

# GOODBYE, SLOPES HELLO, STABLES

For ski-resort fun  
without the crowds, pony  
up to a winter respite  
at a working ranch



BY MATT ALDERTON

Like tomatoes and sweet corn, cattle ranching ripens in summer, when cowboys and cowgirls spend long, hot days galloping between pastures on horseback counting and herding cows before shipping them to market. But ranchers' work doesn't cease come winter — least of all in the Rocky Mountains, where extreme weather demands constant vigilance from the ranch hands who care for land and livestock.

Nikki Morrow is one of those ranch hands. As stables manager at Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa in Tabernash, Colo., she oversees the year-round equestrian program on a 6,500-acre working ranch, whose occupants include approximately 250 head of wagyu cattle.

"Our work doesn't stop just because it's cold, windy or snowing. In fact, we go twice as hard in the wintertime as we do in the summertime," says Morrow, who spends colder months feeding hungry animals bale upon bale of hay. "Our horses don't care if it's 30 or 40 degrees below zero; they're waiting for their food."

When they're not feeding livestock, ranch hands in the winter >



C LAZY U RANCH

C Lazy U Ranch

typically are removing snow, repairing fences or conducting health checks.

And on some properties, winter is calving season. “Our calving season starts in January,” says Jennifer O’Donohue, brand and communications director at Triple Creek Ranch in Darby, Mont. “We have about 250 cows that will usually drop about 200 or so calves. Taking care of those cows and calves is a full-time job.”

Although ranchers don’t get winters off, their burden is travelers’ benefit, as these lands serve as superb backdrops for seasonal getaways — now, more than ever. With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging, traditional winter retreats like ski resorts might not sound as appealing as they once did.

“Ranches are very well positioned for people who want to escape large mountain towns and crowded ski resorts where you have really big hotels and a lot of commingling,” explains Brady Johnson, director of sales and marketing at C Lazy U Ranch in Granby, Colo. He says ranches are ideal for social distancing because they’re typically small, remote, self-contained and designed around outdoor activities in wide-open spaces. Plus, many guest ranches have made operational changes — reducing capacity limits, for example, and offering private instead of group activities — to mitigate coronavirus risks even further.

“Even without COVID, a lot of people just don’t want to deal anymore with the hustle and bustle of ski resorts,” Johnson continues. “Ranches are easy. You don’t have to make reservations and book activities and rent a bunch of gear. You just show up.”

What you find when you show up might surprise you. Instead of manure and manual labor, modern-day guest ranches offer unique experiences that marry personal service and opulent amenities with rustic recreation and authentic agrarianism. In wintertime, especially, the result is a vacation that feels familiar enough to be comfortable but novel enough to be exciting. Case in point: The following guest ranches, each of which will have you dreaming of stables this winter instead of ski lodges:



Snowboarding

## BLUE SKY RANCH

WANSHIP, UTAH

Before it was home to an elite luxury resort — **The Lodge at Blue Sky, Auberge Resorts Collection** — **Blue Sky Ranch** was the site of a working cattle ranch and a horse rescue foundation, Saving Gracie’s Equine Healing Foundation. Now, all three coexist on 3,500 acres outside of Salt Lake City.

For downhill skiers, the property has its own ski lounge at the base of nearby **Park City Mountain Resort**, which affords Blue Sky guests the chance to carve Park City powder while foregoing Park City crowds. And yet, guests needn’t leave the ranch at all thanks to onsite activities like snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, sporting clays, fly-fishing, snowmobiling and dogsledding. There’s even heli-skiing, where a helicopter transports guests to private ski zones in the **Uinta** and **Wasatch** mountain ranges, or natural horsemanship lessons in the style of legendary “horse whisperer” Buck Brannaman.

“People naturally go into a more inward, introspective state during the winter season,” explains Henry Hudson, Blue Sky Ranch general manager. “Being outdoors in the elements, working with animals and exploring the peace of our land is a very powerful conduit for putting one back in touch with oneself.”

[aubergeresorts.com/bluesky](http://aubergeresorts.com/bluesky)

## BRUSH CREEK RANCH

SARATOGA, WYO.

Wyoming is quintessentially Western, and all-inclusive **Brush Creek Ranch** is quintessentially Wyoming. Homesteaded since 1884, it encompasses 30,000 acres across three separate properties: **The Lodge & Spa at Brush Creek**, which occupies the original 6,600-acre ranch; **Magee Homestead**, which offers private group buyouts; and **French Creek Sportsmen's Club** for hunting and fishing.

In winter, activities include not only outdoor staples like cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, ice skating, ice hockey and ice fishing, but also indoor options like shooting at the ranch's state-of-the-art gun club; culinary classes at **The Farm**, an epicurean Eden that has its own greenhouse, creamery, brewery, distillery and wine cellar; and horseback riding at its 28,000-square-foot riding arena.

If you ask chief operating officer Mike Williams, however, the ranch's most exciting winter amenity is **Green Mountain**. Located 20 minutes away, the private ski mountain opened in 2019 and hosts just 12 skiers a day, who are transported to the mountain's summit via snowcat.

"Until last year, you could do everything here but ski," Williams says. "Now, there's really nothing you can't do here."

[brushcreekranch.com](http://brushcreekranch.com)



Fly-fishing



Ice skating

## C LAZY U RANCH

GRANBY, COLO.

Located 86 miles northwest of Denver is the family-oriented **C Lazy U Ranch**, an all-inclusive property that dates back to 1919.

"I would compare it to an African safari," Johnson says. "You're paying one price to have an awesome experience that you'll never forget, doing things that are unique to the area that you can only do by going to a property like ours."

Chief among those activities in winter is horseback riding through what Johnson calls a "winter wonderland." There's also ice skating on a frozen pond, tubing on a natural hillside and snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling on a vast network of groomed trails that traverse the ranch's 8,500 acres.

"There are a lot of nice ranches out there, but when you come to ours, you realize that someone actually chose to homestead this land 100 years ago," Johnson continues. "It's truly authentic."

[clazyu.com](http://clazyu.com)

## DEVIL'S THUMB RANCH RESORT & SPA

TABERNASH, COLO.

Boasting solar power, geothermal heating, electric vehicle charging stations, water-efficient plumbing and 80 beehives to cultivate homegrown honey, **Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa** specializes in conscientious cowboying.

Here, protecting nature necessitates communing with it. In summer, that means fly-fishing, zip lining, mountain biking, archery and hatchet throwing. In winter it means cross-country skiing, fat biking, snowshoeing, ice skating on the property's seasonal ice rink and swimming — even when it's snowing — in its heated outdoor swimming pool. Downhill skiing is available just 10 minutes away at Winter Park Resort, and horseback riding is a year-round endeavor.

If you're not comfortable riding in the snow, you can still enjoy an equine

experience courtesy of the property's signature sleigh rides, during which guests learn about horses by feeding them. "We take 700 pounds of hay with us. The guests get to help us kick it off the sleigh, and then the horses come over and introduce themselves," Morrow says. "It's not your traditional sleigh ride. It really showcases the ranch lifestyle."

[devilsthumbbranch.com](http://devilsthumbbranch.com)



Fat biking



Dogsledding

## THE RESORT AT PAWS UP GREENOUGH, MONT.

**T**he Resort at Paws Up claims to have coined the term “glamping” and is best known for its private camps with over-the-top tent accommodations. Those come down in winter, but guests still interface with nature by cross-country skiing, tubing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling, as well as curling, dogsledding and electric fat biking. There also are horse-drawn sleigh rides, and even skijoring — a winter take on water skiing where skiers are pulled by a horse or dogs.

What aspiring cowboys and cowgirls enjoy most, however, is the resort’s 29,000-square-foot indoor arena, where there are equestrian classes for kids, horse whispering workshops, horsemanship lessons and

rodeo sports like cow croquet and team penning. In the former, teams compete on horseback to steer cattle through gates as if hitting croquet balls through metal hoops in the backyard. In the latter, participants must “cut out” three randomly chosen cattle from a herd of 15, corralling them as quickly as possible from one side of the arena to the other.

“Of course, we also do outdoor trail rides,” says Jackie Kecskes, equestrian manager. “One of my favorite things is riding through the trees when a breeze comes through, blowing big puffs of snow off the branches. It looks like glitter floating through the air as you’re riding. It’s magical.”

[pawsup.com](http://pawsup.com)

## TRIPLE CREEK RANCH DARBY, MONT.

**A**n all-inclusive, adults-only guest ranch that’s surrounded by 4 million acres of national forest, **Triple Creek Ranch** encompasses 28,000 acres across three noncontiguous parcels, the largest of which is home to the 26,000-acre **CB Ranch**, Triple Creek’s working cattle operation.

In winter, however, most of the action takes place on the other two parcels: the main ranch, where there is year-round horseback riding, and nearby **Lavene Creek**, where there’s a 15-mile looped trail system for guided snowshoe hiking, snowshoe running, fat biking, cross-country skiing and skate skiing, which combines cross-country skiing with inline skating.

For downhill skiing, staff whisk guests 30 minutes north to **Lost Trail Powder Mountain**, a family-owned ski hill that’s perched atop the Continental Divide.

“It’s not a flashy, Aspen-type experience; it’s where the locals ski, and it very much feels that way,” O’Donohue says. “It’s old and rustic, but the skiing is fabulous, and you never have to wait in line for a lift.”

[triplecreekranch.com](http://triplecreekranch.com)



Snowshoe hiking

RESORT AT PAWS UP RANCH; TRIPLE CREEK RANCH