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'Bearding winter' at Siwash Lake Ranch in British Columbia

By Anne Z. Cooke
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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KAMLOOPS, Canada — "It's a true thing," as my grandmother used to say. Luxury lodging is in the eye of the beholder.

Whether it's an inn, hotel, resort, even a campsite, all the assorted bits that meet to make a hotel feel like a home will never be to everyone's taste. Colors and styles that speak to you might leave me yawning. And vice versa.

But luxury comes in different flavors in Canada, where most land area is either lightly populated or wilderness. We've flown along the coasts and over the interior of this vast country, the world's second largest (after Russia), and marveled at unimaginable features, things we'd never heard of and didn't know existed: deep gorges, roiling waterfalls, vast lakes, rolling tundra, mountain ranges and endless forests.

It's no surprise, then, that when a luxury lodge pops up in one of these remote corners, offering cocooned comfort within and raw nature without, the contrast heightens the pleasure. We've felt it everywhere, at legendary hideaways in Ucluelet and Tofino on Vancouver Island, in classic digs on Quadra Island, in modern hotels in Prince George and Inuvik (on the Arctic Ocean), and Ontario's fishing lodges.

These are the yin and yang of so-called soft-adventure, the "Star Trek" generation's mission played out not in space but on terra firma. Who doesn't want — deep inside — to walk with lions, then dine by candlelight? To sail the Northwest Passage on a cruise ship with an ice-breaker bow? To beard the northern winter in its den?

As it happens, bearding winter is a fact of life at Siwash Lake Ranch, in the snow-blown foothills of British Columbia's Cariboo Mountains. Owner Allyson Rogers, a modern-day pioneer, bought the land and lake, designed the lodge (with her father's help), built it using timber grown on the property, and installed a solar-and-water heating system. But the site isn't just remote. It's 50 miles from the nearest town, store or restaurant. Daily shopping isn't an option in this 80,000-acre wilderness.

Rogers's closest neighbor lives 30 minutes away. The rest of the population consists of the four-legged kind: deer, moose, black bear, badger, coyotes, 30 horses, three dogs and two pet cows. Though phone lines straggle down the nearest dirt road, Siwash Lake Lodge is off the grid and without public utilities.

"We're so isolated here that we look forward to having people come to us," says Rogers, who runs the lodge with the help of her two teenagers, partner Roy Grinder and a staff of 12. "The kids look forward to meeting other kids, many of them coming from around the world. This is my dream house. Sharing it means everything."

It's a late afternoon under a smoky grey sky as we arrive. The dirt road to the lodge leads under dark firs, passing the horse corral, a popular hangout for horse-crazy teens in summer's more benevolent weeks. Cold and wet, the barn looks foreboding. The horses, winter coats grown woolly and thick, stamp their feet and turn to stare. Strands of straw and manure dot the snow, today's frozen lumps and tomorrow morning's chore.

Then the front door opens and Rogers appears in a halo of light, welcoming you to the warmth within, with a glimpse of soaring peeled-log rafters and good smells from the kitchen. A cup of tea, a glass of wine and a cushy sofa in front of the tall stone fireplace will never seem better. You'll spend this evening the old-fashioned way, with a hot toddy or glass of wine beside the fireplace, a game of checkers or cards, a book, music or conversation. Tomorrow, when the anchor-weight of ample meals leaves you dozing, the cure is a brisk snowshoe trek through a snowy wonderland, or a cross-country ski across the frozen lake.

Rogers supplies guests with basic gear, or you can bring your own. She also partners with local outfitters in 100 Mile House who organize special expeditions: long snowmobile treks, ice fishing and dog sledding.

We'd been sledding before, but just for rides. So we jumped on board when Rogers suggested a dog mushing class, taught by local trainer Laurie Niedemeyer, owner of Netkitsilk Outdoor Adventures, and taught at the lodge. Niedemeyer, who trains dogs and teams to race and to perform in films, trains guides, dog handlers, actors and amateurs. Just the kind of help we needed. But before unloading the dogs, we started with the basics: learning commands, how the dogs work, and driving techniques.



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"No matter what happens, even if you spill," she warned, "even if you fall, don't let go of the sled. The dogs can run for miles without realizing you're gone. Catching them means a very long hike."

Finally Niedemeyer unloaded her 40 dogs, enough for three teams, and hitched them to the sleds. Taking turns, we practiced driving, riding, and driving again. When my lead dog, Tricia, looked back at me, waiting for a command, I knew I'd graduated from novice to partner. "Ready up," I sang out and we were off.

Winter is low season at the lodge, for obvious reasons. Most guests prefer summer, when sunshine and blue skies paint a warm patina over the landscape. Warm breezes ruffle the lake and forest trails invite hikers to explore, enjoy the wildflowers and look for birds.

"June is like a symphony," Rogers says. "The wildflowers are blooming and migrating birds arrive every day. Some days we see sand hill cranes and ospreys; other days it's eagles and song birds. We've seen Steller's jays, tanagers and all kinds of ducks."

But it's the horseback riding program that most families come for. Geared to all ages, it includes lessons, guided and solo trail rides and your own mount, a horse that fits your size and abilities. You can be involved as much as you want, saddling and caring for your horse, or just riding for pleasure. With canoe, horseshoes, fishing and swimming as options, there's plenty to do.

"The lake is weedy at the edge, but it's 22 feet deep at the end of the dock, and yes, you can swim," Rogers says. "Actually, that's the most popular place to be after riding horseback all day. Everyone jumps in together to cool off."

Rogers and her family, plus a staff of 12, run the lodge in the summer. Two chefs prepare all the meals, with Rogers, who likes to cook, on deck to help. Website reviews of the ranch — presumably contributed by former guests — give high marks to the horseback riding program, the horses, the friendliness of the staff and the cuisine, usually described as healthy American. Wine, at no extra charge, is included at dinner.

If you're up for the journey, book a flight to Vancouver, a connecting flight to Kamloops and a 2 1 / 2-hour drive to the ranch. Getting here takes most of a day. But the final frontier is always its own reward.

IF YOU GO

Siwash Lake Ranch is open for individual visits during January and February, and from May through September. However, you can book the entire ranch and lodge — all the rooms — for the holidays or over any week.

One and two-bedroom suites in the main lodge sleep a total of 12 guests, booked as a couple, a single or a family group. All have private baths, down quilts, top-quality beds and comfortable furniture. In summer, six elaborately-decorated large canvas tents with bathrooms are geared toward families. Each sleeps five guests in a king bed, fold-out double sofa bed and a single. The tents are pitched on a flat ridge overlooking the lake, out of sight of the main lodge.

To check for reviews and current rates, search for "Siwash Lake Ranch Canada." Contact the ranch directly at www.siwashlakeranch.com or call (250) 395-6541.

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