

Take a Ride

*Try your hand at horseback riding.
No experience necessary.*

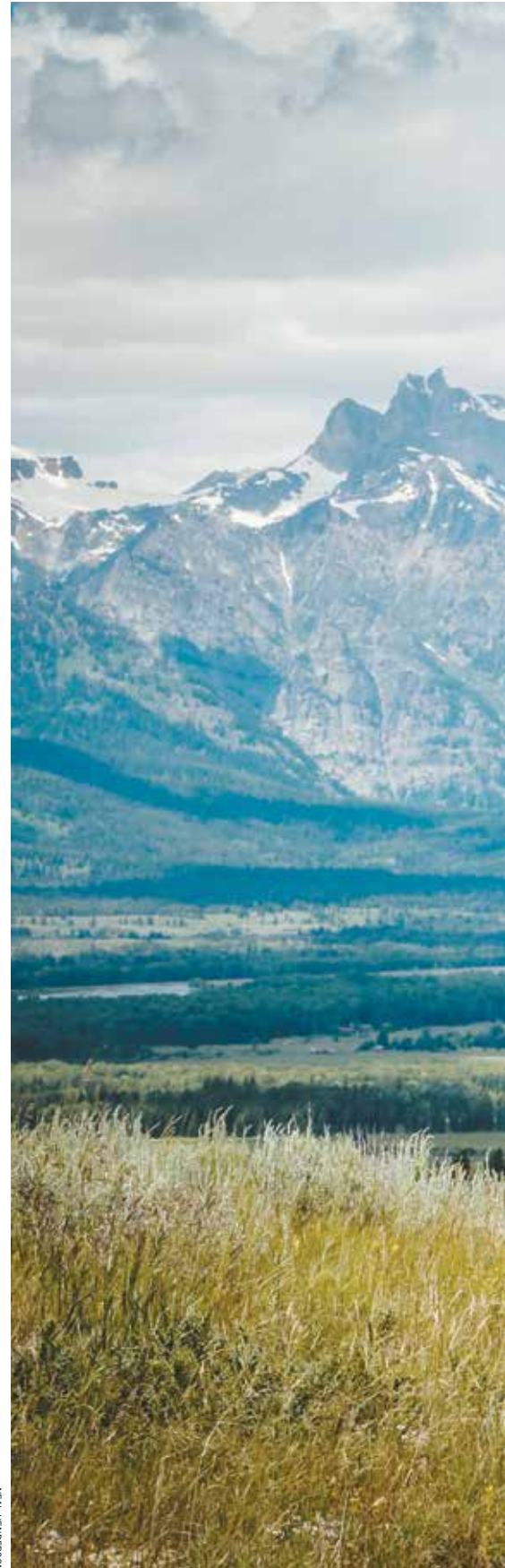
BY LILA EDYTHE

MANY OF THE first tourists to Jackson Hole came to play at being dudes. They stayed in log cabins at cattle ranches and rode horses daily. There are still dude ranches in the valley, but because there are now so many other things to do here, like paragliding, hiking, touring Yellowstone National Park, mountain biking, and floating a scenic stretch of the Snake River (just to name a few options), we recommend you don't spend your entire time here sitting in a saddle. (Your inner thighs and butt second this recommendation.) But you should hop onto the back of a horse for at least part of one day. No experience is required. Outfitters offer rides of varying length—including ones as short as one hour—and with different views of the mountains that ring Jackson Hole.

JACKSON LAKE LODGE

You've likely seen Oxbow Bend, a curve in the Snake River where it almost bends back on itself and, on still, clear days, reflects the hulking Mount Moran on the opposite shore of Jackson Lake. After the Moulton Barn on Mormon Row, Oxbow Bend might be the most photographed place in Grand Teton National Park. A horseback ride from the Jackson Lake Lodge stables brings you to a butte a couple of hundred feet above Oxbow Bend and a unique view of it.

As fun as it is to see something familiar in a new way, the highlight of this ride is the deep well of Jackson Hole trivia that wrangler Rusty shares. As we ride past Christian Pond and begin the gentle climb up to the overlook, we learn that sage grouse and pronghorn are the only animals that can eat sagebrush, and that it provides all the water the former needs. Also that early cowboys used the wide leaves of arrowleaf balsamroot as toilet paper. And rubbed themselves with sagebrush to minimize their body odor. Emma Matilda Lake, which is nearby, but just out of view, is named for the wife of William O. Owen, who climbed the Grand Teton in 1898. Rusty shares that in the spring a family of Trumpeter swans with three cygnets nested on Christian Pond, but that, perhaps in search of more privacy, early in the summer the family relocated to Emma



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Some rides from Jackson Lake Lodge climb up a butte overlooking the Snake River.

Matilda Lake. Just as the ride is about to end and we pass under a bridge that's part of the road to Yellowstone, Rusty shares a final bit of trivia about the bridge, which has higher guardrails on one side (its west side) than the other. "Lady Bird Johnson was out here on vacation and found that the rail interfered with the views of Christian Pond. They cut off the top rung the same day she complained." (Editor's note: We're unable to fact-check this tale, but this bridge's guardrail is lower on its east side than the west.)

Back at the stables with several dozen images of Oxbow Bend, Jackson Lake, and Mount Moran on my camera and new snippets of Jackson Hole trivia to share, Rusty gives our group one last thing: slices of red apples to feed the horses.

TETON VILLAGE

On horseback, Teton Village's summer crowds are easy to escape. Within 10 minutes of mounting our horses in Teton Village Trail Rides' corral near the base area of Jackson Hole Mountain

Resort, my group of six has followed our wrangler, Kiera, through the Snake River Ranch and into Grand Teton National Park. We can't see the main peaks of the Tetons—this is difficult to do when you're in thick forest at the range's feet—but there is a mother deer and fawn that seem to be following us. Kiera also warns: "There's been a couple of black bears around here for the last week."

As we climb a couple of hundred feet up switchbacks, which I can't help but notice that Abby, the blue roan I'm on, negotiates much easier herself than I do when hiking, the doe and fawn climb with us, staying just far enough away to not spook the horses. I've run and hiked plenty of times in this small section of Grand Teton National Park between Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and Granite Canyon; on horseback I notice that the network of trails is much denser here than I had previously realized ... and that I'm not sure I could get myself back to the corral on my own. Civilization, including my favorite Thai restaurant in the valley, is nearby, but



DINA WISHEV

feels miles away. I like the feeling of being lost in the woods with Abby beneath me.

I tense when I see a downed tree on the trail in front of us. It looks tall to me—if hiking, I couldn't step over it and would certainly have to sit down on it and swing my legs around. If Abby senses my nerves she keeps it to herself. When we're steps away from the tree, I still can't guess if it's an obstacle Abby can step over or if I need to prepare myself for a little jump. To make the ride a little more


exciting, I hope for the latter. But no. Abby is well trained and steps over it like I would step over a curb.

As the ride nears its end, I feel like I finally recognize where we are—in a flat meadow with views of the Sleeping Indian in the distance. (While you can't see the major Teton peaks on this ride, you can see some of the taller peaks in the Gros Ventre Mountains, on the valley's eastern side.) I snap some photos and then we're back in Teton Village, where I happily join the hustle and bustle by having lunch at Teton Thai, followed by a sweet treat at Southcable Café. The perfect end to a ride.

SPRING CREEK RANCH

Almost immediately upon leaving the stables at Spring Creek Ranch, on East Gros Ventre Butte, we begin climbing. And climbing and climbing. My impression had been that Spring Creek Ranch, a luxury resort popular with visitors and for weddings, was near the top of the butte just to the west of downtown Jackson. Except wrangler Randy, a woman, leads our group up at least 500 additional vertical feet from the stables, which are directly across the street from reception. When we do finally reach the top, I don't immediately realize it; views I don't expect distract me.

Spring Creek has some of the best Teton views of anywhere in the valley. Locals, including myself, have long flocked to its restaurant and bar, The Granary, for spectacular sunset views. Sitting in a saddle on the back of George, who is part quarter horse and part draft horse and 100 percent female—"we get kind of funny with the names sometimes," Randy says—I can see the entire length of the Teton range, from Glory Bowl in the south all the way north to and beyond Mount Moran. But then I can also see Snow King, the Town of Jackson, Jackson Peak, the Sleeping Indian, and because it's a clear day, in the far, far distance, the Wind River Mountains, the tallest and most glacier-filled range in the state. The Winds are about 70 miles away as the crow flies.

Spring Creek itself offers jaw-dropping 180-degree views. From the true summit of the butte the resort is on, which is only accessible via a horse, there are 360-degree views. I feel like I'm on a pedestal stuck in the middle of the valley's floor. If that pedestal was warm and hairy, and liked being rubbed behind the ears. 

NUTS & BOLTS



Spring Creek Ranch Stables, 1800 N. Spirit Dance Rd., Jackson, 307/732-8140, springcreekranch.com; one-hour rides (\$49) depart seven times daily and two-hour rides (\$69) twice daily through October 15. **Teton Village Trail Rides**, 7795 Granite Loop Rd., Teton Village, 307/733-2674, tetonvillagetrailrides.com; one-hour rides (\$45) depart on the hour between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., two-hour rides (\$65) on every even hour between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., four-hour rides (\$100) at 8:15 a.m. and 1 p.m. daily through mid-October. **Grand Teton Lodge Company Jackson Lake Lodge**, 101 Jackson Lake Lodge Rd., Moran, 307/543-3100, gtlc.com/activities/horseback-riding; one-hour rides (\$48) depart at 1:45 and 2:15 p.m., two-hour rides (\$78) at 9 and 9:30 a.m. daily through late September.



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