

HOME ON THE RANGE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY Marie Barbieri



Facing page: making memories at Cougar Point Lookout

From left: the all-timber Lookout Lodge; the expansive grounds of Echo Valley Ranch and Spa



All couples need a secret hideaway. I've found one. In the Cariboo region of the Coast Range, Echo Valley Ranch & Spa is cradled within fragrant pine forests overlooking the Marble Range. Our room, tucked within the Lookout Lodge, is dressed in Thai silk cushions, reclaimed maple and features a cathedral ceiling. In this family-run sanctuary, more a home than a hotel, luxury and serenity meld.

In the Main Lodge, garlanded by fragrant apple trees and berry patches, we join other happy couples (one marrying onsite tomorrow). Jason, the retreat's talented master-chef, prepares a banquet of Thai-infused dishes, created from the organic veggie and herb garden, and cooked in the open kitchen before us. We feast with owners, British-born Norm, and Nan from Thailand, who talk of their home-reared cattle, pigs and chickens. I think to that, sipping from my glass of sparkling water extracted directly from the ranch's spring. Joining us is artist in residence, Michael Blackstock. Michael has curated the ranch's guestrooms and grounds with his indigenous face tree-carvings. One sparkles through real diamond eyes. As lunch digests, Norm safari-drives us through the Fraser Canyon. Its spirited silty river tumbles along, with sagebrush and prickly pear cactus in full yellow blossom. We halt, riverside, by ancient petroglyphs carved by the First Nations people. Sunset is spiritual. Sitting on a lone bench at Cougar Point Lookout, we witness a dramatic storm jet-wash the striated

canyon walls. Couples come here to reconnect with nature: they end up reconnecting with each other.

In the morning, wild turkeys are our wake-up call before a wrangler mounts me onto a Tennessee Walker. We're learning to horse ride; Western style. Half terrified and half elated, we amble through forested wilderness. Eventually, I proudly achieve cowgirl status.

By afternoon, our John Wayne thighs head to where Western and Eastern influences marry, at the ranch's authentic Thai Baan spa. We are kneaded, rocked and pummelled by Thai masseuse Jaranya. She detoxes us further post-massage with a fruit platter and ginger tea. We float back to our room. In bed, I squint at theatrical stars that beam onto my Egyptian cotton duvet from an inky sky, to a soundtrack of silence.

Sunrise marks our farewell to this unblemished world where nature and romance hold hands. But not before witnessing the wedding beneath a spring sun. The winter snow has melted. Canada is in full bloom. And so am I.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE: The eco adventure resort of Echo Valley Ranch & Spa is located in the Cariboo Region of British Columbia. Take a 50-minute flight from Vancouver to Kamloops Airport. Drive through the mountains, lakes and plains to the resort, or take a charter flight, landing on the property's private landing strip.

CONTACT: Echo Valley Ranch & Spa; evranch.com; +1 (250) 459 2386