

courses and hot tubs, and you'll find them anywhere from Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming to New York, Alaska, and Canada.

So what do ranch employees actually do? Well, they're not all ranch hands and cattle drivers, for one. "When I applied for a job, I imagined I'd be a cowgirl or something," says Danielle Lund, 23, who is head chef at the Tarryall River Ranch in Colorado.

"WHEN YOU COME TO A DUDE RANCH, IT'S MORE RELAXED. YOU LIVE HERE WITH YOUR COWORKERS AND THEY BECOME YOUR FAMILY."

Other jobs range from horse wrangler and children's counselor to office and wait staff. In an effort to give guests as much personal attention as possible, ranches typically hire one staff member for every two guests. Experience is usually a prerequisite for those who will be working with animals or food, but most other positions are open to anyone. And locating a job is surprisingly easy; you can find web site links for most ranches (including their job openings) on DudeRanches.com or GuestRanches.com.

Life on the ranch is seasonal, and most positions are available only for the summer. (Some ranchers spend the off-season working on ranches in Arizona, which, with the warmer climate, are open year-round.) The staff usually wakes up with the sun around 6:30 a.m. and has breakfast together, before the guests. Then they head out to their assignments. Allen Traylor, 21, leads three fly-fishing trips a day, except on Wednesdays when he leads an all-day horse ride for guests. "I go out an hour and a half before the guests with two horses.

Then I meet them in the backcountry, start a fire, and cook lunch so it's ready when they get there," he explains. While the wranglers and riders are out and about, people like Wilkinson are working in the office, taking reservations and helping to make sure the ranch runs smoothly. The day usually ends around 5 p.m., and after dinner there is an evening activity, such as two-step dance lessons. And as you might expect, there is a dress code for every employee who is in view of guests: cowboy boots, hats, and other western paraphernalia.

Admittedly, salaries on the ranches are low (one person reports a \$600 per month paycheck, plus gratuities), though room and board are included, and staff members do get time off—one or two days a week, plus some evenings. But most twentysomethings don't become ranch hands for the paycheck. Most we spoke with chose these jobs either for a break before joining the "real world" (what better place to contemplate next steps?) or because their ranch job is related to their future career (in anything from veterinary medicine to accounting to hospitality).

The ranchers we spoke with agree that they've gained a boost in confidence and improved their leadership and people skills on the job. Jennifer Schmutzler, 22, says that the kind of networking she's been able to do on the ranch may prove helpful when it's time to look for a job. Wilkinson, who began his ranch career in the kitchen, switched to the office when he began to consider law school and wanted to gain some skills that might be more applicable down the road. Still others intend to stay put, acknowledging that life on the ranch is everything they could want from a career.

So, while a job on a ranch might not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of professional development, to most who make their home on the range, it's a solid career venture and a priceless life experience. As Lund says, the allure is simply the fact that she "probably won't get to do anything like this ever again." ◀

Like Jeff Bridges in The Big Lebowski, Associate Editor Martin Lieberman likes to be called "The Dude."

learn the LINGO

Before you strap on your chaps, make sure you know your cowboy-speak, because words that mean one thing in the big city mean something totally different on a ranch. The word *dude*, for example, doesn't just mean a guy—or gal. To ranchers it means anyone who hails from the city. Here are some other common words and phrases:

WORD	MEANING
Outfit	A truck
Jingle	To bring the horses in
Coulee	A ravine or dry creek
Draw	A shallow natural drain for rainfall
Wild rag	A colorful handkerchief you wear around your neck to keep out the wind