

PLAYING A WESTERN ROLE

EAGER TO EXPERIENCE COWGIRL LIFE AND TASTE THE TRUE GRIT OF THE WILD WEST, **STEPHANIE DRAX** TRAVELS TO WYOMING TO TAKE IN THE BEAUTY OF THE STATE FROM ITS CHARMING WORKING RANCHES

The natural wonders of Wyoming have a habit of stopping traffic. I'm forced to pull over once more - not for bison, moose or bear this time, but to gasp at Mount Moran in Grand Teton National Park. From the viewpoint at Oxbow Bend, the golden aspen trees in autumn appear like flames, licking up the snow-capped mountain. The contours and contrasts of this American state have lured many - hardy homesteaders, wannabe cowboys and A-list film crews among them - to marvel at its monumental beauty and scale.

Almost twice the size of England but with less than 600,000 residents, Wyoming is littered with gifts of nature - from the geothermal wonders of Yellowstone and the vast, lonely stretches of the High Plains, to these seductive Teton peaks. This state is high, dry and with unforgiving earth, a land limited to cattle grazing and ranching. I have arrived here - dressed in denim and checks, naturally - to play at being a cowgirl, live ranch life and taste the true grit of the Wild West experience. And, as it turns out, in the Twenties, city slickers and society types from the East Coast had the same idea.

Their thirst for Western adventure kick-started the concept of a 'dude ranch'. Escaping the heat and disease of urban summers, these outsiders - called 'dudes' by Wyoming residents - stayed in rustic cabins and participated in ranch work. Over subsequent decades, dude dollars became more of a mainstay than a sideline for many ranchers. College-educated wranglers replaced

conversation-shy cowboys as ranch hands, hired to engage with paying guests.

Now ranches across Wyoming offer varying levels of exertion and comfort: from working cattle ranches and dude ranches, to guest ranches and resort ranches. For Maureen and Terry Reidy, raising yearling cattle is still at the heart of their property, Focus Ranch, on the border of Wyoming and Colorado. Theirs is a pastoral scene dipped in Western romance: a log house and vivid red barn nestled alongside the Little Snake River, quarter horses grazing in a meadow, and nothing but empty hills and forests of cottonwoods as far as the eye can see.

Terry helps me saddle up. It's far more comfortable than an English ride: more leather and padding, and the stirrups are longer. We keep the reins loose and our bodies relaxed as we ride out, up to the mesa of sagebrush and grass, looking for cattle to return to lower pastures before the harsh winter sets in. We weave through the willows of a small valley and find 19 cows and one bull. Flanking the herd and steering them down to the meadows on our incredibly responsive steeds, we enjoy a sedate and gentle afternoon.

'This isn't Disneyland,' says Maureen amiably, 'and there's no shopping or TV. With no minimum age, we expose families to our culture - whether it's milking cows, mending fences or moving cattle to new pastures.' After a day's work, we are nourished with pork chops, roasted squash and polenta, followed by homemade cookies. I sleep in a simple log room under a colourful patchwork quilt.

Just a 90-minute drive away from Focus - but at the other end of the ranch spectrum - is Brush Creek Ranch. Situated in the Platte River valley, it boasts sweeping views of the Sierra Madre mountain range. It may have all the

accoutrements of a luxury resort - a spa, mountain-chic interiors, sophisticated cuisine, and a staff-to-guest ratio of 2:1 - but I most admire how the sprawling lodge and cabins fold into the epic landscape with dignity. 'Are those rocks real?' a guest asks a female wrangler in Stetson and spurs as we lope on horses across movie-set-perfect terrain. The resort loans cowboy boots to each guest on a ride or cattle drive, so I'm feeling especially in character.

Brush Creek's smorgasbord of activities keep the Western roles coming: one minute I'm an outlaw, aiming a rifle at a cowboy cutout at the ranch's top-class outdoor gun club, the next I am using a compound bow and arrow on the archery course. Then, in a tranquil tipi beside a bubbling creek, I'm inhaling smoking sage leaves and oils of juniper, lavender and cedarwood during a massage.

I meander up towards Falcon Peak on one of the ranch's many trails, and turn back to survey the view. Brush Creek Ranch and its many indulgences have melted into the scenery and I am faced with the same panorama that would have greeted the pioneers: a west that is truly wild.

OTHER RANCHES TO VISIT

DUDE RANCH

Triangle X

Five generations of the Turner family have hosted dudes at their traditional ranch with epic views of the Teton mountains. The emphasis is simply on riding out in the back country, camping and barbecues. trianglerex.com

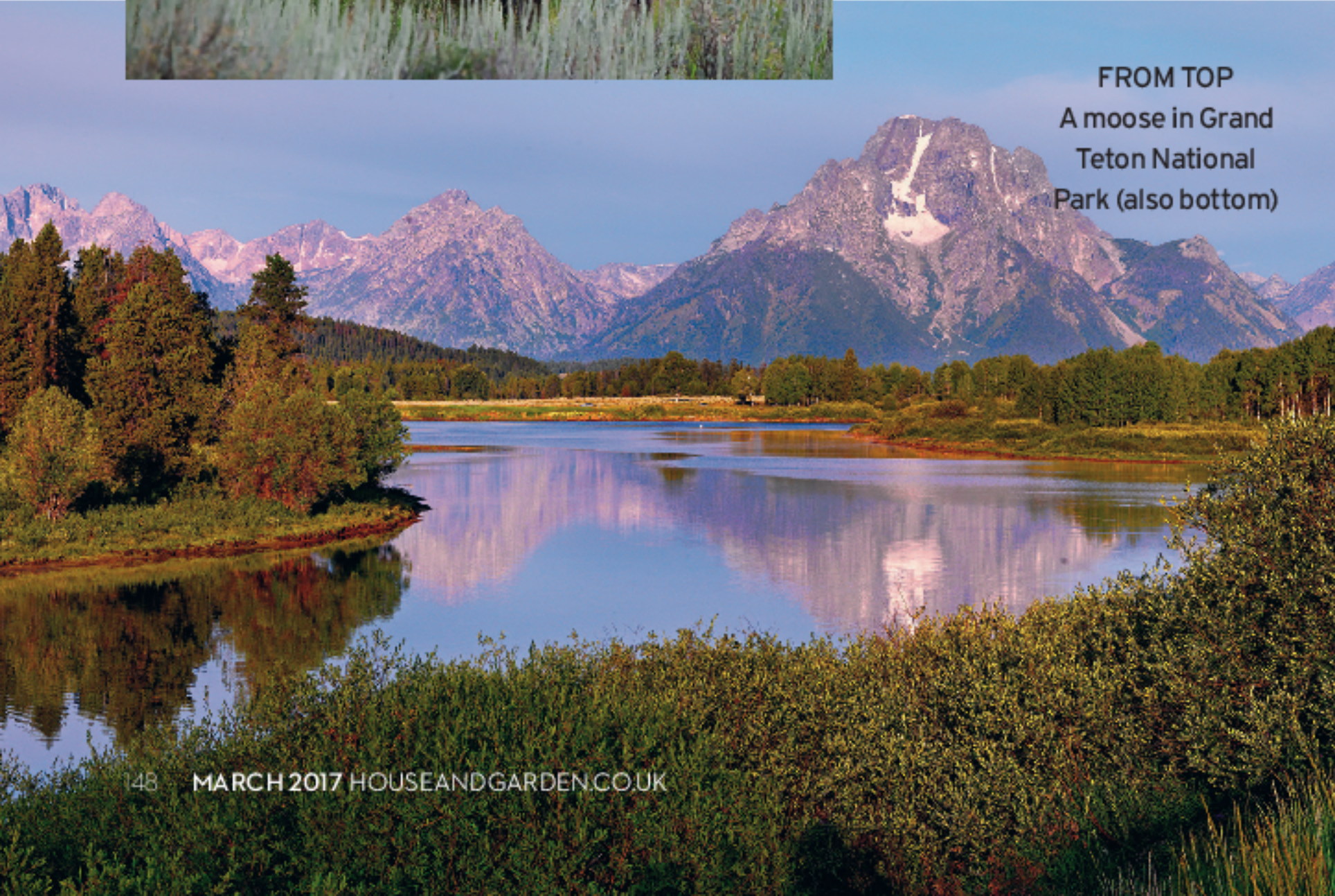
GUEST RANCH

Goosewing Ranch

This family-orientated, riding ranch has a pool and utility vehicles for each cabin, and activities including target shooting and fly-fishing. This year, it is introducing a glamping option. goosewingranch.com



FROM TOP
A moose in Grand
Teton National
Park (also bottom)



ways and means

Stephanie Drax travelled as a guest of Hertz (hertz.co.uk) and Western & Oriental (020-3588 6130; westernoriental.com). W&O offers all-inclusive seven-night trips from £6,255 per person at Brush Creek Ranch, £2,989 per person at Focus Ranch and £3,325 per person at Goosewing Ranch, all including flights and transfers. Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris offers tours that decode the geology, history and ecology of Wyoming's national parks (from \$145 per person; jacksonholewildlifesafaris.com). Stay in an elegantly appointed tent or tipi right on the edge of Yellowstone with Under Canvas (from \$194 per night, per tent for two; undercanvas.com) □