

Branded in Heaven

By Chris McBeath



My husband, Don, sat tentatively astride the bay mare, the saddle creaking as he settled his posture. He was missing the security of mother earth. "So" he asked, nodding towards the horse's laid back ears "what's her name?"

Slim, the Barn Boss, didn't miss a beat. "Earthquake" he quipped, stealing a large wink in my direction.

Immediately, I could see my husband's aspirations 'to cowboy' dissolve; he gripped the reins, squeezed himself into the saddle even further, and loosened the bandana around his neck. But before he could protest, we were off towards the open range.

This was the first time he had ever been on a horse - her real name was Lazy Gal - and even though it took some cajoling to get him into the idea, our stay at Big Bar Ranch turned out to be an unforgettable experience.



Like many of the farmlands, homesteads and cattle ranches in the Cariboo, Big Bar is set well away from the highway so that getting there is half the fun - winding through the mountains on well-groomed, dirt-track roads where cattle, Big Horn Sheep and the odd coyote, have right of way. Located near Big Bar Lake amidst the farmlands of OK Ranch, Big Bar is a heavenly spot - real cowboy country where you can roam the range in any direction for as far as the eye can see.

The welcome at Big Bar is instantaneous, first by a pack of tail-wagging collies, Booboo, Ben and C.C. (named after his love of Coors and Canadian beer) with Jessie James, an amiable golden retriever bringing up the rear. Horses raise their heads from well stocked hay bins to acknowledge your arrival and you'll probably see a couple of barn cats skittering between horses hooves, testing their quota of lives to the max.



As one of the few guest ranches that is open year round, Big Bar Ranch serves up this welcome come rain or shine.

WIn summer, you can hike, canoe, and hope for the Mother Lode, gold panning the Fraser River. In winter they offer ice skating, sleigh rides, sledding, snowbiling and skiing. And year round, there is riding on gentle horses that come as miniatures (reserved for petting) to much larger appaloosas, chestnuts and greys. Of course, for die-hard wannabe Cowboys, Big Bar will organize overnight field trips and

even a little cattle carousing - the 'real' McCoy - that'll have you covered in caked-on dust from the brim of your Stetson to tip of your spurs.

We opted for a two hour ride into the hills that were splashed with brilliant shades of yellow, orange, crimson, gold and brown. A fall breeze quivered through the lakeside grasses and, as the sun cut swathes of shadow into the mountains, we watched cattle being coaxed from their high summer pastures in preparation for their drive down to winter fields nearer the Fraser River. It was a perfect introduction for neophyte slickers - just enough time to get used to one's buttocks jostling against leather alongside the faint satisfaction that I, at least, was using muscles I had actually thought were cellulite. And when we returned to the corral, I noticed that even my tenderfoot husband was sauntering towards our room with the confidence of a John Wayne swagger.

We stayed in the lodge but Big Bar accommodations also include self contained cabins and a campground. Most are inclusive of delicious meals which "Cookie" creates for appetites that just don't know how to quit. All are served family style with guests and ranch hands eating together in a light filled dining room that fills with good-natured banter that's normally reserved for families. But that's how Big Bar makes you feel ... a member of their extended family.



There's also a hot tub to ease sore muscles as well as the Fireside Lodge where we shot some pool before settling down to watch a video while downstairs, in the kids recreation area, a couple of teenagers were engaged in a vicious game of table hockey. As the sky darkened, the wranglers sparked up a fire and before long, we were toasting marshmallows in the flames and pointing with confused authority at the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Big Bear and starlit formations.

Then the branding iron grabbed our attention.

"So" my husband inquired, gazing at the iron's glowing and twisted insignia, B/R, "are we branding cattle tonight?" One afternoon in the saddle and he had true grit in his veins.

"Well that depends on how sore your buttocks are", Slim replied with a wry smile "because this here iron could be just the cure." As we digested this curious piece of information, he pulled the iron out of the fire and faced his charges "Well, who's up first?"

We were about to discover that branding guests is a Big Bar tradition and despite some initial concerns (that proved to be unfounded), we rallied to the challenge. Gritting our teeth and clenching our fists, we presented our jean-clad hides to the iron which, amidst plumes of smoke, forever scorched the cotton B/R.

But for Don and I, we had been branded well before that night - intoxicated by the Cariboo air, Big Bar's hospitality and the rhythm of the ranch. As first time dudes, it had been a romantic adventure but now, as experienced city slickers, we were already making plans to return. Winter never looked so inviting.

If You Go:

Big Bar Ranch

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Clinton, BC
Canada V0K 1K0
Tel: (250) 459-2333
Fax: (250) 459-2400
Email: info@bigbarranch.com
Web site: www.bigbarranch.com

By car: Travel north on Hwy 1 for about 5 hours (approx. 450 Kilometers) to Cache Creek and continue north on Hwy 97
Turn west onto Big Bar Road, about 10 km north of Clinton, and follow the signs
Big Bar Ranch is 30-40 minute drive once you leave the highway

By air: Charter flights are available from Vancouver via North Van Air to Kamloops by scheduled carriers, Air Canada or Canadian Airlines
Arrangements can be made for transportation to Big Bar

