

Guest riders learn about ranch life, improve stewardship at Bar H Bar Ranch

By Steve Stuebner



On a frosty September morning in the Bear River Valley, the Harris Family is preparing to gather 350 yearlings from a large pasture next to their corrals. Mark Harris leads the charge on his palomino, "Frosty".

"Heya! Hah! Hah!" Harris and his fellow hands on horseback shout as they herd the cattle across the spacious meadow toward the corrals.

Three of the riders -- two men from New York and a woman from Indianapolis -- are paying guests who love to ride horses at the Bar H Bar Ranch. All three of them are

return guests.

"I always wanted to do this," said Patrick Marinelli, who is retired from ConEdison and lives in Long Island, New York. "To come out West and do things just like the cowboys did 150 years ago is just fantastic. It's a wonderful experience."

Adds Missy Logie of Indianapolis, "This, for me, is riding heaven. I can be in the saddle 6-7 hours a day and for me, that's my perfect day."

The Bar H Bar Ranch in Soda Springs, owned by the Harris Family, was one of the first ranches in Idaho to embrace the guest ranching experience in the early 1990s.

The concept was just budding then.

"We'd have friends come out and chase cows with us, so the idea was kind of out there, and then the movie *City Slickers* come out and that just added to it," said Mark Harris, one of two Harris brothers who manages the Soda Springs part of the operation with his wife, Cheryl, his brother Wade and his family, and their father, McGee, and mother, Janet.

Indeed, *City Slickers*, the 1991 comedy starring Billy Crystal, popularized the notion of taking a vacation out West and participating in a real cattle drive. The movie was part of what got Marinelli and his friend, Dominick Mancuso, a retired New York Police Department lieutenant, interested in the concept.



The Bar H Bar is a working cattle ranch. Guests receive a well-trained horse to ride and help herd cattle in the national forest, where they may see moose and elk.



New Yorkers Patrick Marinelli, right, and Dominick Mancuso, come to the Bar H Bar Ranch every year to ride horses, enjoy the wide open spaces and feel the spirit of the West.

"I must confess that I watch that movie every time before I come out here to the Bar H Bar Ranch," Mancuso says with a chuckle.

Turns out that Marinelli's daughter is married to Mancuso's son, and when their kids heard that both fathers wanted to go to a guest ranch out West, they got them together. The two have been coming to the Bar H Bar Ranch for the last three years in a row. They usually stay for 10 days.

"The Harris family takes only 6-8 people at a time, which is really nice," Marinelli says. "At other ranches, they take more people, and there can be a lot of competition for getting to do what you want to do. Here, it's more intimate and personal."

The Harrises marketed their services by advertising in Cowboys & Indians magazine, Gene Kilgore's Ranch Vacations guidebook, and they were listed as a top guest ranch by National Geographic Traveler magazine in 1995. They've been booked solid ever since.

Logie, who has her own horse in Indiana and rides regularly, says it is a good idea for guests to have horseback riding experience. That way, they can hit the ground running, so to speak, and not get saddle-sore. She notes that they herd cattle in topsy-turvy terrain in the mountains; it's not a leisurely trail ride. So the horseback riding can be challenging and demanding, and that's how she likes it.

"It's a good thing to know how to ride," she says. "I've never really felt like they're entertaining me. They have jobs to do and things that have to be done every day -- pushing cattle from one pasture to another, finding the escapees and putting them back where they belong, branding, mending fences, we do it all."



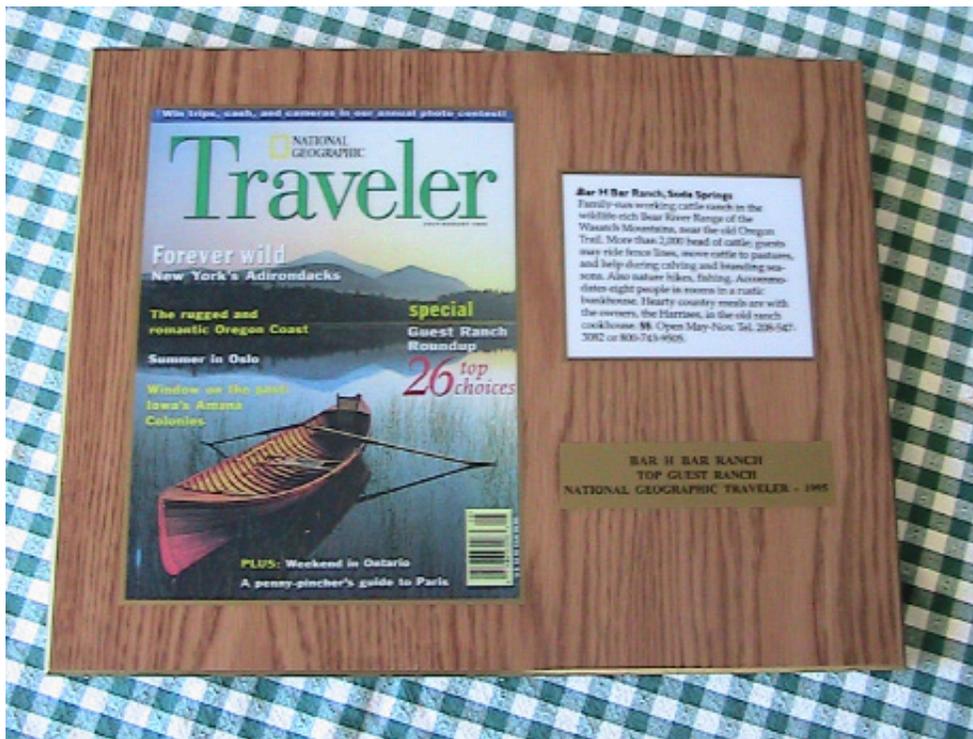
Herding cattle across the Bear River.

It's not a dude ranching experience at the Bar H Bar, the guests note. They come to work on a real working ranch, and the Harrises put them to work.

"They have a family meeting every morning to figure out what they're going to do for the day, and you join in whatever activity you'd like to do," says Marinelli. "Every day is something different."

The Harrises have found that limiting the number of guests per week ensures that everyone has something to do.

The Bar H Bar is a large operation, with more than 10,000 deeded acres of private land, 30,000 acres of grazing allotments on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest and 2,000 cows to manage. Two of Mark Harris' brothers



National Geographic Traveler included the Bar H Bar Ranch as one of the top guest ranches in the 1990s, great advertising that helped fill their bunkhouse for years to come.

the summer months, we ride through each group of cattle every week or every other week and just check 'em," he says. "We've cut down on our death loss considerably. In the last five years, we've had zero death loss."

That's because they're in contact with the cattle more frequently, and they can detect animals with hoof rot, pneumonia or other diseases that can cause serious problems, and provide medical attention.

"It also helps us manage our pastures better, too," Harris says. "We're out there, we can see what kind of shape they're in, and if we need to move 'em, we move 'em," Harris says. "We push the cattle off the riparian areas and that helps us with our rapport with the Forest Service and the creek bottoms look better."

As proof of the improved livestock management, Harris notes that an environmental group petitioned a species of fish, the Bonneville cutthroat trout, for listing as an endangered species. The fish resides in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest and on the Harris's private land bordering the Bear River.

Research studies by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showed that the fish did not need to be listed. "We must be doing something right," Harris said.

"At the very base of their philosophy is taking care of the environment," Logie says. "As ranchers, there is nothing more important than using the right amount of grass, the right amount of water, and having this ranch be here for future generations of their own family."

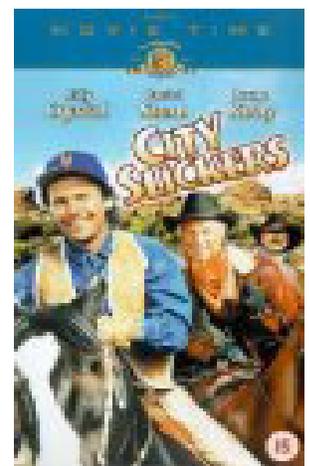
One of the side benefits of running a guest ranch is that the Harris Family teaches people about the lifestyle of

run a hay farm in Malta, Idaho, where the yearlings over-winter to stay out of the extreme cold in the Bear River Valley at 6,000 foot elevation.

"We have snow here till the first of May," Harris says with a twinkle in his eye. "It's a short summer."

Logie loves riding in the mountains to move cattle around because it's a sporting riding experience. "All of these horses are so well trained," she says. "When you point them toward a cow, they know what to do. You just need to hang on and go along for the ride."

It's real handy to have extra hands to move cattle around in the national forest, Harris says. "In



The hit movie, "City Slickers," popularized the guest ranching experience right as the Harris Family dipped their toe into the business. Great timing!



The Harrises and guests herd cattle into the corrals for a cattle sale.

being a rancher and what is involved in operating a real-life working ranch, and ultimately, the guests fall in love with the whole experience.

"When they come to the ranch, they get an education. We're able to be with them for a week, and they're able to learn what it takes to manage a cow, to grow a steak, see what it takes to run a ranch," Harris says. "When they leave, we like to think that person leaving is another advocate for agriculture."

And the guests give back to the Harrises in the form of friendship.

"It takes the dull drums out of what we do," Harris says. "Every day is a new adventure; every week is a new adventure. Stupid things happen to people and it's funny and you have stories to tell. But it's fun. Lots of fun."

"They don't miss a thing," Logie says with a chuckle. "Mark just pointed out that my spurs were upside down. I'm not going to hear the end of that."

The tagline on the Bar H Bar web site says it all: "Come as a guest. Leave as a friend."



Mark Harris doctors a cow while a guest helps with a rope. Mark says the guests really help keep watch over their cattle in the national forest, reducing their death loss to zero in the last 5 years. The guests also help move the cattle around in the national forest to ensure that pastures don't get overgrazed.