

Guest Ranch Extravaganza: Colorado's Latigo  
by Jonathan Wiesel, Nordic Group International

Cross country skiing is the ideal sport for Stoics and Spartans, right? - redolent of hair shirts or sweat-soaked lycra, freeze dried foods or carbo loading, icicles dripping from a racer's beard..

In my experience, the guest ranch experience is anything but austere or masochistic. It appeals more to the "pleasure is the highest good" instinct than a "pain is gain" doctrine. It's cross country's highest form of hedonism, whether one thinks of accommodations, cuisine, or staff skills. "Hospitality" simply damns with too little praise.



Some guest ranches are already synonymous with service among skiers. Latigo Ranch in Colorado is a relative newcomer and rates as one of winter's undiscovered gems.

Latigo is family owned and run. Your hosts are Jim and Kathie Yost, and Lisa and Randy George. They're Renaissance Men and Women - the folks who take your reservations, greet you at the door, help shovel your car out of a fresh powder storm, check your cabin's firewood supply, groom your trails, and steer you towards photo opportunities. They're also chefs, instructors, guides, counselors and raconteurs, all carried off with energy and grace. I've often wondered if they secretly have clones.

Now for the spectacular facts. Latigo lies 9,000' high in the Gore Mountain Range, about 1.5 hours from Steamboat Springs and 3 hours by car from Denver near the town of Kremmling. Almost straddling the Continental Divide, one can see two National Forests as well as the Indian Peaks Wilderness and Rabbit Ears Range - easily 75 miles of mountain and valley snowscape on a clear day.

The winter season typically runs mid-December through early April, closing more because people ignore the wonders of spring skiing than lack of snow. Jim Yost track-sets 60 kms. of trail.

Most of the skiing near the Ranch buildings is short and easy loops, letting guests acclimate the first day. A favorite trip heads down Waterfall Run, with magnificent views of valley and mountain to the East. The waterfall is normally frozen over from early January.

There are a series of longer loops and tours intriguing for natural beauty (ski Jumper Flats!), skiing quality, and wildlife viewing (elk, deer, coyote, snowshoe rabbits, Boreal Owl, ermine, blue grouse, fox...). Longer trips tend to incorporate more difficult terrain, so the Ranch can pack you a lunch.

A winter vacation should be fun, so the Ranch expands recreation beyond "do it yourself" jaunts on the tracks. Your hosts will take you on scenic tours, wildlife viewing, or powder hunting. Kids have a tubing chute. And there's an indoor hot tub to rest weary bones at day's end.

Accommodations are more than pleasant. Winter capacity is about 25 people, far less than in summer. Duplex cabins are tight, comfortable (your own woodburning stove), and tucked into clusters of trees just above the Lodge. There may be a few snowmobilers along with the skiers, but the two groups seem to mix nicely.

The Ranch has snowshoes and skis for rent.

Latigo does create a culinary quandary, or what I call "the caloric vicious circle." Food is great and plentiful, but you work it off each day skiing, which stimulates hunger pangs anew . . . Vacations end, but I've found ski-accelerated appetites go on and on.

A final note: explore any opportunity to sit down and talk with the Georges and Yosts. Like so many guest ranch owners, they have chosen to leave diverse professional backgrounds for a challenging way of life. Guests themselves are often intriguing, including a sprinkling of Europeans.