

Escapes

A Rootin', Tootin' Visit to . . . Delaware?

By THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF
Special to The Washington Post

The drive to a ranch in Wyoming ought to pass through majestic mountains and wild, windswept prairies. But the route to the Wicked R ranch in Wyoming, Del.? Not so much.

Instead, the scenery is more prosaic: strip malls, motels, chain restaurants, Wawas. Central Delaware does have its rural areas, though, and once you leave busy Route 13 just southwest of Dover, you're on a two-lane road that winds through farm fields and occasional clusters of older "in-town" homes.

In contrast to western ranches that boast thousands of acres, Wicked R comprises just 60 acres of fields and woods with a red wooden barn for horses, a large metal storage shed, an outdoor riding arena with a few bleachers and a bunkhouse.

Ranch owners Randy and Jennifer Ridgely, a 30-something couple who gained notice after an appearance on ABC's "Wife Swap," live with their two young daughters in the modest clapboard farmhouse near the road.

The Ridgelys were there in the gravel driveway to welcome me and the 11 others who'd come for the Women's Ranch Retreat, a weekend rodeo camp for women. I'd wanted to visit a dude ranch ever since seeing "City Slickers," but those types of vacations can be pretty dang costly. At Wicked R, I could get a two-day ranch experience — the Ridgelys offer several a year, including some in the coming months — for \$250, with no plane ticket required.

The couple promised to teach my group (we ranged in age from 28 to 50) to drive and sort cattle and to perform rodeo events such as barrel racing and pole bending. By Sunday afternoon, we'd be in our own little rodeo, complete with an All Around Cowgirl Buckle awarded to the winner.

Cowgirl Jen, as she calls herself, had assured me the camp would be just fine for beginners, so my friend Heather and I were dismayed to learn that we and one other city gal were the only greenhorns. The other participants took riding lessons, owned horses or had attended rodeo camp before. One was even a horseback-riding instructor. Our hopes for winning that belt buckle



BY LARIS KARGLIS — THE WASHINGTON POST



BY HEATHER MCNALLY

The author takes a ride on a manual bull operated by two cowboys at Wicked R ranch.

dimmed.

We began by learning how to lasso a calf — actually a hay bale with a plastic head attached. Part of the trick is having the proper tool: a stiff rope looped using a knot that allows the rope to slide freely. I succeeded several times, but since rodeo calves move faster than a hay bale, I doubt my newly acquired skill will win me any competitions.

Next we saddled up on live horses. Heather was assigned a big white male named Avalanche, while I rode Digger, one of the feistier equines. Ostensibly, our job was to master barrel racing and pole bending, but I decided early on I'd be happy simply completing the tasks.

To barrel race, we rode our horses in a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels

placed in a large triangle. The object is to accomplish the deed in the fastest possible time. Professionals can do it in 15 seconds. Our best runs were two to three times as long.

Riding a horse in the pole-bending event is a bit like maneuvering a car through an obstacle course of cones — except the horse has its own agenda. Riders race around six poles, completing three figure-eight patterns. At the 2007 National Pole Bending Championship, the winner completed the course in 19.621 seconds. I was delighted to finish in less than a minute.

The Ridgelys were determined to keep us busy, so while the horses were put out to pasture after dinner, we took a hayride to a challenge course consisting of a climbing

wall, zip line and balance beams (more fun than harrowing) and to try our hand at archery. I was a pretty good shot, but I couldn't compare to Carrie, a no-nonsense truck-driving gal who boasted of bagging a buck the first time she hunted with a bow and arrow.

The promise of warmth soon lured us to the campfire. The glow of the fire, the whinnying horses, the crisp air and star-filled sky — I could almost believe I was in deserted country out west. Almost.

As fatigue got the better of us, we peeled off one by one to retire to the bunkhouse, a simple, rectangular wooden shed filled with six bunk beds and no mattresses. Comfort facilities consisted of a portable toilet and an outdoor shower, which we all passed on, opting to wash up using baby wipes someone had brought. The bunk was soon quiet but for the sounds of snoring and a Discovery Channel program that one woman was watching on her BlackBerry.

The next morning we awakened to find the campfire ablaze and cups of steaming coffee at the ready. Cowgirl Jen had let us sleep later than the schedule called for, but now we hurried to squeeze in trail rides and a few more activities before the grand finale, our rodeo performance.

Shortly before 2 p.m., family and friends began to trickle in, bearing cameras, video recorders and amused expressions. They applauded politely as we showed off our calf-roping skills on a rudimentary wooden model, but clearly they were waiting for the main event.

The rodeo began, as most do, with the national anthem and a parade around the arena. Then we raced (well, some plodded) around those barrels and poles. Our horsemanship skills varied wildly, as did our finishing times. The All Cowgirl Belt Buckle went to Linda, a pediatric nurse practitioner . . . and skilled horsewoman. Heather and I finished solidly in the middle of the pack.

A successful weekend? For certain. Before leaving, more than half of the women signed up to attend a springtime camp, and I considered doing likewise, but I let my sore thighs and butt decide for me.

For the moment at least, the answer was no.

■ **Wicked R** (2621 Sandy Bend Rd.) is in Wyoming, Del., southwest of Dover. Upcoming two-day, one-night rodeo weekends for adults (\$250 each): Bull Riding Clinic, May 10-11; Women's Retreat, May 17-18; Barrel Racing Clinic, June 23-24. Three-day, two-night Dude Ranch Camps for children are offered throughout the summer. \$250 if child brings own horse, \$300 if using a ranch horse. Info: 302-492-FEAR, www.wickedr.com.

5 MORE PLACES TO SADDLE UP

You don't have to travel out West for a real cowboy experience. The mid-Atlantic is home to a number of dude ranches and equestrian-focused bed-and-breakfasts.

🐾 **Warfordsburg, Pa.** The 95-acre Buck Valley Ranch, with its four-bedroom guesthouse, is set in a secluded, wooded area. In addition to riding the trails, guests can help groom the horses, enjoy the swimming pool and hot tub and observe wildlife. A two-day, one-night stay includes lodging, two meals and a 90-minute trail ride for \$150 per person. The three-day, two-night option, which includes two trail rides, is \$250. Riders must be age 7 or older and weigh less than 225 pounds. Info: 800-294-3759, www.buckvalleyranch.com.

🐾 **Rocky Ridge, Md.** Double Rock Farm offers day-long "cowboy experiences" on weekdays from mid-May through October (no lodging). The morning is spent riding horses and driving cattle, and the afternoon is devoted to learning how to rope cattle, both plastic and real. The \$175 fee includes lunch. Experienced riders can bring their own horses to the farm or some weekends to take part in team penning (\$10 per run) or in the Extreme Cowboy Race (\$10-\$20). Info: 301-447-3550 or 301-606-6810, www.dbrockfarm.com.

🐾 **Swoope, Va.** North Mountain Outfitter, a 200-acre working ranch, has two Cowgirl Weekends on tap (June 12-15 and Sept. 11-14, \$650 per person), in addition to its regular one- or multi-night stays in rustic, wood-floor canvas tents or a soon-to-be-open bunkhouse. (One night in the bunkhouse is \$275 per couple.) Overnight stays include lodging, meals and guided backcountry riding by permit through George Washington National Forest. Beginners are welcome; riders must be age 10 or older and weigh less than 245 pounds. Info: 866-481-4400, www.northmtnoutfitter.com.

🐾 **Stanley, Va.** River's Bend Guest Ranch in the Shenandoah Valley is a 260-acre working horse and cattle ranch that offers trail rides (\$35 an hour for ranch guests), private lessons (\$60 an hour) and pony rides for kids (\$30). Hiking, fishing, swimming and other activities are included with lodging. Room rates start at \$95 for the bunkhouse and \$175 for a one-bedroom cabin. Info: 800-672-7726, www.riversbendranch.com.

🐾 **South Boston, Va.** Shangrila Retreat is a family-oriented farm on 500 acres where guests can help care for the chickens, ducks, mules and horses. Activities include pony rides, guided trail rides, campfires and often hayrides or wagon rides. A two-night minimum stay, which includes lodging, meals and activities, starts at \$540 per person, with savings for groups of two or more. Info: 434-517-0888, www.shangrilaretreat.us. — T.G.M.

🐾 **COMING SUNDAY** | Bunking in an old caboose and a faux steamboat in Lancaster County, Pa., in Travel.