

So Far, Yet So Close

The Lakota S Ranch

by Erika D. Napoletano

I am a writer with a climbing problem. Rock, ice, mountains, hills, walls – no matter. If it's vertical and I can use a rope, I'm headed for higher ground.

Being a freelance writer has its advantages, like being able to take a random Thursday off for a "client meeting" (read: I'm climbing) or doing "research for an upcoming assignment" (read: yeah – climbing). On occasion, however, I really do have to go on assignment, buckle down, open up a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and get to work.

In desperate need of a vacation yet with an equally pressing need to hammer-out a children's book where I'm a ghostwriting gun-for-hire, I looked into heading back to Ouray, Colorado where I find solace several times a year. An avid ice climber, there's no real ice this time of year (June), but the country is beautiful. Needing a local resource to help me get out of dodge, I contacted a web design company out of Ouray that I freelance for and asked for some advice: where do I go to get the out of the 100+ temps of Las Vegas and (quite literally, chill) and get some work done, yet still have access to everything that's "Ouray?"

There was no hesitation: they said the Lakota S Ranch.

After jotting down the requisite contact information, I grabbed the phone and gave Fred Stemmler, proprietor of the Lakota S a call. After about a 30 minute conversation and some email exchange of property photos, I booked myself in for 3 weeks at what looked to be just what I needed: something far away yet so close to everything else.

My only thought now was: packing. Yeesh.

The Location

Nestled in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, Hastings Mesa is the home of the Lakota S Ranch. The region is rich with the Uncompahgre National Forest, spanning over 950,000 acres and combining three different alpine wildernesses: Uncompahgre, Mt. Sneffels and Lizard Head (I'm headed up toward the Mt. Sneffels region for this retreat). From rolling hills and plentiful wildlife to the rushing waters of the



Uncompahgre River, the area is simply idyllic – a slice of heaven on earth, with winter bringing the requisite à la mode to the peaks that populate the distance.

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

The Journey

After going through the most painless rental car acquisition, I'm on my way down US-50 towards Ridgway. I've been steered towards the True Grit Café, which turns out to be a quaint-as-can-be cowboy-style bistro. I down my chicken wrap and I'm hopping back on Highway 62 towards Hastings Mesa.

The expanse set out in front of me is impressive, and on more than one occasion, I have to remind myself to drive and not gawk. I love living in Las Vegas, but it's *really a desert*, which means I'm lacking greenery as a general rule in both my yard and daily grind. Most of the drive up Highway 62 towards the Lakota S is covered by the expanse of the Double RL Ranch, owned by design icon Ralph Lauren. If I'd kept going on 62, I'd run smack into Telluride, but since I'm more of a crampons-and-ice-tools girl than a ski bunny, I'd be stopping close to the Sneffels Wilderness and make my home for the next three weeks in the wilderness landscape of the Lakota S Ranch's guest house.

The Ranch

Shocked in part by how close the ranch really is to Highway 62, I turned into the drive that would take me back to the main house. Fred Stemmler promptly greeted me as he saw my little Dodge Caliber rental pull into the drive. With every bit of hospitality but an unstated understanding that I was at his property to *get away*, he set me up with the keys and gave me an overview of the property.



The ranch is – heaven. Simply wonderful. I asked him (only half-jokingly) if he wanted to sell the guest house sight-unseen. Located at 9,100 feet, the Lakota S sits on 250 acres of sprawling mountain bliss with Aspen pines, stock ponds and deep wooded ravines that apparently led to some decent hiking (which I'd soon figure out for myself). I expected for Bambi and a forest full of Disney-drawn followers to sneak out from behind the nearest tree, wrap ribbons around me and fly me to the guest house in the midst of this fairy tale-like setting.

Not being able to remember when I'd last seen so much ... green ... I bid farewell to Fred and drove the 75 some-odd yards back to begin the process of moving in.

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

The Guest House

Grabbing my laptop bag out of the front seat, I headed into the guest house to begin the unloading process for my three week stay. I was greeted by nothing less than mountain lodge-style warmth when opening the front door, immediately surrounded by comfortable and modern furnishings and a knotty pine kitchen that my mother would give her left spatula to cook in.

An eclectic blend of country charm and contemporary style, I was quite confident that my stay here would be comfortable at a sheer minimum. A big fan of bathrooms, I ducked my head into each of two, finding a crisp décor and glass-enclosed shower in each. Now if only I could decide which to



use! (Truth be told, I would use both. Bathroom-hopping is a quirk of mine and even do it at home.)

Finding the bedrooms well-appointed with beds that beckoned me to settle-in for a long mountain vacation-style nap, I decided to empty the car and get settled into my new home away from home.

Fred had mentioned the Alpenglow and it was something I didn't want

to miss. Generally, I'd just Google it and see what it was, but I guess I'd just have to find out for myself. Come sunset on my first evening, I witnessed something I'd seen before yet never to this extent: a red band stretched across the sky to the east, glowing ominously and varied in tone from pale to intense throughout the dusk hours. *So this was alpenglow!* Simply smiling as I sat on the porch with a glass of syrah (I'd stocked-up in Ridgway), the hue of my wine mixed with that of the sky signaled to me that I'd come to the right place to both breathe **and** be at peace while I work.

Maybe ... just maybe ... I was going to get this children's book done!

Life Moving ... Forward?

The next morning (officially "Morning #1"), I found my feet curiously nippy and was suddenly glad I'd brought my fuzzy blue UGG slippers along for the trip. Glancing at the thermometer on the wall, I had to blink and re-read it, thinking I'd gotten it wrong:

39° F.

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

My inner glee began to bubble and I toddled towards the kitchen to brew some tea and find something resembling breakfast. If my cell phone worked out here, I'd be photographing the thermometer on my Crackberry and blast it off promptly to every Las Vegan contact in my address book. As gloating is never pretty, I'm retrospectively comfortable there's no cell service at the Lakota S.

I really can't remember the last time I'd sat and ate breakfast at such a leisurely pace. Being a freelancer, one might think my work schedule more viscous than it truly is. In actuality, I'm busy 12 months out of the year and my vacations are working vacations. The source of angst for more than one suitor in my life, my schedule is a comfortable one for me and I find a great deal of solace in the hum of my chosen daily grind.

I was also having fun chasing the Special K around my bowl of almond milk, occasionally sinking the renegade flake with some child-like rant of "bombs away!"

Breakfast complete and cup of tea number two in the making, I eyed my laptop bag sitting in the corner. Having just finished my puerile round of "Sink the Flake," creative juices were flowing. I set about exploding my bag and arranged the storyboards of illustrations I'd be writing to during my stay around the living room like paintings at a flea market booth. (At this point, I hoped I was placing them in order.)



Noon that first day still found me in my UGG slippers and jammies, now that I think of it. Don't even think I noticed it at the time. I do remember, however, walking outside around lunchtime, pleased that I'd hammered-out an outline for the book, only to find four deer munching on a grass snack not 15 feet from my front door.

Wishing them "bon appétit," I popped inside and went back to work. Still wearing my slippers.

Launching Adventure

It's undeniable that I'd found my own little corner of heaven at the Lakota S Ranch, regardless of whether they were going to let me into the actual gig one day or not. Anyone considering the Ranch for their own purposes, however recreational/work-related/hermit-like, should be prepared to live spend their days as active or ... inactive ... as they'd like.

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

I made my stay in June, and the temperature never broke 74° F throughout. A huge (and welcomed) change from the 109 that was blazing a trail through my desert home, it afforded me the opportunity to feed my soul and get out and about, exploring the vastness of what the region has to offer.

The Lakota S website had a pretty comprehensive list of area activities, and I'd had the foresight to print it out prior to my arrival. Fred was more than happy to offer his guidance and advice while I was the ranch's guest as well, and it wasn't often I'd found such a level of hospitality between proprietor and guest. (He was also instrumental in advising me to not feed the wildlife, no matter how "cuddly or cute" I found them. Feeding could break them out of the instinct to find their own food and do more harm than good. Apparently, Snow White I'm not.)

Throughout my stay, I did at least a good eight half to full days of hiking throughout the Sneffels Wilderness. Ornamented with a canopy of Aspens unlike anything I'd ever seen, it was incredibly adventurous, exhilarating and cathartic all at once to explore this new terrain.



There was more than one occasion where I just thought being surrounded by the carpeting of grass and yellow wildflowers was entirely too picturesque, so I had to go and ruin it by taking a swig of Sugar Free Red Bull (another prize from my shopping in Ridgway).

There's quite a bit of snowmelt during June and the ground is damp. I found that it gives each day a breathability that I never knew existed. While acclimatizing myself to

9,100 feet took a few days, I never had any adverse effects from the altitude. Rather, I found myself breathing better, sleeping more soundly and feeling ... whole again. All I could think is that if my client didn't like the version of the book I was crafting, I'd happily volunteer to return here to devise another draft.

The region's at no loss for things to do on any given day, either. From Jeep tours to hot air balloon rides and fly fishing to mountain biking, the offerings seemed to challenge visitors with a "double dog dare" to be bored. Throughout my excursions, I witnessed everything from families climbing in for a Jeep tour of Ouray to a group of guys abandoning the traditional bachelor party and heading up the Jud Wiebe Trail out of downtown Telluride. I ended up hanging back on the trail a bit, pleading altitude, if only to let the guys have their day without my pall of estrogen washing over them on the trail.

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

Both flora and fauna alike share the Hastings Mesa area. I witnessed everything from Red Tail Hawks patrolling the ranch's airspace to elk and deer roaming the ranch. In one of my conversations with Fred, he mentioned a large female cow elk had wandered out of the woods and produced a very wobbly calf. Life really goes on around you at the Ranch, and what I loved was that I could participate or simply watch as much as I liked.

There was a ton I just couldn't get to on this trip since it was a working vacation, but visitors should know that everything from glider rides out of the Telluride Airport to kayaking and river rafting are available within 30 minutes. I was periodically cursing that I'd come to the Lakota S to work. Sure, the condo I usually rent in Ouray is pretty posh, but I go there to ice climb each winter. Hastings Mesa is somewhere you go to *live* and I actually looked forward to coming home to the Lakota S each an every day I ventured out.

Farewells ... and what's your availability?

On the evening of day 20, I was making the obligatory rounds of the guest house. Opening drawers, cabinets – seeing if I'd left anything behind. Finding a bottle of wine I'd opened two days prior, I dove palate-first into waste-not-want-not and



finished the last two glasses. The book was done (and damn cute, might I add), my client liked everything I'd sent over via email (I had to drop down to the Ridgway Library to hop on the Internet a few times) and tomorrow would see me on a plane back to my home at 3421 Blazing Hot Street -- Inferno, Nevada.

The Lakota S Ranch had facilitated more than just a few things this trip. Moreso even than my ability to complete my assignment (with three days to spare) in the unabashed splendor of the Uncompahgre National Forest, I'd undertaken some new activities and kinda *found myself* in the process. Unfettered by alarm clocks and schedules other than those self-imposed, I fell easily into a routine of appreciating the world that happened around me at the ranch every day – and would continue long after I'd hopped on a plane and gone. I'd summited my first Colorado Fourteener (Mt. Sneffels, 14250 feet), seen a hawk (several), looked eye-to-eye with elk and deer, and likely spent the most quality time with *myself* ever. There was a fleeting feeling of remorse that I didn't have anyone special to share these past three weeks with, but it evaporated in knowing that I would eventually be back with a pretty lucky man in tow (who would realize it's possible for me to live three weeks without my BlackBerry).

So Far, Yet So Close — The Lakota S Ranch

The following morning, I spent some time chatting with Fred as I handed over my keys and bid him farewell. I know it sounds trite, but when he asked me what I liked the most about my stay, I really did say “everything.” Asking how much notice I needed to give for another stay, he recommended at least three months, as they’re traditionally booked up to a year in advance around more popular dates. I playfully asked if he was already booked for the same time next year and he’d already turned to walk inside and check when I said I’d have to call him to verify.

I was interested, though.

Promising him a copy of the book that was written during my stay, I climbed into my rental roller skate and eased back onto Highway 62 towards Ridgway. It was hard to believe that the highway had been so close all along, even though I’d scooted around on it throughout my stay. It seemed almost impossible that a beautiful haven like the Lakota S Ranch was so far away from everything, yet accessible to anything I wanted or needed to do.



Alpenglow as seen from the Lakota S Ranch guest house

To contact the Lakota S Ranch and inquire about their Guest House rental, email owner/proprietor Fred Stemmler at fstemmler@starband.net or call 970-626-2006.

Activities Resource List — The Lakota S Ranch

Year-Round

- **Bird Watching** — including red tail hawks, wild turkeys, grouse, flickers, nuthatches, red shouldered black birds, blue birds, and stellar jays (depending on the season) on site, visit www.ouraycolorado.com/birding
- **Hiking** - on site and nearby (www.ouraytrails.org)
- **Horseback Riding** — bring your horse and take advantage of the property's corral and barn
- **Photography** - on site or nearby (www.ouraycolorado.com/Photography)
- **Soaking at Ouray and Ridgway public hot springs** — Ouray Hot Spring Pool (970) 325-7073 (Ouray, CO) and Orvis Hot Springs (970) 626-5324 (Ridgway, CO)
- **Elk Mountain Hotel Professional Shooting Range** — skeet, trap, firing range, and 360-degree combat range (970) 252-4900 (Montrose, CO)
- **Kayaking** on Ridgway Reservoir, Uncompahgre River, San Miguel River — Fishrigs (970) 626-4460 (Ridgway, CO)

Winter

- **Alpine skiing** - Telluride (888) 353-5473 , back country skiing at Red Mountain Pass
- **Cross-country skiing** - on site and nearby
- **Ice Climbing** — Ouray Ice Park (www.ourayicepark.com)
- **Ice skating** - Rotary Park (970) 325-7072 (Ouray, CO)
- **Snowmobiling** - Telluride, Molas Pass
- **Snow Shoeing** - on site

Spring/Summer

- **ATV riding** - visit www.go-colorado.com/Telluride/Guides/ATV-Jeep-Offroad or www.ouraycolorado.com/ATV
- **Hot Air Balloon Rides** — San Juan Balloon Adventures (970) 626-5495 (Ridgway, CO)
- **Boating** - Ridgway Reservoir
- **Biking** - Peak to Peak Bicycles (970) 626-3177 (Ridgway, CO)
- **Rodeo** - Ridgway
- **Camping and Backpacking**
- **Horseback riding** - Many Ponies Outfit (970) 728-6278 (Telluride, CO)
- **Fishing** - Fishrigs (970) 626-4460 (Ridgway, CO)
- **Fly-casting** in stock ponds (ponds used for stock, not stocked ponds)
- **Jeep Tours** – Dave's Mountain Tours (970) 728-9749 (Telluride, CO), and see www.ouraycolorado.com/Jeeping for more resources in Ouray and Ridgway
- **Off-Roading** - nearby
- **River Rafting** on the Uncompahgre River — Fishrigs (970) 626-4460 (Ridgway, CO)
- **Sailing** - nearby

To contact the Lakota S Ranch and inquire about their Guest House rental, email owner/proprietor Fred Stemmler at fstemmler@starband.net or call 970-626-2006.