

Best of the Wild West

By Chris Coplans, **Daily Mail** December 15, 2008



Find your inner cowboy on Nevada's wild plains

After a tortuous 30-mile drive along a dirt road, passing through twisted canyons studded with sagebrush and shimmering under a cobalt-blue Nevada sky, we emerged into a landscape of pastoral splendour.

As I looked down at the Cottonwood Guest Ranch, nestling in this bucolic valley, it seemed the perfect place to indulge my inner cowboy and realise a boyhood dream.

I'd come to Nevada not to lose my dollars in some glitzy casino, but to gain my spurs in the real West. And Nevada is as real as it gets.

Located in the high sierras in the remote North-eastern corner of Nevada, Cottonwood is a working horse and cattle ranch that has been in the same family for five generations. Wells, the nearest town - if you can call it a town - is 70 miles away and you are a couple of days' drive from Reno.

They don't mess much with the formalities at Cottonwood and after a few howdies, hat-tipping, back-slapping and y'all's, I put on my Wranglers (real cowboys don't wear Levis). Then, in less time than it takes to skin a jackrabbit, I was in the saddle, Stetson tilted at a rakish angle.

It's horses for courses at Cottonwood, so it doesn't matter whether you once rode with the James Gang or don't know your lasso from your leggings. They cater for riders of all abilities, and everyone is paired with a horse suited to their experience.

I was partnered with a statuesque, chocolate-brown mare called Brandy. My equine skills are on a par with George Bush's command of the English language and, sensing this, Brandy nonchalantly dismissed me as 'all hat and no cattle'.

With a chorus of 'Yee-ha!', our motley crew were led out onto the range by Cowboy Mike and his band of highly-skilled, and mighty fine-lookin, cowgals.

Our first task was to round up 'a couple a hundred head a cattle' and drive them to a fresh pasture. We headed up the trail, following Cottonwood Creek as it snaked through willows and open meadows.

Soon, we were chasing cattle at what seemed like breakneck speed, but in reality was no more than a gentle trot - or, in cowboy parlance, a lope.

As my confidence grew, and Brandy begrudgingly acknowledged I might have the makings of a good cowpoke, I was soon burning the breeze and chasing strays like an old hand.

Our group - mainly British but equally divided between men and women - spent the afternoon rounding up some mavericks (unbranded cattle) and the odd muley (hornless cattle), before driving them back to the ranch.

Exhausted, I flopped into the hot tub, conveniently located on Cottonwood's deck, and gazed out as the sun slid behind the towering peaks of the distant Jarbidge Mountains. I was tempted out of the warmth of the tub only by the crackle of the campfire and the aroma of fresh meat sizzling.

As darkness finally swallowed up the vast landscape, we all sat round the campfire, chewing the fat and consuming some monster T-bones.

After the chow, I retired to the games room and shot some pool with a bunch of ranchwranglers, who had obviously been hustlin' pool since they were knee-high to a rattler. The hands ranged from grizzled, leather-skinned, old-time cowboys to East Coast cowgirls with a love of the open range.

Ten bucks lighter but ten pounds heavier, I hit the sack and slept like a bear.

At sun-up the following day, bleary-eyed and virtually catatonic, we saddled up for a full day's ride. This took us far from the ranch and up to some of most remote wilderness areas in the state.

As we made our way up the slopes of the fragrant alpine valleys, the rush of inhaling the clean air gave my fragile body more of a turbo boost than a dozen double espressos. This is Big Country - a wide-screen landscape, broodingly primordial and sublimely beautiful. Until the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century, it was populated by only a few nomadic Indian tribes who scraped an existence in the harsh and unforgiving environment.

We stopped for some chuck - that's food to you - on a high ridge, devoid of any signs of life or human habitation, except for a couple of eagles, effortlessly floating in the thermals.

Then our posse moved on. We spotted some antelope on a distant plateau, rabbits, hares and many different birds of prey.

For a city boy, used to endless traffic jams, noise, pollution and frenetic activity, it was difficult not to fall in love with this raw, majestic and silent landscape.

For those seeking even greater solitude and more of the trail life, Cottonwood lays on three-day horse drives and five- day pack trips into the remote Jarbidge Wilderness, with nothing but golden eagles, deer, elk, antelope and the odd mountain lion for company.

Bushwhacked but elated, we staggered back to the ranch in time for one of those spectacular desert sunsets, dripping in deep purples and vivid reds with voluptuous storm clouds spilling over the distant mountains.

Once again, I took my sunset from the comfort of the hot tub, whose bubbling waters and powerful jets soothed away a severe case of SBS (Sore Bum Syndrome).

The ranch has been in the Smith family for more than 50 years. With just seven well-appointed bedrooms that accommodate no more than 19 guests, everyone is treated like family. We all chowed down at the same table, giving the mixed bunch of American and international visitors a chance to mingle.



Home on the range: Cottonwood Ranch in Nevada

The guests come from all walks of life, from serious range riders to city slickers and equine virgins.

Grub is good ol' home-cooked scrumptious country food; the kind that puts hairs on your chest and pounds on your waistline. Cottonwood is a far cry from themed, corporate-branded 'ranches'. The only branding at Cottonwood is reserved for the horses and cattle.

Cottonwood is geared to horse-riding, but if you tire of life in the saddle, there are plenty of other activities. You can take quad bikes out for exhilarating rides on the back trails. Budding gunslingers can trap shoot with Winchester rifles, or shoot from the hip with a Colt 45.

The high point for me was breaking in a horse. Under Cowboy Mike's tutelage, I tried to learn to rope a wild colt in the corral.

Learning to lasso turned out to be a humiliating experience, but after a number of feeble attempts, I succeeded. Trust is the key word 'cos' if the horse don't trust yer, he ain't goin nowhere', as one of the wranglers succinctly put it.

After much cajoling, patting, stroking and talking to my charge, the miracle happened. I nuzzled up against his body so tightly that I could feel his every breath and heartbeat, and, with my arm over his neck, he gingerly took his first steps with me. Soon I had him happily trotting round the corral on the rope. The sense of achievement was intoxicating.

At the end of a week of hard riding, and a steep learning curve, I felt like I had earned at least one of my spurs.

Travel facts

Cottonwood Ranch: www.cottonwoodguestranch.com

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-617636/Best-Wild-West.html#ixzz0hLuGajPE>