

Travel and Adventure: A step back in time, like historic cowgirls

by Priscilla Lister

There aren't many places that escape the march of time over 75 years. But my friends and I found one that offers a retreat in both time and space that nurtures one's sense of priorities, feeds fond friendships, and steps lightly in a place of age-old natural beauty.

It's called Cimarroncita, a 2,600-acre rustic property in northern New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Way back in 1931, Minnette Thompson, who hailed from Houston, opened a summer camp for girls in this remote place of gorgeous wilderness. Her camp pamphlet from 1932 quotes Dr. Luther Gulick asserting, "There is hardly anything more important to establish in a girl than those habits of action and thought, those desires and those social relations that make her vigorous, able to work hard and joyously, that give her quiet nerves, sound sleep, regular habits and the joy of strong winds, cold water, long roads, brown earth, open fires and friends on the hike ... the joy of living."

Five girlfriends far past puberty found little has changed at Cimarroncita. Though the camp closed in 1995 - after more than 60 years in operation - it reopened in 2005 as a retreat for adults, thanks to Minnette Burges, Thompson's grandniece. We went for a cowgirl weekend.

We rode horses every day into the magnificent hills covered in Ponderosa pine, pinon, scrub oak, cedar and Douglas fir. We took in the vistas that the 7,300-foot-high elevation afforded across the Ute Creek Valley through which the Cimarron River runs. We saw little sign of civilization anywhere, since the property adjoins the Boy Scouts of America's 300,000-acre Philmont parcel and the Cimarron Canyon Wildlife Area, a protected state preserve.

We gathered each evening in Frijoles, a dining hall that dates back to 1908 when the short-lived St. Louis Rocky Mountain & Pacific Railroad built a destination resort for its (dashed) dream of tracking to Los Angeles. Wining and dining, we'd recount the thrills of the day and plan for the next.

We bunked in Laguna, another 1908 building that offers 10 single rooms, double rooms and bunk rooms with four shared bathrooms on the ends. The rooms are pretty much the way they have been for decades - simple accommodations with porcelain sinks in each room, updated with plush bed linens and cozy down comforters.

VIEW OF THE VALLEY - Cimarroncita covers 2,600 acres in northern New Mexico's glorious Ute Creek Valley. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. HITTING THE TRAIL - The skies of New Mexico are legendary, and gorgeous from horseback. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. GETTING AROUND - Draft horses and a buggy ride are a great way to enjoy happy hour down by the river. The service is provided by Nancy Burch's Roadrunner Tours in Angel Fire, N.M. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. GATHERING SPOT - The living room in Frijoles where we'd gather for wine each evening. CNS Photo by Priscilla Lister. The bathroom at my end of the building didn't have any hot water during my stay, but that was no problem since my friend at the other end generously shared her shower.

Such Spartan surroundings increased our sense that history was still very much alive at Cimarroncita. We felt a little more like campers than hotel guests, and that seemed to suit the experience.

While the campers of yesteryear would have spread out into the additional eight log-cabin bunk houses built in the 1930s - all of which Burges plans to renovate - and would have availed themselves of swimming competitions in the pool, theater and dance events in the giant ballroom, crafts and hiking and horseback riding, we were there to ride.

Nancy Burch, who operates Roadrunner Tours in nearby Angel Fire, N.M., was our lead cowgirl who brought her horses as well as her nurturing, skilled presence and ended up making proud cowgirls of each of us. Patti, Judy and I had ridden before, but Verna and Pat were relative novices. Pat didn't really want to get on that saddle at all, but after talking with Nancy, she found the confidence and trust she needed.

"If Nancy hadn't been our leader, I wouldn't have gone," Pat noted. She went for two long rides over two days, a significant accomplishment we all toasted each night.

One evening, Nancy brought two of her magnificent draft horses and a classic buggy to take us down to the river for a fireside cookout.

Burges and her husband, Alan Huerta, joined us to talk about what was and what will be at Cimarroncita. Burges was herself a Cimarroncita camper and counselor during her youth. Now an attorney in Tucson, Ariz., she took over her great aunt's legacy in 1999 and with Huerta, a Latin American history professor, begins its reinvention.

"This place was a passion for my aunt, who had asked me to keep it alive," said Burges. "It's now a passion for me."

Its summer 2007 programs include Cowgirl Weekend, Relationship Radiance Retreat, Traveling with Your Pen, Dream Water Fishing Camp, Spiritual Wellness and Photography as Spiritual Practice. The camp is also available for private retreats that groups can design for themselves.

We returned to the real world by spending a night in Taos, which is about a two-hour drive south from Cimarroncita, on the road called The Highway of the Immortals.

"In all America, there is no more amazing ride than that trip from Cimarron in New Mexico up the canyon of that name over the divide and into Taos," said National Geographic in 1932. Once again, that hasn't changed much.

Taos is one of the truly special towns in that Land of Enchantment. With its classic town square surrounded by shops, its remarkable collection of art galleries and museums that bespeak its long history of inspiring artists, and its distinctive fiery cuisine, Taos is one of my favorite destinations.

We packed a lot into our day there: A visit to the Taos Art Museum and Fechin Home; lunch in the magnificent resort El Monte Sagrado; a tour of the wonderful Harwood (Art) Museum of the University of New Mexico; and dinner at Sabroso, an excellent destination restaurant on the old State Highway 150.

We split ourselves into two different B&Bs, both of which were marvelous for their accommodations and their owners who double as fantastic breakfast chefs. Patti, Verna and I stayed at the American Artists Gallery House Bed and Breakfast, where LeAn and Charles give a very warm welcome; Judy and Pat stayed at the colorful Inn on the Rio with innkeeper Jules Cahalane, a local wonder woman.

There truly aren't many places more inviting than northern New Mexico.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: We flew into the Albuquerque airport and had arranged Twin Hearts Shuttle Service (800-654-9456; 505-751-1201) to Cimarroncita (about a 4-1/2-hour drive), as well as shuttle service from Cimarroncita back to Taos, then back to the Albuquerque airport. You can also take the train to Raton, N.M., and arrange transportation from there. Another option with shorter drives is to fly into Alamosa, Colo., from Denver and rent a car.

Staying there: A three-day Cowgirl Weekend at Cimarroncita in 2007, including all horseback riding activities, accommodations and three meals each day, will cost \$1,500 for a shared room, \$1,650 for a private room. For more information on all programs, check its Web site, www.cimarroncita.com, or call 866-376-2482.

For Taos accommodations: American Artists Gallery House Bed & Breakfast, 132 Frontier Lane, Taos, N.M. 87571; 800-432-2041; www.taosbedandbreakfast.com.

Inn on the Rio, 910 Kit Carson Rd., Taos, N.M. 87571; 800-859-6752; www.innontherio.com.

Priscilla Lister is a freelance travel writer.

Â© Copley News Service

Travel and Adventure: A step back in time, like historic cowgirls by Priscilla Lister