

Horses, History & the Great Outdoors

Guests at this dude ranch recharge amid breathtaking scenery.

Story and photos by Kelly Burns
Winston, New Mexico

Hello from the Gila (pronounced *hee-la*) National Forest. I'm Kelly Burns, and I work at Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, which is west of the Continental Divide in the mountains of southwest New Mexico. This 20-acre ranch is in the middle of the 3.3 million-acre Gila National Forest. We are four hours from both the Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the El Paso, Texas, airports, and two hours west of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. While the ranch's official address is Winston, New Mexico, we are still 90 minutes west of that point. This remote location means we're off the power grid. Most of our electricity comes from solar arrays, and our water comes from stream-fed wells. Even cellphone coverage stops 70 miles away.

Originally a hunting lodge in the 1980s, the ranch evolved into the Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in 2002. (The name comes from being just off the Geronimo Trail Scenic Byway.) Harry and Diana Esterly

bought it in 2007, and today it is operated by their daughter, Meris Esterly Stout, and her husband, Seth Stout. Along with Meris, Seth and me, the ranch staff includes a cook, Kathy Kitts, who will arrive March 11 to begin cooking for the spring season. Because Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch is small, with a maximum capacity of 16 guests, my job involves a little bit of everything.

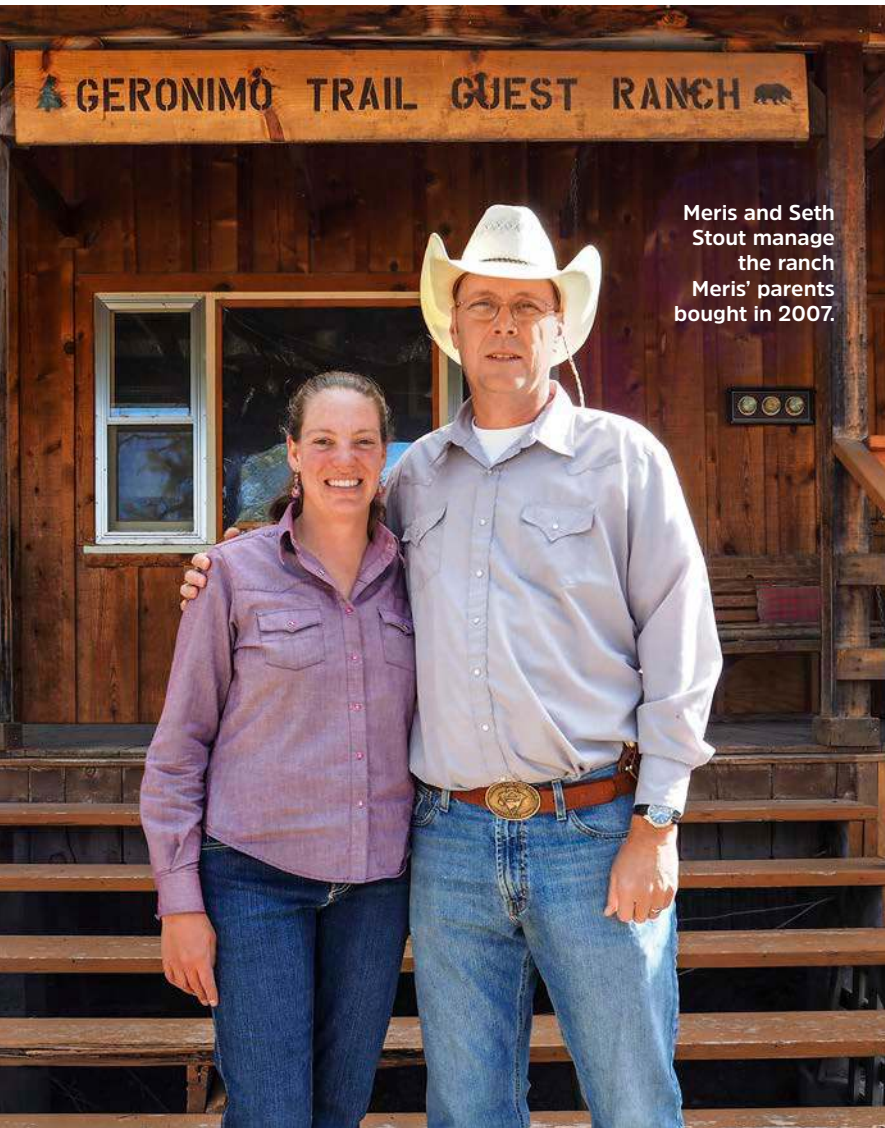
Getting the Horses Up to Speed

March 1 Cold nights hang on around here, since we're 6,500 feet above sea level. That means the first task each morning this time of year is breaking ice off the horses' water troughs. While Seth handles that, I feed the herd. We have 26 horses spread out among four pastures, but our utility vehicle allows us to zip around and feed them efficiently.

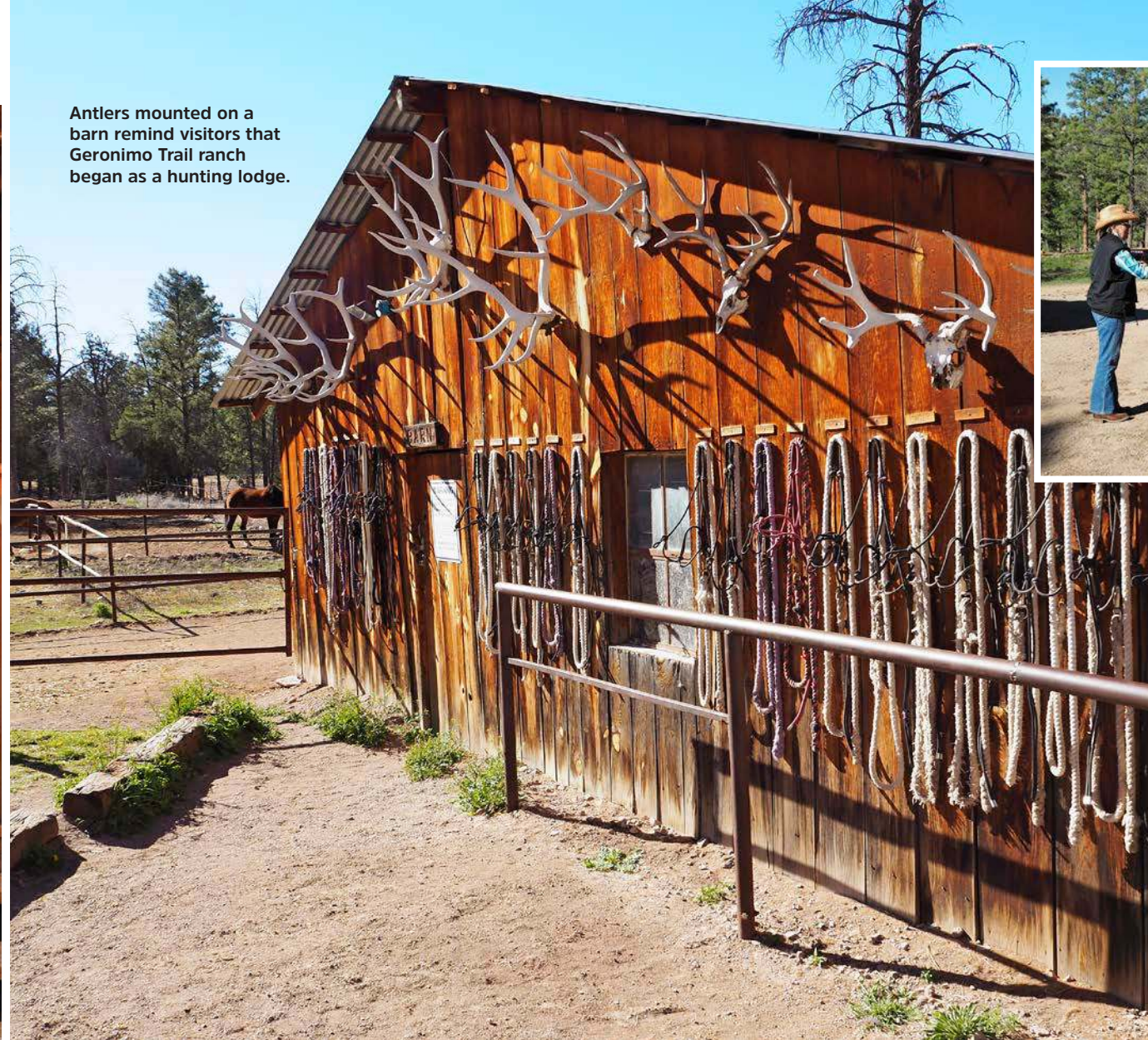
Our first guests arrive March 12. We need to get the horses back in shape after taking the winter off. So today we did the orientation loop, a 90-minute ride to help guests get comfortable with their horses.

A trail ride under soaring blue skies is a daily activity at the Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in New Mexico.





Meris and Seth Stout manage the ranch Meris' parents bought in 2007.



Antlers mounted on a barn remind visitors that Geronimo Trail ranch began as a hunting lodge.



March 2 Our spot in the Gila boasts abundant crystal clear warm-spring-fed streams. The Hoyt and Taylor creeks both flow into Wall Lake. You can always find wildlife here, including bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, great blue herons, mule deer and elk. For today's ride we followed Taylor Creek downstream from Wall Lake, then through Taylor Creek Canyon. The water was higher and muddier than usual, but the horses did fine.

March 3 Feeding 26 horses requires a lot of hay. So every couple weeks, Seth drives three hours away to get a trailerful of it. While he was gone, Meris and I rode Shoot 'em Again Canyon. The name comes from a

long-ago hunting party looking for mule deer. When one member missed his shot, another hunter called out, "Shoot 'em again!"

March 5 Our remote location means we take safety seriously. That's why I signed up for a wilderness first-aid course this weekend. The two-day course provided a really thoughtful balance of classroom instruction and scenarios, complete with stage makeup. But I hope we never have to put those skills to the test.

March 6 We prepped guest cabins this morning by turning the water on, turning the heat up and washing the bedding. Tomorrow we'll clean the cabins, flip mattresses and test smoke alarms. We're responsible for

our own trash removal out here, so Seth hauled a horse trailer full of trash and recycling to a collection center in Truth or Consequences.

March 7 Eleven mule deer ran across a meadow and leapt through the air as we left for our morning ride. Such a beautiful sight. Then we continued down Taylor Creek Canyon and rode through the Narrows—highlights we love to show off to our guests.

Cleaning Cabins and Greeting Guests

March 8 This morning we took a ride upstream through Dwelling Canyon, named for all the cliff dwellings in its walls. On our way we passed our neighbor's herd of open-range

cows. We use the term "neighbor" loosely; his house is a 45-minute drive away. This neighbor—the epitome of an Old West cowboy—has spent his entire 80-plus years in the Gila. As a result, we learn something new about the area every time we chat with him.

March 9 We rode to the top of Ant Hill, 7,120 feet above sea level, where we thrilled to a stunning 360-degree view as far as the eye could see. Seeing that vista does make you feel as small as an ant.

March 10 We rode different horses to Ant Hill this morning, which is an essential workout for them, and now they're ready for our first set of guests. When we got back, we

released Slingshot and Linus—two new horses from a Kansas ranch—into the pasture. They took off running and had a grand time exploring their big new home.

March 11 I started my day early since the farrier is coming today. She travels three hours to get here, so she usually comes once a week for four weeks and handles six to seven horses in each trip. We also wormed all the horses. Most take it pretty well, but they do make the funniest faces. Seth picked up Kathy and then groceries.

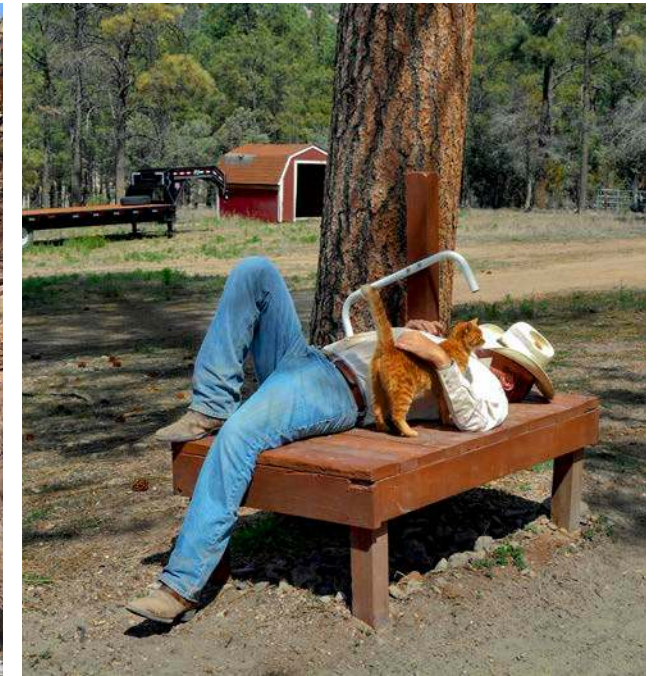
March 12 Guest-arrival day! We finished cleaning the cabins, and then Meris stocked them with towels, toiletries, new pillows

If I Had Known That!

There's no official manual for starting a dude ranch. Meris Esterly Stout says she wished she'd known a few things on Day 1.

1. There's a lot of work to off-the-grid living. I learned it's important to not only be cognizant of **how much power and water** you use, but also when you use it.
2. When working with horses, a **good source of quality hay** is so important. It's difficult to find in New Mexico.
3. **Hackamores are a great alternative to a bridle** for both horses and riders. My horse wasn't doing well with a bridle, so I decided to try a hackamore—a type of bitless bridle—and it made a huge difference. We switched our entire herd over to them.
4. I am not a horseshoer. We thought we would do our own shoeing to save money, but we learned that a **good farrier** is worth every penny.
5. **Yoga** is a great way to refresh both physically and mentally for ranchers who live life in the saddle.

Taylor Creek is a picturesque spot to pause while the horses get a drink.



Seth Stout and Clementine the Cat find the mounting platform makes a nice nap spot (above) after a trail ride. One guest called the ride through the Narrows (left) “heaven on earth.” The Shale Trail offers wide views of cattle grazing in Beaver Canyon (below).

and some of Kathy’s freshly baked cookies. We welcomed a father and son from Texas and two friends from Michigan. Everyone got to know each other around the dinner table as we feasted on ham, scalloped potatoes and cheesy biscuits.

March 13 The sun wasn’t even up yet when I went out to feed the horses. A full moon and howling coyotes made it an atmospheric experience. After orientation, we mounted up, adjusted stirrups and headed out on the orientation loop. While the guests relaxed after lunch, Seth, Meris and I watered all the horses and prepared for the afternoon ride. Since the Texans leave Wednesday, we took them through Taylor Creek Canyon while Meris took the two women on the Top of the World Trail. After dinner, we adjourned to the fire pit to gaze at the stars.

March 14 We split up again for this morning’s ride; Meris took the women through Cox Canyon while Seth and I took the men around Wall Lake (about a mile from the ranch)

and up to Red Bluff. Then we all met at the Dwelling Canyon for a picnic lunch. We explored some of the old dwellings—which range from rock outcroppings to deep caves—on foot. Once back at the barn, guests chose to try their hands at scooping poop, which we appreciated!

History Lessons and Wildlife Sightings

March 15 The Texans departed to go skiing at Taos. The two women from Michigan stayed on, so we decided to ride through the Taylor Creek Canyon. Next we tackled Shale Trail, which ends at the confluence of the Beaver and Taylor creeks. This site is historic for two reasons. The Apache leader Geronimo is believed to have been born at the convergence of the Gila River’s East, West and Middle forks—only 10 miles away—so this area may have been his childhood playground. In addition, this site was the boundary line between the U.S. and Mexico prior to 1854’s Gadsden Purchase, a treaty that

provided land for a southern railroad to go through.

March 16 Seth, our two guests and I rode to Hoyt Canyon, which called for a fair amount of bobbing and weaving through branches. Seth dismounted several times to remove trees that had fallen over the winter. It was a long day in the saddle, so a dinner of ribs, beans, cornbread and pecan pie hit the spot.

March 17 Meris’ parents visit the ranch once a month, and today her mom, Diana, joined our ride through Taylor Creek Canyon and the Narrows and up Beaver Canyon. We spied an owl and a bald eagle in flight, then passed through several herds of cows on our way to the picnic spot. We had to avoid riding between the moms and babies so the cows wouldn’t be upset.

March 19 When I walked out the door this morning, I saw a rogue bovine in the ranch’s front yard. A neighbor’s cow wanders over to our property from time to time. I went to shoo her out the front gate



but she decided she wanted to go out the back instead.

March 20 It was unusually cloudy this morning, at least by our New Mexico standards. When you are used to seeing blue skies every day, it seems odd to spot clouds above. After lunch we rode with our new guests, a Texas couple celebrating their 35th wedding anniversary, to the Narrows, and then home. Our timing was perfect. It didn't start sprinkling until we unsaddled the horses.

March 21 Yesterday's special arrival—Colleen from the Dude Ranchers Association (DRA)—left today after breakfast to visit another ranch. To be a member of the DRA, your ranch has to be inspected and approved, so her visit was a big deal. Seth and I rode with our remaining guests to Dwelling Canyon. A coyote trotted in front of us. But he looked pretty healthy, so I decided he was just in search of a drink from the creek.

Back at the ranch we were greeted by Ned, a 36-year-old horse, roving the yard. It always makes me smile to see him wandering around like a big dog. During dinner we saw more wildlife—10 elk behind the back gate and a mule deer grazing by the solar panels. Living in the middle of a gorgeous national forest certainly has its advantages.

Internet Access, Pottery Shards and Precipitation

March 22 One of the sacrifices of living off the grid is poor internet service, so we were delighted to see the internet installer arrive today to handle our upgrade only two days after we placed the order.

March 25 Seth and the short-term guests rode through the Narrows



Board games are another evening pastime at the ranch. This Apples to Apples game got quite lively.

because it is a “can't miss” spot. Meris and I took the other guests on our Lake Loop Trail. She and I got back earlier than Seth, so we did yoga stretches in our jeans and flannel in the barn. Doing yoga every day really helps with my flexibility.

March 27 Last night we celebrated a guest's 60th birthday with cake and then singing by the campfire. This morning we got back to business by readying eight horses for today's ride. Seth took two guests to the Top of the World while a new group of six women went on the orientation ride. We spotted a great blue heron—the first one this year.

March 28 Sleet started falling as we prepared the horses, but it cleared up in time for Seth and Meris to take the six women to Dwelling Canyon. I took our other guests to the Pottery Mesa. That's our name for the Twin Pines archeological site, an ancient Mimbres village where the ground is littered with pottery shards. We spotted all kinds of pottery—black and white, red and white, plain red, and corrugated—and some really

cool rocks. After admiring ancient pictographs on a rock wall, we headed back to the ranch. Hail started falling as we ate lunch, followed by lightning and thunder.

March 29 We made quite a posse on the trail to Beaver Canyon today because all of our eight guests rode together. One of them later said that riding through the Narrows was like “heaven on earth.” Comments such as these make us love what we do at the ranch even more.

March 30 It was so cold this morning we saw a hard frost on everything, even the horses' manes and tails. But it didn't stop 10 mule deer from frolicking in one of the pastures—a really cool sight. I spent the day digging into office work, but I was interrupted when Seth came in and told me the horses got out. We had forgotten to latch a gate, so they were grazing wherever they liked. Thankfully, it was easy to round them up and put them back where they belonged.

March 31 It was sad to say goodbye to our guests after a week of their company. But as soon as they departed, we started preparing for the next group.

I hope you enjoyed learning what it's like to work on a guest ranch. We'd love to meet you on the trail someday! **R**

You Gotta Laugh

Ranch life has its moments. The funniest one happened the day one of our horses licked my mouth. I was letting one of the shyer ones sniff me when, out of the blue, he gave me a lick and his tongue went in my mouth! I think it shocked us both, and I laughed so hard he got scared away. I couldn't stop laughing the rest of the day.

—Kelly Burns