

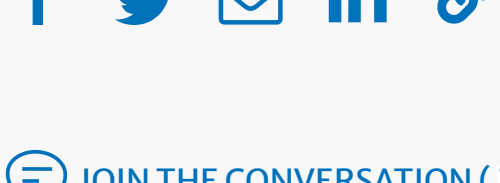


TRAVEL

# In the ranches of B.C.'s Cariboo Chilcotin, I gained a deeper understanding of the connection between human and horses

With more than a dozen guest ranches, the region offers many opportunities to get back in the saddle.

By **Claudia Laroye** Special to the Star  
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At Historic Hat Creek Ranch, about an hour west of Kamloops, B.C., guide Reni Lind wears the snappy garb of a 19th-century saloon keeper as he tells tales of the Cariboo Wagon Road, and the American Gold Rush miners who flooded this region in the 1850s.

“More than 700 kilometres of road were built over three years [between 1862 and 1865], from Fort Yale to Quesnel and Barkerville,” says Lind. Once a crucial route to the Fraser River’s precious metal, the gravel road still runs through the ranch, where the well-preserved Hat Creek Roadhouse, built in 1861, once serviced miners and watered stagecoach horses en route north. Today, the ranch is a heritage site with costumed interpreters bringing the past to life.

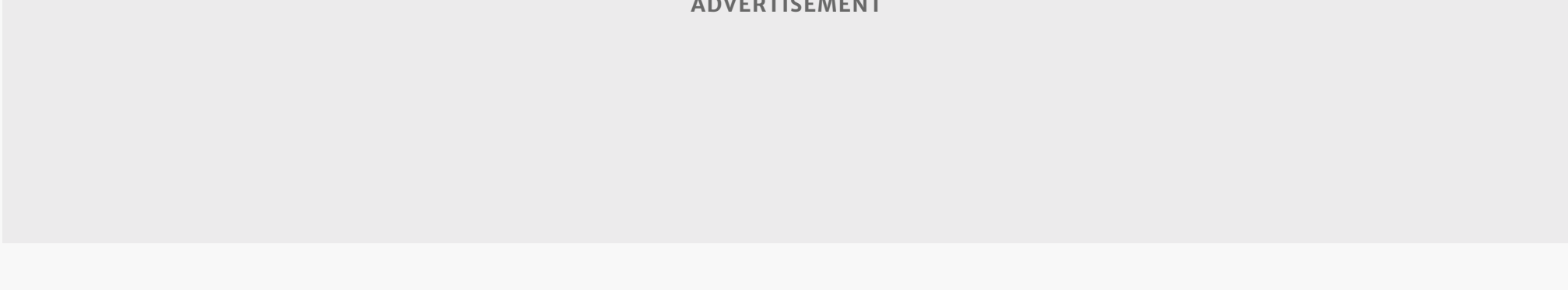
I can’t imagine riding a horse for 700 kilometres, but I’m in the Cariboo to dust off my skills in the saddle — though admittedly with a bit of cold feet. Getting acquainted with the region’s horse-centric history feels like an apt way to start my equestrian adventure.

I walk on the creaking floorboards and the roadhouse comes alive again with the scratchy melody of “Ev’rybody Calls Me Honey,” played on a restored 1909 Edison Amberola. I can almost hear the clink of glasses and shuffle of faro cards in the saloon.

Once integral to supporting the transportation of people and goods along the Cariboo Wagon Road during B.C.’s Gold Rush, the region’s ranches are now devoted to recounting histories, connecting people to the land and its animal inhabitants, and also highlighting Indigenous experiences.

From Hat Creek, a 75-minute drive north brings me to Big Bar Guest Ranch, where I’m greeted by the sight of horses quietly grazing on rolling pastureland fenced with rough-hewn wood beams.

Big Bar was purchased by the Stswecem’c Xgat’tem First Nation in 2020, and along with mountain biking and horseback riding, they also offer traditional Indigenous experiences like medicine walks.



Grasshoppers jump in the dry grass as I follow cook and guide Rae-Leigh Rosette to the ranch’s garden. “When you pick wild sage, you must have tobacco to give in offering,” says Rosette, explaining the fragrant plant’s significance in smudging ceremonies and cleansing rituals. She learned lessons on traditional medicine both from school and from living with her grandmother in Canoe Creek.

She points out wild mint, rose hips and juniper on our walk, but the search for sxusem (pronounced “hu-shum”) or soapberries is fruitless. Fortunately, Rosette has some of the tart berry juice in her kitchen, where she adds sugar and whips the liquid into a meringue-like pink froth, dishing out ramekins of Indian ice cream, a tasty finish to our tour.

Appetite sated, I’m off to the stables for horseback riding along the rolling hills of the ranch, where the fun begins. The deep connection between horses and humans is legendary, but the bond hasn’t come as naturally to me. My personal experience has tended toward more of a master-servant relationship — often I feel like the nervous underling, subject to the whims of a large, four-legged creature intent on eating grass whenever the mood strikes.

I quickly find that my chestnut-brown mare, Mimsy, is sweet but stubborn. She stops occasionally to nibble on weeds and likes to wander close to trees, treating me to a pine-needle exfoliation.

Fortunately, with more than a dozen guest ranches, B.C.’s Cariboo Chilcotin region offers many opportunities to get back in the saddle.

A short drive “down the road” (Chilcotin-speak for anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours away), I arrive at Echo Valley Ranch & Spa. Situated in an open grassland with stunning views of the Marble Range, the 160-acre, all-inclusive ranch offers an extensive menu of guest activities, including active adventures (hiking, biking, canyon excursions), spa treatments, and morning yoga in a building designed by Thai architect Pinyo Suwankiri.

The ranch’s operations manager, Mike Christensen, sports a salt-and-pepper beard under a well-worn brown cowboy hat. He’s been at Echo Valley for four years, arriving here from his chaps-and-boots “cowboy life” in Montana. He created Echo Valley’s popular Horse Harmony experience, which launched to the public in 2021.

“We want to have guests understand and appreciate that a horse is not just a ‘vessel for transport’ but a living, feeling being,” notes Christensen, describing the ranch’s horse-riding program, which is one of Destination Canada’s Canadian Signature Experiences (a curated collection of distinctive, only-in-Canada activities).

Horse Harmony offers guests the chance to gain a greater understanding of the human-horse connection. The program excels at calming nervous riders who may or may not have equestrian experience; it’s tailor-made for people like me.

The care and respect that I would offer to a friend or companion is what I learn to give to my horse, Bow. Named after nearby Mount Bowman, he’s tall and handsome, with a shiny black coat and white markings on his long face, which I scratch obligingly.

Before heading out onto the trails surrounding the ranch, Bow and I walk around the dusty corral, working on the trust exercises Christensen has shown us. We follow each other’s moves, bolstering my confidence in Bow and his in me.

This time to physically connect before riding is important, according to Christensen. “The intention is to establish trust and leadership, with the human respecting the horse, and the horse feeling comfortable and giving permission to having you on their back.”

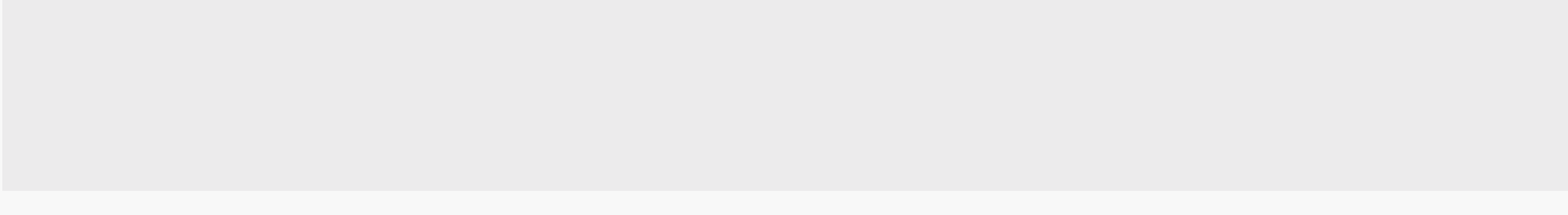
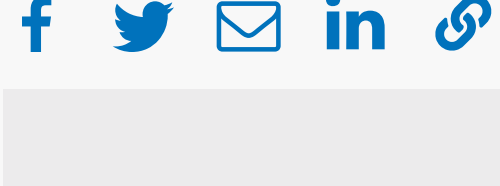
We leave the corral, meandering comfortably through a canopy of pine trees and alders whose leaves are just beginning to turn and drift to the forest floor. It’s a relaxed ride; fall is in the air, but the sun is still summery and fits my bright mood.

At the tour’s end, Bow and I share a moment. I stroke his warm neck, slightly damp from the ride, thanking and praising him for the safe journey and our time together. It’s as harmonious a time as I’ve ever spent on a horse.

Back in the stables, I brush Bow’s flank and feed him dried alfalfa treats. It seems this beautiful creature and I have finally found equal footing.

*Claudia Laroye travelled as a guest of Destination BC, which did not review or approve this article.*

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