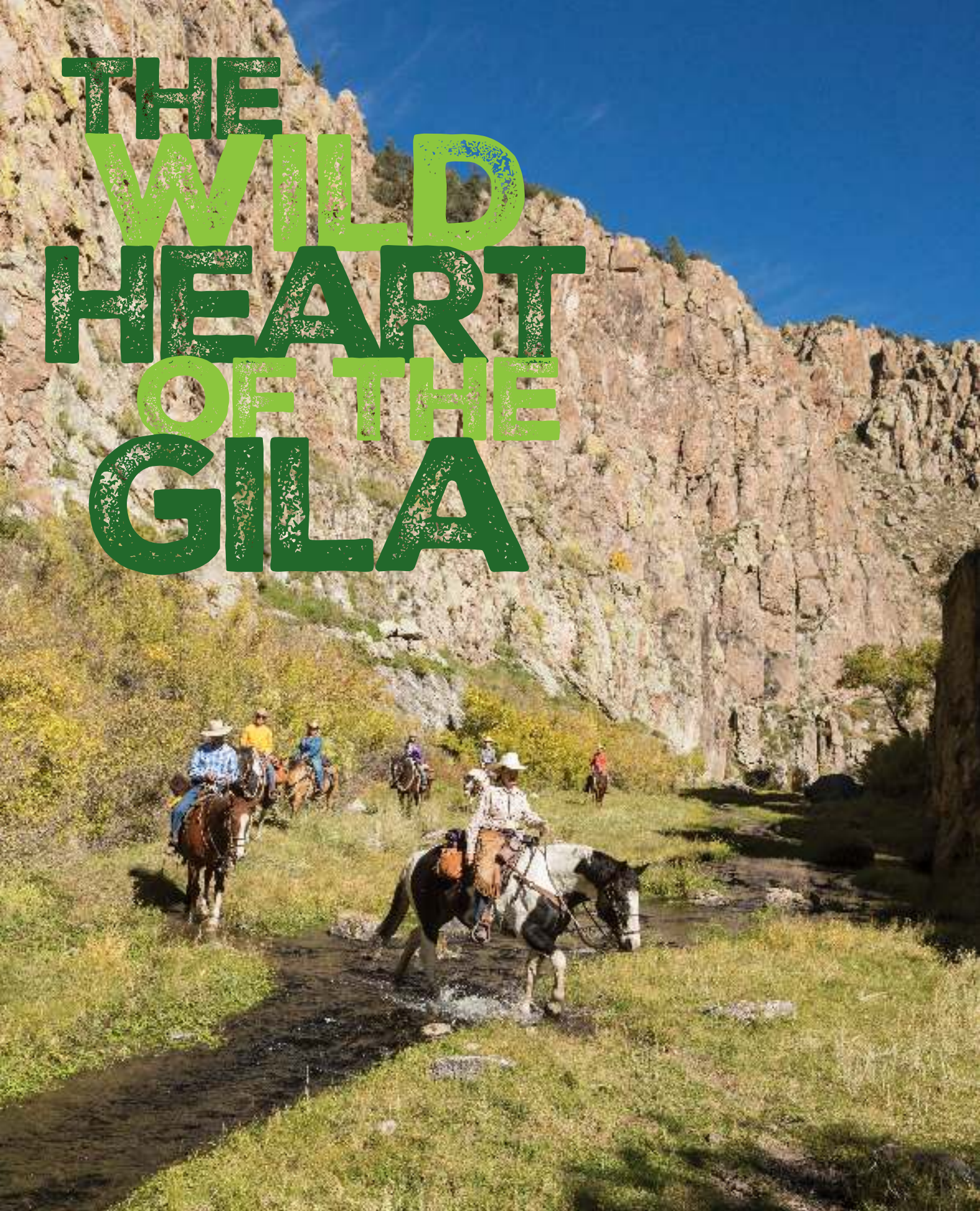


THE WILD HEART OF THE GILA



Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch gives dudes (and dudettes!) a way into the history of the very Old West.

BY *WILL GRANT* PHOTOS BY *GABRIELLA MARKS*

THIRTEEN MILES NORTH of Truth or Consequences, exit 89 on Interstate 25 is a lonely, windy place. The landscape is devoid of trees. Elephant Butte Reservoir, the largest in the state at 40 miles long, sits to the east, so dwarfed by the knobby Fra Cristóbal Range that it looks like a puddle in a sandbox. To the west, the faint blue profile of the Gila country sits low to the horizon, barely a suggestion of its three million acres of wilderness. And that's where I'm headed—the largest patch of wildland in the lower 48.

Call us when you leave the interstate so we know when to expect you, wrote my hosts, Seth and Meris Stout, owners of the Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, in an email the previous week. The message was laden with cautionary advice—a dearth of GPS or cellular service, the dangers of washboard dirt roads, open range for cattle grazing, wildlife everywhere. They advised against making the two-hour drive from the interstate at night and, in a bold font, said to bring along a printed copy of the directions.

Parked at exit 89, I feel a little like I'm calling my parents. But the call is brief and painless. I hang up with Meris and start west toward a serrated ridgeline in the far distance. The road shoots straight across sparse desert for 30 miles before breaking through low foothills into the one-store town of Winston (pop. 61). From there, the density of human settlement further diminishes.

Another 30 miles on NM 59 takes me up through rolling grasslands that give way to ponderosa pine forest. The road hooks and climbs through the dark woods, passing only the barest traces of civilization. The blacktop ends eight miles shy of the destination, and when the road finally hits Wall Lake, less than a mile from the ranch, I feel like I've entered an oasis in the wild heart of the Gila.

Geronimo Trail Ranch sits in the shade above the lake, a five-acre impoundment dating to the 1940s that hosts ducks, geese, herons, bald eagles, and a rotating cast of other migrators. As in a lot of places in New Mexico, water can be scarce in the Gila. But not at the confluence of Taylor and Hoyt creeks, which flow all year and run together near here.

When you arrive at the ranch, the first order of business is a tour. But before that, a cold beer. Guests stay in comfortable, ranch-house-esque duplex cabins, and Meris enters mine to find me standing over a ripped-open 12-pack of Modelo Especial. She smiles, and I tell her that everything looks perfect. She shows me how to work the coffeemaker and adjust the thermostat on the gas fireplace.

"Seth will give everybody the tour at six," she says, "and dinner will be at seven."

I've spent a lot of time on ranches, and every time I visit a guest ranch I'm impressed with how friendly everyone is. Not that most ranches aren't welcoming to visitors, but most aren't in the hospitality business.

Seth and Meris seem as tranquil as the horses eating their hay. Seth is a fairly young man, in his early forties, and he walks with an easy, swinging gait as he tours us through the buildings and corrals. With his straw hat tipped back on his head, he speaks with a deliberate, quiet cadence that probably helps keep the horses calm.

The ranch is off the grid, he tells us—there's no grid in the Gila to be part of. An array of solar panels generates electricity, and the diesel generator, named Gertrude, runs from 8 to 10 in the morning and 8 to 10 at night. Two pumps supply water for the humans, horses, and barn cats and the potted plants around the cabins. Seth and Meris keep 23 horses that each need between five and ten gallons of water per day. All the horses wear shoes, and about half, Seth says, are on special diets.

"Does that mean they're spoiled?" asks Kevin, a realtor from Arizona. Kevin seems like a laid-back, no-drama guy. He's wearing a sweatshirt with a mule deer on it and has the gentle, quiet vibe of someone who gets along with animals. »

“Nah,” Seth says, “these are working horses. They work five to six days a week for ten months.”

By *work*, he means packing dudes into the wilderness surrounding the ranch. And because the area in nearly every direction of the ranch is designated wilderness, which prohibits mining, logging, and any construction, as well as bikes and motors, the only two ways to see the canyons and ridges are on foot and on horseback. Being that we have a string of working horses at our disposal and a week of clear weather ahead of us, I reckon we’re about to see a lot of this country between the ears of a good horse.

Meris and her family bought Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in 2007, inheriting seven horses and a pair of barn cats with the land, which is an in-holding in Gila National Forest.

Born into a maritime family in Maine, Meris worked on a dude ranch in Colorado for three seasons, where she fell in love with both life in the saddle and helping other people experience it. Seth is originally from Michigan, born and raised on a dairy farm. They met in 2008, threw in together on the Geronimo Ranch, and have been dealing in horses and dudes ever since. They were married in 2014.

“We really love sharing this place and this area with people,” Meris says the first night at dinner. “We see that as our way to give back—to have people come here and show them this.”

For dinner, Chuck, the cook, lays out platters of beef brisket, mashed potatoes, and green chile. We arrange ourselves around the long wooden table. Kevin from Arizona is here with his wife, Sandy, who for most of her adult life has carved logs into bears and other things using a chainsaw. Cindi came to the Gila from Atlanta. She read about the place on Facebook, thought she could do well with a few nights in the pines above Wall Lake, and booked one of the cabins as part of a weeklong trip to New Mexico.

Kelly is the wrangler. She’s originally from upstate New York and worked on the same dude ranch as Meris in Colorado. Kelly did a few years in the corporate world before, not surprisingly, almost losing her mind. This will be her second year at the ranch, and, like Meris and Seth, she’s totally unassuming, very handy with the horses, and quick to accommodate the guests. Given her manners, her wherewithal, and her respect for the country around her, it’s not hard to see that she hails from the cultured East.



“I don’t go outside the fence at night,” she says around the campfire after dinner, gesturing with a nod of her hat to the nocturnal world of wolves, bears, and miles of darkness just beyond the firelight. “There are critters out there that I don’t want any part of.”

Seth puts another log on the fire as we talk about the neighbors. Wall Lake concentrates the wildlife, he tells us. Because the spring-fed creeks that run into the lake neither freeze nor dry up in the winter, animals, including reintroduced Mexican wolves, are in the area all year. And while your chances of seeing a wolf in the Gila are slim—at last count there were about one hundred—you can hear them howl. There just aren’t many places left where that’s possible.

The ranch sits at about 6,500 feet, and temperatures swing 40 degrees between the daily highs and lows year-round. Dawn is crisp and cool. Chuck starts early in the kitchen, and Kelly throws hay to the horses under the dark pines. At 8:30, scrambled eggs and sausages and just about everything else you’d want to see at a breakfast table arrives in the mess hall.

We’ll ride after breakfast, Meris says, and asks each of us about our riding experience, which varies widely. Cindi owns a slightly renegade horse at home in



The Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, owned by Meris and Seth Stout (above right), offers pristine scenery, cooperative horses, and campfire conviviality.



Georgia and rides regularly. Kevin and Sandy, though they haven't been on horses in recent years, have ridden off and on their whole lives, most recently harboring an Icelandic horse in their backyard.

"I need a good horse because I don't bounce too good," Sandy says, cupping a mug of coffee between her hands on the table. "I need one with good brakes."

I chime in to say that I'll bet she can ride as fast and long as any horse can run. She shakes her head disapprovingly. Meris tells us not to worry, all the horses have good brakes. She points us to the collection of loaner riding boots the ranch keeps, arranged by size, and helps Sandy find a suitable pair.

At the barnyard, Meris runs through a well-rehearsed primer on how to handle the horses. The horses at Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch are as much a part of making the guest experience pleasant and comfortable as Seth and Meris are, and the horses are well

"THIS PLACE INSPIRES PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT WAYS," SAYS SETH. "EVERYBODY LEAVES HERE WITH SOMETHING DIFFERENT."

sued to their job. They're far from robots on the trail—meaning that they turn, stop, and have a reverse gear like any broke horse should—but they don't waste energy with antics, they prefer to pick their own footfalls through the rocky trails, and they stand quietly while tied during lunch and water stops.

Good behavior comes pretty easily to horses that work as hard as Seth and Meris's do, and the good behavior makes them nice to be around. The first morning, Seth leads the way uphill from the corrals, on a dusty trail snaking between alligator junipers and piñon pines. Our horses scramble over the rocks and root shelves, until we top out 300 feet over a red-walled canyon. Below us, Taylor Creek meanders through the narrow, green valley. The horizon is all peaks and ridges, and the only sign of man seems to be the airline contrails overhead.

"As far as the eye can see in any direction, it's all Gila National Forest," Seth says, turned sideways in the saddle, one hand on his horse's hindquarters.

But the hand of man is visible in these mountains. As we're riding back to the ranch after half a day on the



ridges, Seth stops his horse at the edge of Wall Lake.

"You're looking at a classic Mimbres cliff site," he says. He sits silently, as if to let us figure it out. Coincidentally, I had stopped at this lake two years prior to let my dogs out of the truck and eat some lunch while passing through. I sure as hell didn't see a classic Mimbres site then, and I didn't see one now as I sat on my horse beside Seth. He points to a shelf midway up the wall where the sandstone hangs over strata eroded out below it. And there at the end of the shadowy ledge is clearly a wall structure with a hole or doorway built into it, exactly the same color as the bedrock.

"Stuff like that is all over here," he says. "This afternoon we'll ride up Cliff Dwelling Canyon."

The ranch is named for the Geronimo Trail, which is named for the Apache warrior. But Geronimo didn't spend much time in these hills. He was born on the west flank of the Mogollon Mountains, on the other side of the Gila. The Mimbres people, however, did live in these mountains.

Mimbres is an archaeological classification based on pottery, architecture, and other evidence of a culture that lived in the Southwest between AD 200 and the 15th or 16th century. The people that lived in the Gila during this time are referred to as the Mimbres branch of the Mogollon culture. And they left plenty of signs of life around the ranch.

"We've found lots of new sites and have shown them to a Forest Service archaeologist," Seth says. "We do our exploring with guests, and we cover a lot of ground out here."



From left: Riders saddle up for creekside adventures and, later on, compare notes around the campfire.

Cliff Dwelling Canyon cuts east from Wall Lake through steep hillsides of volcanic ash and hard, red breccia that soon becomes cliffs. The canyon sides loom over the meadows and cottonwoods along Taylor Creek. Erosion has scoured large cavities in the cliffs, some as large as a subway tube, others fit only for a falcon nest. At the base of a large wall, where the rock hangs over itself to form a dark recess, Seth pulls up to loosely stacked rocks encircling what looks to be a living area.

“Basque herders,” he says. “They came after the Mimbres, but the Mimbres lived in there, too.”

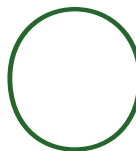
The ceiling of the recess was thickly blackened with soot. The floor was packed dirt and showed signs of rodents living there. The Basques, nomadic herders from Spain and France who came to New Mexico to herd sheep in the 18th and 19th centuries, built the wall while living with their herds. A strand of old barbed wire strung just under the ceiling suggests more modern residents. The layers of human settlement, Seth tells us, begin with the Mimbres, then the Apaches, Basques, homesteaders, miners, cowboys, outlaws, guests from the Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, and pretty much nobody else.

We ride to another Mimbres site where round holes the size of a broom handle run into the rock above a similar living space. The holes were clearly augered with a metal tool, but so far no one has been able to definitively tell Seth their use or purpose. Farther up the canyon, Basque herders built a stone wall beside a Mimbres site adorned with a series of ocher pictographs.

As we ride down the canyon, crossing Taylor Creek dozens of times on our way home, I can easily see why the area has for so long appealed to humans. The flat, fertile

valley is an oasis among miles of steep, dry country. The shade of the cottonwoods and the tall grasses swaying in the wind make the place feel like some idyllic glade out of a Disney movie.

“This place is just a pinprick on the map,” Seth says. “There’s three million acres out there. Who knows how many more places like this one there are?”



On my last day at the ranch, we pack a lunch in the saddlebags and ride down Taylor Creek Canyon, headed west. Again, the rocky slopes edge out the meadows to where we splash our horses down the center of the channel, the water as deep as our stirrups. The canyon opens at the site of a homestead abandoned in the 1940s. A Mimbres cliff dwelling, vacated long before the homestead, sits inconspicuously on a ledge high above the valley floor.

At a low grove of elm trees, we stop for lunch in the cool shade. A bend in the creek and a ring of 400-foot cliffs create a natural amphitheater over the yellow elms. After lunch, Meris and Kelly, the wrangler, lie fully clothed in the creek, squawking like young ducks. I lean against a log, chewing a piece of grama grass and staring at a white streak on the cliff face. Seth stretches out beside me in the shade.

“This place inspires people in different ways,” he says. “Everybody leaves here with something different.”

He asks me what I’ll leave with. Mostly, I tell him, an appreciation for the subtle layers of human footprint on the landscape. At first glance, the land seems untouched. But once you look, there’s a history lesson around every



turn in the creek. I've found old potsherds all over New Mexico, and I've seen wagon ruts in the prairie from the 19th century. I'm well aware of the historical context of the West, but this place seems more pristine and richer in history than most, I tell Seth. The cliff dwellings at both the Gila and Bandelier park sites are stunning, but often crowded. Where Seth and Meris lead their guests, there are no crowds. There are Indian ruins and bear tracks and saplings stripped by elk, and Taylor Creek Canyon sits quiet and empty but for the few who know the area, which is just about the way it has been for the past millennium or so. If humans have been here for this long, I tell Seth, then maybe there's hope for us.

By the time we roll into the ranch under long shadows, most of our crew are ready to quit their saddles. Sandy slides off her mount, heads to her cabin, and that's the last we see of her for the night. Kevin walks as though he still has a 1,000-pound horse between his legs. We pull the saddles off the sweaty animals and turn them out to roll in the dust. Kelly sees to their hay and grain, and we make for the cabins to wash up and pour a drink.

That night around the campfire, Meris brings out enough chocolate, marshmallows, and graham crackers to make a troop of Boy Scouts sick. We talk about parting ways the next day, and Meris warns us not to get lost on the way out. Seth laughs. People do get lost, he says.

"At one point we had two miniature horses for kids—you know, like a petting zoo," he says. "Except it was actually more like a kicking zoo if you went in the corral with them."

One day, he says, the Budweiser Clydesdales showed up. The driver of a very large rig full of the famous workhorses was lost en route to somewhere other than Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch. Seth gave him directions to get out of the Gila alive, and the large rig rolled down the dirt road. The next thing Seth knows, one of the miniature horses comes galloping back to the ranch from the direction of the truck and trailer.

A year later, the Budweiser rig returned. The driver unloaded a young horse out on the dirt road and led it up to the ranch. Apparently the miniature horse had impregnated one of the Clydesdale mares during the brief visit. Here's your horse, the man told Seth, handing him the lead rope. Sitting around the fire, none of us were quite sure what to make of the story.

"We still have that horse here," Seth says. "He's the big one that looks like a Clydesdale. You'll have to come back and ride him." ■

When he's not finding ways to incorporate horses into his free-lance stories, **Will Grant** splits his time between mucking stalls in Santa Fe and restoring a 32-foot sailboat that's docked in Connecticut but will soon make a run for tropical waters.



Clockwise from above left: The forest offers foggy mornings, nap-inducing afternoons, and starry nights. Cabins come with comfy porch swings. *Facing page:* Ancient ruins appear on a mountain excursion.



Gila Hideaway

Get ready to ride. The **Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch** has horses for every level of rider. Other than sitting on the porch of your cabin with a book, there's little else to do. Hiking is an option, but don't expect a wrangler to join you. (575) 772-5157; geronimoranch.com