



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER

SKI & SNOW

- Nov. 29: Canada offers prime powder
- Dec. 6: High-society skiing is going on all over North America
- Dec. 13: Millennial mountain must-haves



COLORADO

WINTER DUDES



On a winter trail ride, horses' hooves softly clomp into the packed snow over easy terrain at a slow pace, perfect for drinking in the scenery.

Colorado's Vista Verde Guest Ranch north of Steamboat Springs immerses guests amid scenic mountains, meadows and forest.

Vista Verde Guest Ranch near Steamboat Springs provides the ideal venue for a winter getaway

By DAN LEETH
Special Contributor

CLARK, Colo. — The grub is gone, the wine consumed, and the cowhand concert has concluded. It's time to hit the hay.

Clad in down parkas, my wife, Dianne, and I saunter from the ranch house to our log cabin. The night feels crisp, clear and calm. Dusk's thin, crescent moon has long since set. Only the faint glow of scattered porch lights sullies the encompassing darkness.

Overhead stretches a black velvet sky glittered with stars. Across its apex streams the wispy veil of the Milky Way. We pick out the constellations we know, which

aren't many. Living in the city, we seldom see such heavenly views. The undiluted skies near Steamboat Springs are truly a starry treat.

Colorado's cowtown turned ski resort has long been one of our favorite winter destinations, but this year we're trying something different. We're going to spend a long weekend duding it up at Vista Verde Guest Ranch. Located near Clark, 19 miles north of Steamboat Springs, Vista Verde occupies a Colorado cliché setting of mountains, meadows and forest.

"It's quiet enough out here to hear yourself think," says ranch manager Ben Martin.

With lodge rooms and private hot-tub-equipped cabins available, the all-inclusive ranch can handle up to 48 summertime

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SOUTH AFRICA

Durban hotel is cat's meow in more ways than one

Guests enjoy the sumptuous views, curry bar and a resident celebrity

By SHANNON MELNYK
Special Contributor

DURBAN, South Africa — As Durban climbs the ranks as one of 2015's must-see cities, one of its historical hot spots is enjoying a renaissance since its heyday in the 1950s.

The Oyster Box, a luxury boutique hotel bought and renovated by the Tollman family of the U.K.-based Red Carnation Hotels, has been given the full "Tollman treatment."

It has received a personal approach that combines eclec-

tic chic and extravagance with effortless flair for making guests feel at home.

Originally from South Africa, the Tollmans had a special history with the Oyster Box prior to acquiring the hotel: It was the setting of their blooming romance decades ago.

Each individually appointed suite designed by Bea Tollman includes sweeping views of the Indian Ocean and the hotel's beachfront red and white lighthouse.

Her attention extends to every charming colonial detail that whispers of a bygone era, all with modern luxury amenities, a world-class spa and restaurants.

Tollman is known to call the staff every day and invite everyone from management to housekeepers to her head-

quarters in London. She painstakingly shopped the world to furnish the Oyster Box or refurbish priceless tilework from the original property. Three imposing chandelier fans in the Palm Court were snagged on auction from the old Savoy Hotel in London.

The quirky, colorful pieces in the Grill Room's fine dining restaurant were painted by a local hairdresser. There's an extensive, engaging private collection of South African artwork throughout the property. From the vintage revolving-door entrance, hand-painted wall tiles and bold black and white terrazzo tiles, it's the promise of not a stay, but an experience.

That experience extends to signature drinks enjoyed in the

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Skabenga, the resident cat at the Oyster Box hotel in Durban, South Africa, prefers to sit in the middle of the red carpet during special events.



Put your feet up and relax in a cabin at the end of a busy day exploring in the snow.



In the Vista Verde Guest Ranch lodge, guests swap stories before dinner.



Private hot-tub-equipped cabins are among the lodging options that make guests feel at home.

Make a getaway at Colorado dude ranch

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dudes and dudettes. The numbers drop over nonholiday winter weeks.

Options for the day

We meet a small handful of fellow guests at breakfast. Between flapjacks and omelets, a ranch hand checks to see what we want to do for the day.

While my wife opts to go exploring, I decide to engage in something I seldom have time for anymore. I'm going to spend a guilt-free morning wallowing in sloth. I brew a pot of in-room coffee, light a real wood fire in the fireplace and begin turning pages in a long-ignored novel.

Outside, close to 100 horses clomp around their winter pasture. At 11 a.m., I lay the book down and head out to help with their morning feeding.

Half the horses have lined up by the entry gate, eagerly awaiting the ranch's equine chuck wagon. A sleigh soon arrives covered with bales of hay, and into the pasture we ride.

As the sleigh circles the steeds, we dump their lunch onto the snow. I exit the cart

with enough residue clinging to my Levi's to turn me into a human hay-sicle. Fortunately, the horses aren't yet ready for dessert.

That afternoon, Dianne and I ride a pair of those happily fed critters. Hooves softly clomp into the packed snow. The pace is slow and the terrain easy, making this a perfect ride for a city slicker like myself.

We turn around near the 1936 Homestead Cabin, Vista Verde's oldest structure in which, we're told, lunch is served on Thursdays. The menu must include beans. The cabin outhouse bears a warning sign: "Danger. Explosives."

After an afternoon respite, Dianne and I saunter to the main lodge for happy half-hour. This daily event is held in the ranch's Great Room, a *Bonanza*-worthy setting with towering windows and a stone fireplace. Here we swap stories and experiences with fellow dudes.

Mingling completed, we traipse into the dining room. Breakfast choices range from simple continental to hot, plate-filling entrees.

Lunches feature a salad bar, sandwich board and a menu of plate-filling entrees. Dinners include an appetizer, dessert and, of course, a selection of plate-filling entrees.

Horses or snowshoes?

Our final day, Dianne signs up for a horsemanship session in the ranch's heated indoor arena.

Instead of horseshoes, I choose snowshoes and take a guided walk in the woods. Along the way, I learn that aspen bark contains salicin, a chemical relative of aspirin, which the Ute Indians employed as a pain cure. Native healers, no doubt, told their patients to take two aspen and send them a smoke signal in



Photos by Dan Leeth/Special Contributor

Options for activities during the day include cross-country skiing. You can choose to ski with a guide or go solo.

the morning.

After lunch, while my cow-girl-wannabe wife opts for a second session in the horse arena, I choose to see the ranch on cross-country skis. I'm offered a guide, but this afternoon, I elect to go solo.

Sounds of silence

I cross the horse path, pass the old Homestead Cabin and glide past willows and groves of naked aspen. Other than my breathing, the only sounds I hear are the zing of skis, the whisper of wind and the occasional yelp of a distant coyote.

By the time I get back to the cabin, grin lines score my face.

After dinner that night, Dianne and I stroll back to our cabin beneath another star-domed night. We quickly don bathrobes, fill wine glasses and step out to simmer away ski and saddle soreness in the cabin's outdoor hot tub. That's when I catch the first seldom-heard discouraging words out of my wife's mouth.

"They placed the hot tub on the covered porch," she moans. "They should have it out in the open. I can't see the stars!"

Dan Leeth is a freelance writer in Aurora, Colo.

When you go

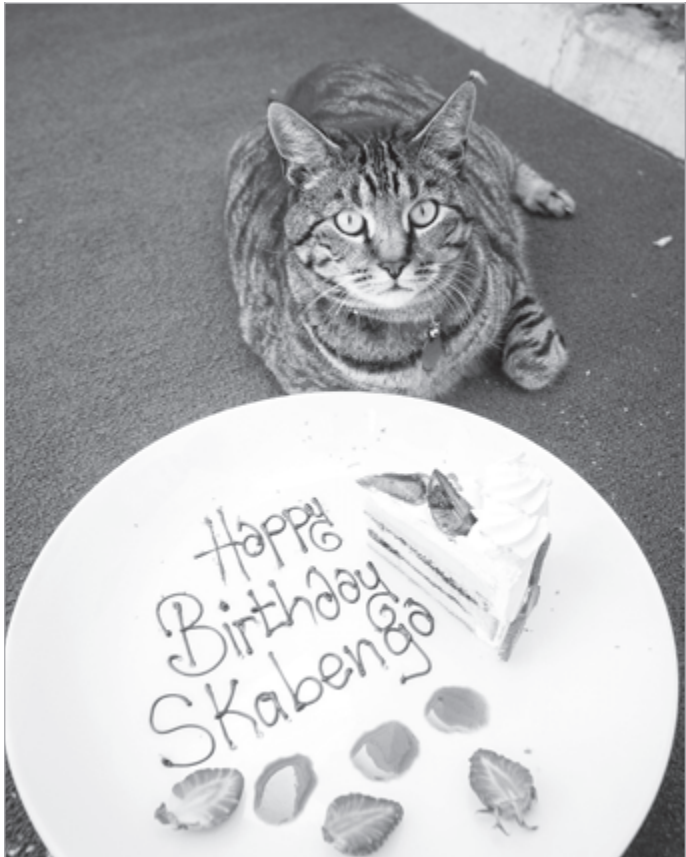
When to go: Vista Verde Guest Ranch welcomes winter guests Dec. 12-March 19. A weeklong stay from Saturday-Saturday required Dec. 19-Jan. 2. Minimum three-night stay required otherwise. The ranch is closed Jan. 2-5, and serves adults only Jan. 5-Feb. 11.

Rates: Winter rates start at \$1,295 per person for three-night, lodge-room stays. Seven-night holiday rates start at \$3,795 per person for seven nights and \$3,075 per child (ages 6-12). Rates are all-inclusive, including house wine and beer. No tipping and no hidden resort charges.

Getting there: Vista Verde is about 5 miles east of Clark, Colo., a 19-mile drive north of Steamboat Springs. American Airlines offers nonstop service to Hayden, Colo., about two hours away. Numerous airlines offer service to Denver, a 205-mile drive away.

Contact: Vista Verde Guest Ranch (1-800-526-7433, vistaverde.com). Contact the Colorado Dude and Guest Ranch Association (1-866-942-3472, coloradoranch.com) to learn more about other Colorado ranches open in winter.

Durban hotel offers luxury amenities fit for celebrity guests



Skabenga, the resident cat at the Oyster Box, gets the royal treatment from guests and staff.

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glass-bottomed Oyster Bar, such as the Umhlanga Schling, local cane muddled with pineapple mint and mango. But what is famously synonymous with the allure of the Oyster Box is the legendary Curry Bar.

Durban has the largest Indian population in the world outside of India and draws Indian food fans from all over the world, including royal guests Prince Harry and Prince William.

The entire Manchester United soccer team has stayed here, as have South Africa native Charlize Theron and Sean Penn. There's also been a Kardashian or two.

But guests don't flock to the Oyster Box on account of the international glitterati. The biggest celebrity is Skabenga the cat. Years ago, Skabenga, which is Zulu for hooligan, wandered in as a stray to harass patio guests for seafood scraps.



Durban, South Africa, is climbing the ranks as one of 2015's must-see cities. The Oyster Box hotel offers sweeping views of the Indian Ocean and the lighthouse.

These days, he pretty much owns the place; his haughty attitude has won him his own Facebook page (facebook.com/skabengaoysterbox). The hotel throws him a huge birthday party for an animal charity every year attended by hun-

dreds of people.

He famously declines to show. But Skabenga makes a splash at red-carpet events, where he sits in the middle of the carpet, refuses to move, and makes guests, in all their finery, step over him.

Management claims he has serious cattitude, but guests clamor to get a photo of the resident beast, who also shares the hotel with a family of monkeys.

Shannon Melnyk is a freelance writer in Canada.

When you go

Contact: Oyster Box Hotel, 2 Lighthouse Road, Umhlanga, 4320, South Africa. Suites from \$450 per night. Rates are seasonal. oysterboxhotel.com.

How to get there: South African Airways offers direct flights to Johannesburg from JFK International in New York or Washington Dulles International. Connecting routes to Durban from Johannesburg run daily. The Oyster Box is a 20-minute drive from King Shaka International Airport on the N2.