

Smith Fork Ranch

For the authentic dude ranch experience with deluxe ambience, head to Crawford's Smith Fork Ranch.

Even cowgirls can wash away the blues with everything from fly-fishing to haute Western cuisine.

IN THE DUDE RANCH HEYDAY of the 1920s and 1930s, wealthy East Coast couples with their offspring in tow loved to hightail it out West to play summer buckaroo in the wide open spaces. They'd gather at the great guest ranches of the high country to horseback ride, fish and laze away the days in the crisp mountain air far from civilization.

Though the old places are mostly gone now, a slice of the authentic dude experience is still alive and well at Smith Fork Ranch, which actually began life as a guest ranch in the 1930s. Long ago, Grant and Mamie Ferrier bought the place as newlyweds and began cattle ranching. Over the years, a variety of visitors made their way to this remote slice of the real West, where the couple guided outdoor lovers from all over the world on pack trips, fishing trips and big game hunts. As the place gradually transformed into a guest ranch, the Ferriers built a lodge, cabins and a restaurant. The family ran the ranch for more than 30 years, but it fell into disrepair after they sold it in the 1970s.

Enter high-powered New York entrepreneurs Marley and Linda Hodgson, who spent eight years (on and off) searching for the perfect Colorado family retreat. With deep roots in the state through longtime skiing and ranching vacations, their kids attending summer camp and family ties, the Hodgsons always knew they'd have their own place here some day. When they saw the ranch—set in the Smith Fork River valley ringed by the majestic peaks of the West Elk Wilderness—they knew this was it. “Our son told us not to do anything until he could get out and see if the river was fishable,” laughs Linda Hodgson. “It turned out we have some of the best fishing on the Western Slope.”

The ranch inspired the Hodgsons, founders of Ghurka, the luxury leather goods company, to a life-changing decision. “We had originally wanted a family place,” says Linda. “But we'd been to several Colorado guest ranches, and remembering all the good times we had, we thought we should bring it back as a guest ranch.” At the same time, she decided she didn't want to spend the rest of her life doing what she'd done since 1970, she says.



ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SMITH FORK RANCH



IF YOU GO

Smith Fork Ranch is a four-and-a-half hour car trip from Denver, between Aspen and Telluride, in Crawford, Colorado. Crawford is musician Joe Cocker's hometown, about 30 minutes away from the nation's newest national park, Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The ranch is open May 25 through October 15 and is available for hunting parties in the fall. For more information or reservations, call 970-921-3454 or visit www.smithforkranch.com.

FOURTH ANNUAL CULINARY WEEKEND

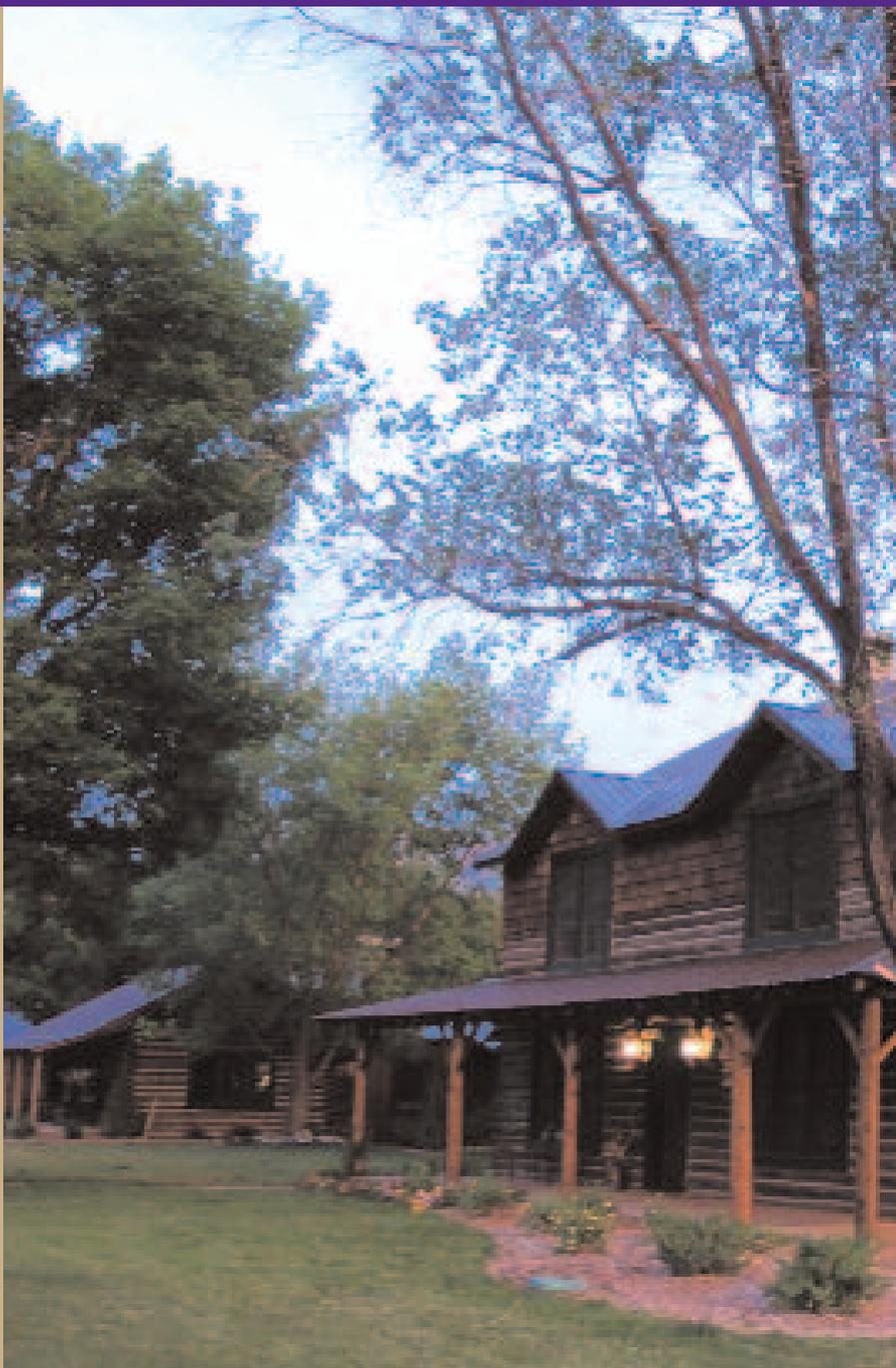
SEPTEMBER 7-10

The radiant colors of a Colorado autumn are the backdrop for this foodie adventure filled with gourmet delights. Hands-on cooking sessions with acclaimed ranch chef Bob Isaacson, formerly of the Montagna Restaurant in Aspen's Little Nell Hotel, are a highlight of a flavorful long weekend.

COWGIRL ADVENTURE

SEPTEMBER 27-OCTOBER 1

This four-night weekend retreat lets wannabe cowgirls polish up all those essential skills with horseback riding, roping lessons, team cattle penning, line dancing and fly-fishing. Take to the arena for instruction by expert wranglers, for games on horseback—barrel racing, steer soccer and rodeo-style calf roping, demonstrated by team ropers. After a full day of ranch activities, gals enjoy the ranch's haute Western cuisine, wine tasting and even cowgirl facials.



They bought the ranch in 2000 and set about using the talents of local craftsmen and builders to restore the original buildings. Invaluable help came from 90-something Mamie Ferrier, who had written several local history books and kept diaries from the ranch's beginnings. "She visited here frequently and was so thrilled that we were going to bring the ranch back," recalls Hodgson. "When we needed to restore the old chinking, she found the formula they had used in one of her diaries from 1941." The new owners took apart the original main lodge and four guest cabins, reconstructing them log by log and adding a new five-bedroom guesthouse.

The rooms are filled with furniture handmade by local craftsmen, as well as the antiques, Western art and Indian artifacts that



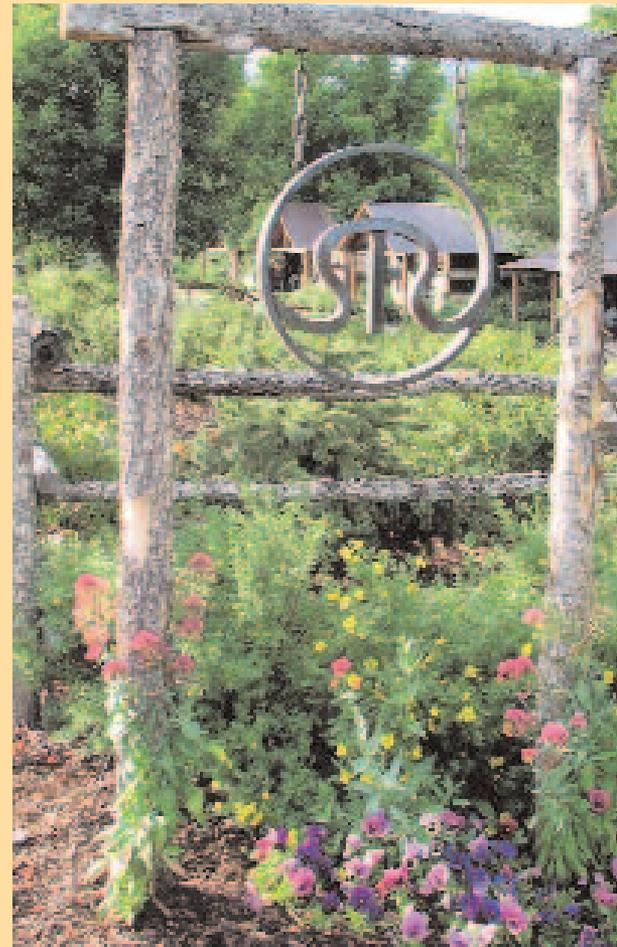
make the mountain-rustic motif so comfortable. (Ladies, however, will be glad to hear there's nothing pioneerish or Old West about the very modern bathrooms.) Each cabin has its own character and private deck where it's mandatory to lounge in the Adirondack chairs and admire the stunning views.

In this enclave of idyllic beauty, all Western fantasies are perfectly indulged. The ranch's atmosphere is

best described as down-home mixed with deluxe, a combo that attracts not only Front Rangers, but also the occasional pop star, futures trader or owner of a famous jewelry label.

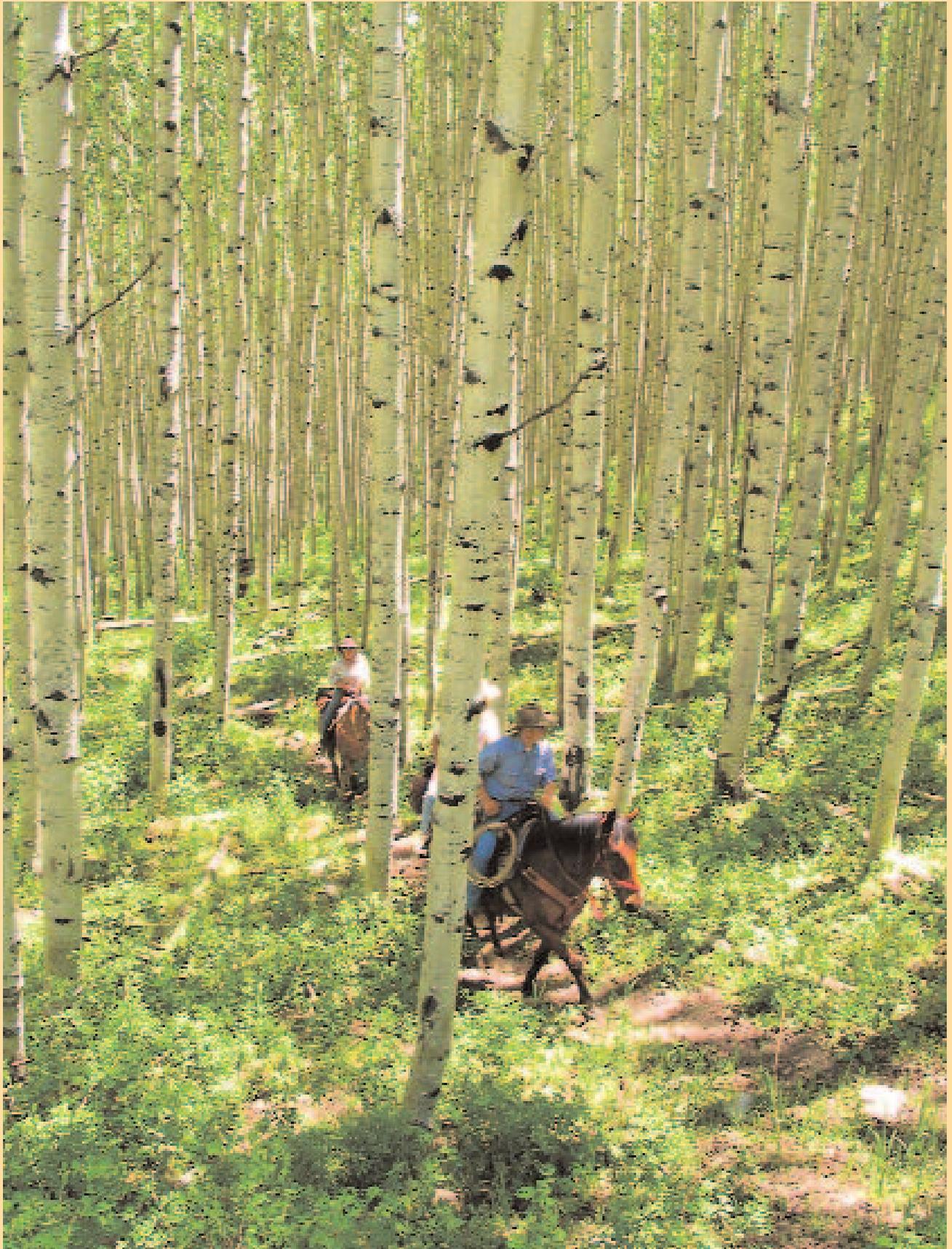
COWBOY UP

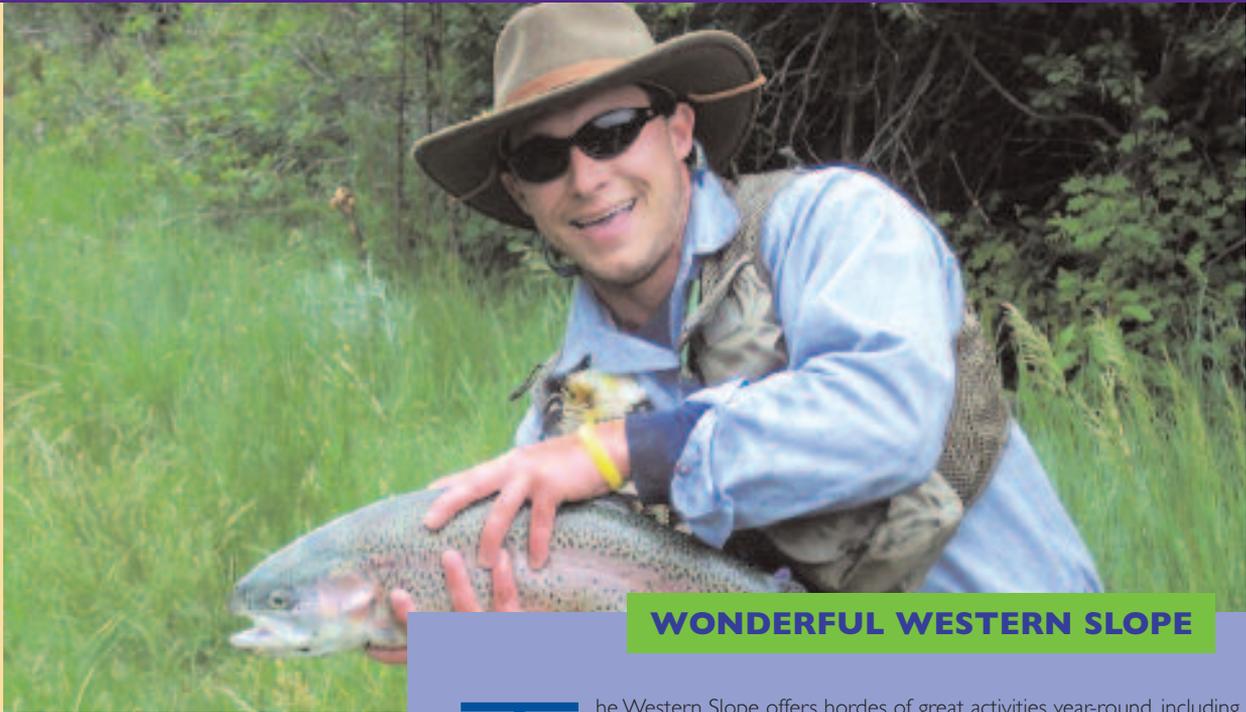
Adventure aplenty waits for those willing to throw themselves into the Western spirit of the place. Three miles of the Smith Fork River's primo fly-fishing waters splash through the ranch,



delighting anglers. Friendly guides teach first-timers how to cast on the ranch lawn, and then the fun moves over to the well-stocked trout ponds and the crystalline river. Since the ranch accommodates only 28 guests (think family reunion) personal attention is the norm, whether from the fly-fishing and hiking guides or the horse wranglers.

The ranch stables can fix up any level of rider with the perfect equine match, kids included, and instruction to boot if needed. Exploring the area on horseback or hiking the miles and miles of aspen-cloaked mountain and valley trails are the best ways to really appreciate the natural splendor of the countryside. Sightings of fox, deer, elk





WONDERFUL WESTERN SLOPE

and the occasional brown bear add to the excitement. The ranch also offers backcountry camping trips that include high mountain trails and an overnight under the stars.

The littlest cowhands, those under 7 or so who may not be into riding or fishing, will still have a blast. They can play in the two-story treehouse, hang out in a real Ute tepee or splash around in the swimming pond. In a creative mood, they may want to try out some arts-and-crafts activities, and they can even pan for gold. Mom and dad can be sure the tykes are well supervised while the grown-ups are off on their own pursuits.

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

Lovely food is always part of the ideal vacation. At the Smith Fork, typical ranch cooking is expertly transformed into cuisine whether you're talking breakfast, lunch or dinner. Chef Bob Isaacson, formerly of the Montagna Restaurant in Aspen's Little Nell Hotel, ladles on the gourmet with a home-style touch. Breakfast may feature fresh fruit, locally made elk sausage or bacon, specialty egg dishes or corn cakes piled with fresh blueberries. At lunchtime,

The Western Slope offers hordes of great activities year-round, including great festivals in August and September along with all the activities at Smith Fork Ranch itself. Check it out at www.telluridechamber.com.

IN AUGUST Telluride Jazz Celebration, Olathe Sweet Corn Festival, Delta County Fair & Rodeo, Telluride Chamber Music Festival, and Telluride Culinary Art Festival.

IN SEPTEMBER Telluride Film Festival, Ute Indian Council Tree Pow-Wow complete with native dances and Ute Indian Tepee Village, Telluride Blues & Brews Festival, and Mountain Harvest Festival (Paonia).

IN AND AROUND THE RANCH Lest you fear you'll run out of things to do at Smith Fork Ranch, visit www.smithforkranch.com for the complete list of activities: fly-fishing, horseback riding, hiking, team cattle-penning on horseback, archery, swimming in a pond, Frisbee golf, touring Black Canyon National Park, touring local vineyards and orchards, local rodeos, kids' program, overnight pack trips to remote backcountry camp, sporting clays, white-water river rafting, hot-air ballooning and guided float/fishing trips on the Gunnison and other major Colorado rivers.

the outdoor grill is fired up to cook burgers or chicken, accompanied by a bunch of fresh, delicious salads.

All meals take imaginative advantage of the region's farm-fresh organic vegetables and fruits as well as local meats and game. Dinner is always an occasion, though the most dressing up anyone does is clean jeans and a pressed shirt. Entrees include tender local lamb and beef, or sautéed trout with a pumpkinseed crust, and desserts are legendary. The scrumptious fare is

complemented by a choice of wine from the Hodgsons' very large and diverse personal wine cellar.

Evenings are spent watching the alpenglow casting its delicate magic on the meringue-topped peaks, talking easily with the other guests and enjoying local entertainers. There's another big outdoorsy day coming up tomorrow, so better say those goodnights and get horizontal, sinking happily under the down comforter in your cozy bed.

