

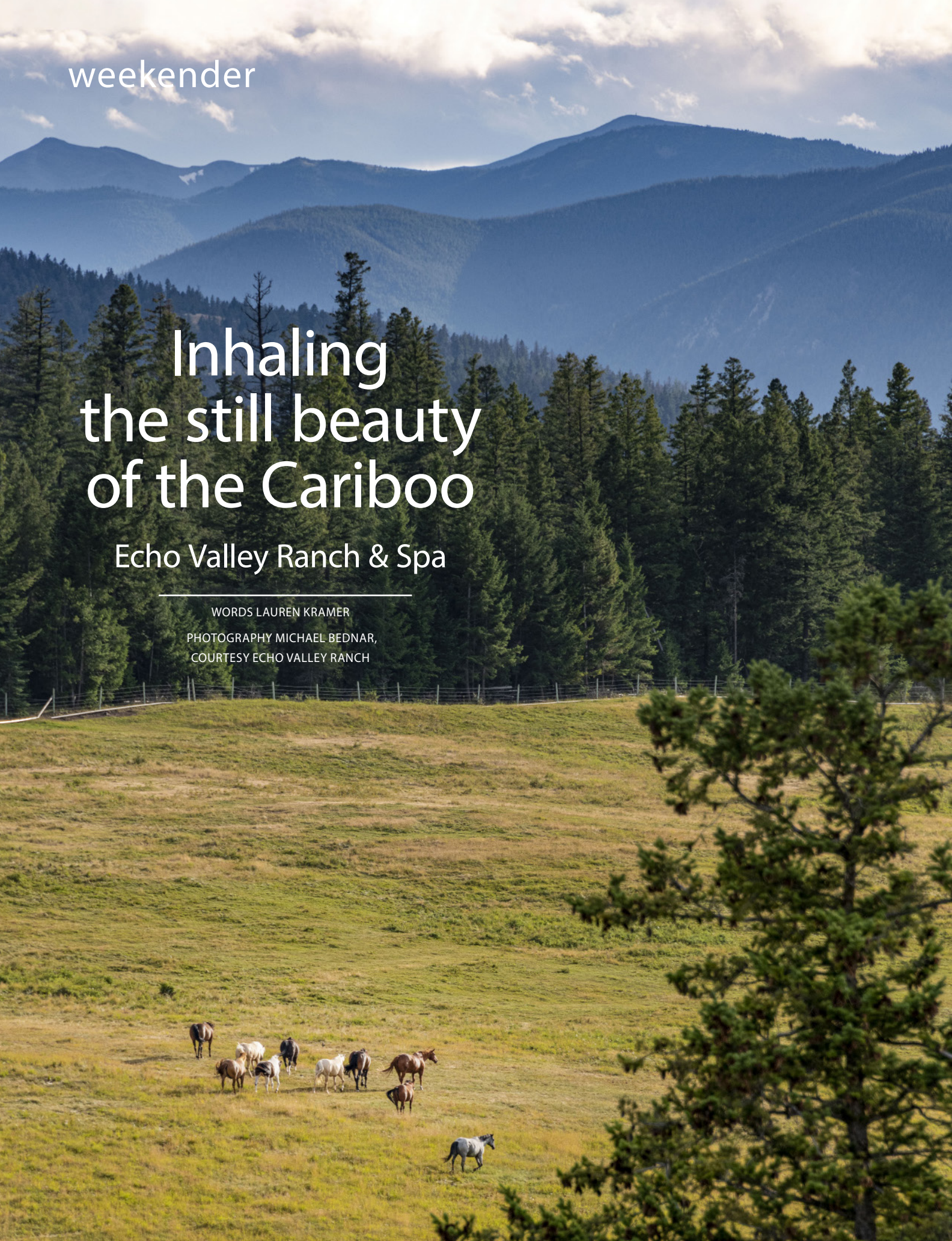
weekender

Inhaling the still beauty of the Cariboo

Echo Valley Ranch & Spa

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PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL BEDNAR,
COURTESY ECHO VALLEY RANCH



Arrive at **Echo Valley Ranch and Spa** in BC's Cariboo country and the silence is deafening. But for the gentle rustle of the light breeze in the trees and the bubbling of the nearby creek, there's complete and utter stillness. It's a silence that invites you to calm your mind, absorb the peacefulness and rid yourself of the restless energy that's so contagious in the city.

To reach the ranch we drove two hours northwest of Kamloops to Clinton, taking a winding dirt road for the last 34 miles and just barely avoiding a flooded beaver pond. Located on a crest, Echo Valley overlooks sweeping views of Cariboo grasslands skirted by thick swaths of boreal forest. Hillsides descend into a creek surrounded by lush greenery, and between the Marble Mountains in the distance and the Fraser Canyon nearby, it's a breathtaking location.

It instantly captured the hearts of Norm and Nan Dove when they first visited the area back in 1994.

The couple bought the 160-acre property on a whim and turned it from a small homestead into a luxurious boutique ranch defined by log cabin-style accommodations. They built an airplane runway, a gym, an indoor swimming pool and a stable, and over the years created a range of innovative activities that married their interests of wilderness pursuits in the Cariboo coupled with Thai-based spa treatments and gentle yoga.

Tour the property and their love, respect and reverence for the Cariboo is evident at every turn. The Doves invited First Nations artists Michael Blackstock to carve living faces on the trees and Theo Mahood to carve intricate wooden murals on the exterior of their Lookout Lodge. The art is a symbol of their deep respect for the area's Indigenous stewardship and a recognition of the distinct spirituality that pervades Echo Valley.

This is wildlife country. Bear sightings are common. Cougar tracks have been spotted. Bighorn sheep still roam the canyon and a marmot feeds nearby the lodge at dusk, almost completely unafraid. The ranch is home to three border collies, six cats, 19 horses and a massive pet swine called Lucky, who, unlike his late companion, avoided a deadly bear encounter;

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It's the stillness that stays with you at Echo Valley, a ranch where luxury accommodations, an insightful selection of activities, a deep respect for the environment and an astoundingly beautiful natural arena merge effortlessly.



thus earning his name. A verdant vegetable garden and hothouse supply farm-fresh veggies and herbs at mealtimes, while eggs come straight from the chicken coop and pasture-raised ranch cattle are harvested for the beef.

Activities, personalized to individual guests, are delivered one on one. On my first evening on the ranch, I try fly fishing with Darrel Nippard, learning how to cast a line on land before we head to two ponds writhing with rainbow trout. Dusk is settling in and swallows swirl overhead as I cast and pull in with the clumsiness of a newbie, repeatedly catching my hook in the weeds. With saint-like patience Darrel untangles the line, repeats the instructions and watches quietly until eventually I nab a fish, wrestling briefly with it before it breaks free and disappears beneath the surface.

Darrel is also the ranch's archery and shooting instructor, canyon guide and survivalist expert. Time with him is peppered with fascinating anecdotes of his two years in the early 2000s living in a hideout on the Cariboo's Poison Mountain, where he kept himself alive by hunting, fishing and harvesting wild onions, mushrooms and berries.

He takes me on a canyon tour, driving a road that's full of switchbacks and sheer, vertical drops to Cougar Point, a 3,800-foot precipice overlooking the Fraser River Canyon. The mountain range, scorched by fire in 2009, is beginning to rejuvenate with fresh foliage growth. And as he recounts the history of gold panning on the river, Darrel stops to taste wild raspberries, black currants and crabapples growing by the roadside.

We walk to an overlook where he gestures at the handful of farms on the slopes alongside the river below.

"Almost everyone out here lives off grid, farming cattle and using wind turbines for energy," he notes.

The landscape is magnificent in its rawness, one full of wildlife but equally full of harsh weather and unforgiving conditions. Most of the area farmers are seniors now, Darrel says sadly. How will a younger, city-raised generation of farmers ever manage to fill their shoes?

Darrel lives and breathes this land and knows it well. On our survivalist excursion he points out krinikini, a plant favoured for Indian tobacco; yarrow, a natural antihistamine; willow ("you boil it to treat headaches") and mullein, whose soft leaves make a great substitute for toilet paper.

"This is a great survival food," he says, grabbing reindeer moss off a tree.

"Boil it and though it doesn't taste good, it's full of starch," he says.

I taste bitter, tiny soap berries filled with vitamin C and learn their boiled leaves are a natural laxative. Before we head back to the ranch Darrel shows me the juniper berry, which, chewed, will stave off thirst if you're lost in the bush.

"Your brain is your worst enemy if you ever get lost because it can set you in panic mode," he cautions. "Always calm down until you can control your mind. Then, and only then, consider your supplies."

You don't have to think much about supplies at Echo Valley Ranch, because the cost of accommodation includes all meals prepared and presented white-tablecloth-style by an expert chef,



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alcohol, transfers from Kamloops airport, as well as activities, spa treatments and use of the facilities. Upon arrival, guests are presented with activity options, and a daily itinerary is carefully curated on their behalf.

That's how I come to spend a delicious afternoon in the spa, surrendering to the capable hands of a Thai masseuse who leaves me in a floating state of utter relaxation. I explore the boreal forest on a guided e-bike ride, careening effortlessly along the trails and inhaling the sweet fragrance of pine trees. I hike down to the creek for a dip in the icy, fresh mountain water and I spend a morning on horseback with Mike Christensen, ranch wrangler and general manager, meandering on a gentle walk through Crown Land.

Before heading out on any guest ride, Mike leads a "horse acquaintance" session, explaining how to use pressure and release to establish leadership with a horse.

"Horses are living, breathing animals and we believe that any ride needs to start with a relationship—it's not like hopping on a bike," he says.

My session with Monty, a 19-year-old gelding, begins with exercises in trust and connection. Only when we've nailed that can we head onto the trail.

We cross a creek, heading uphill on a forest carpeted in moss. A grouse startles and flutters away with a heavy beat of wings and a woodpecker chatters in the distance. Apart from this and the breath of our horses, the forest is still and the air thick with the hot, dry heat of August in the Cariboo.

It's the stillness that stays with you at Echo Valley, a ranch where luxury accommodations, an insightful selection of activities, a deep respect for the environment and an astoundingly beautiful natural arena merge effortlessly. Visit this unique destination and you get to savour the beauty, learn new skills and leave with awe and respect for BC's untamed Cariboo.

IF YOU GO:

Echo Valley Ranch is a four-hour drive from Whistler, BC, and 2.5-hour drive from Kamloops. Open year-round, Echo Valley Ranch visits include car transfer from Kamloops, meals, alcohol, access to all activities and spa treatments. Visit evranch.com or call (800) 253-8831 for details. 📍



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