

One city slicker roughs it in West Texas and lives to tell about it.

BY JOSEPH GUINTO

# GOING AWAY

Plus: Dude ranches where you, too, can live like a cowboy.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN McCORMICK

# COUNTRY



# South.

At 85 miles per hour, south. El Paso in the rearview mirror. Interstate 10 turns to Texas Highway 90 and then Texas 67. The Chihuahuan Desert on both sides, an endless ribbon of highway fluttering ahead.

Farther south. Marfa in the rearview mirror now. Texas 67 gives way to Ranch Road 169. Suddenly, the pavement ends, but the road goes on — for 32 miles it goes on, deeper into the white sands. It's barely a road now, more of an undulating path strewn with potentially tire-slicing rocks. The drive slows to a crawl — a two-hour, 32-mile crawl.

This is the road to the middle of nowhere. And I'm wondering if I should be on it, literally *and* figuratively.

Somewhere at the end of this road, Old Alazan Ranch awaits. There, cattle and mountain lions and mountain goats and horses and who knows what else roam free. This is the kind of land best populated by cowboys and people of that ilk. A cowboy I am not. I am a concrete-loving, cab-hailing city dweller. I know almost nothing about being out in nothingness, including what one should wear in the middle of nowhere. Whatever that is, I'm almost certain my current attire isn't it: vintage sports coat, French-cuff shirt and Italian cuff links purchased in Bologna. Not even Sergio Leone, the Italian Western director, put cuff links on his cowboys — good, bad or ugly.

Also adding to my dismay: There is a longhorn steer in the middle of the road, blocking my path. It is brown and white, and its horns extend the entire width of a full-size SUV. Eventually, I make my way around

it, and the drive south continues. At some point, I realize I've made a wrong turn, correct my course and finally see the lights from Old Alazan Ranch flickering in the distance as the setting sun darkens the desert scrub. But plenty more wrong turns lie ahead. Not literally this time. Just figuratively.

**I'm** squinting at first light. A jack-rabbit is bounding near the ranch's main house, but I can barely fix my gaze as rays of sunshine come over the hills that separate this land from the Rio Grande and the Mexican border.

I was afraid of this. Well, I was afraid of a lot of things involved with coming to this remote outpost that's somewhere near the Big Bend Ranch State Park but nowhere near civilization as I have come to know it.



Clockwise from top left: On the road to hunt aoudad; Alonzo Flores pulls on his boots; writer Joe Guinto atop a horse; a collection of deer antlers at the ranch



But I was afraid of the squinting especially. Just days before flying from my hometown of Washington, D.C., to El Paso, Texas, I lost my sunglasses — dropped them in the backseat of a cab riding somewhere between swanky cocktail lounges where bartenders know me by name and drink. How does one cope in the desert sunlight without shades? My wife admonished, “You’ll be fine. You think John Wayne wore sunglasses?”

Well, no, of course not. But he had big hats. Me, I have a hoodie and a pageboy cap. And, besides, I’ve come here not to act like John Wayne. I just want to accomplish two things. The first is to ride a horse. The second is to experience isolation, Texas-style.

The isolation I immediately get. From the ranch’s front porch, not one other structure is in sight. Planes rarely pass overhead. Cell phones, much to my frustration, don’t work. “Our nearest neighbor is 20 miles away,” says Waynelle Strachan, who, along with her husband, J.H. (who more often goes by Red), has owned the 60,000-acre cattle ranch since 1980. “That’s why we bought this place. We love being all alone out here.”

They’re not *entirely* alone. There are also 300 head of cattle, dozens of deer, nine horses, at least one jackrabbit, untold mountain lions, swarms of large-horned sheep called aoudad — hundreds of them. I ask to get the lay of the land, inasmuch as one can when the land spreads out for 60,000 acres. Waynelle suggests we take a mule up to the spring and then go look at the canyon. A mule ride sounds nice — a slow ride on a slow animal — and certainly easier than jumping right onto a horse. Except, I quickly

learn, the mule that Waynelle is referring to is not a four-legged horse-donkey hybrid. The Mule is actually a four-wheel-drive machine that looks like a golf cart built for the Terminator. As such, it is ideal for getting over the rock-strewn paths that cut through the ranch’s hills and valleys.

The rocks. So many rocks. The Mule climbs. It falls. It sways like a small boat on

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a rough sea. Waynelle shouts over the Mule’s engine and the crunching rocks beneath us, “People say that when God got done with creation, he took all his leftover rocks and put them out here.” People might be right.

I ask her if the ranch doesn’t feel like a desert island sometimes. In miles, it’s not far from the stores and art galleries of newly hip Marfa. But that rocky road makes it difficult, almost treacherous, to reach. Once you’re here, you’re really alone. “How does one live like this?” I wonder aloud. Waynelle wonders in return: “How do you live with all those people around you all the time in the city?”

There’s no time for an answer, because we are about to fall off a cliff. The Mule is 18 inches from the edge and Waynelle must maneuver. She’s searching for a good view of the canyon that cuts a swath through the ranch and runs nearly all the way to Mexico, which is in view from the ranch’s hilltops. The canyon is something right out of an old Western. This whole ranch is. Plentiful cacti. Hills and valleys. Bright sunshine. No wonder Bear Grylls, from Discovery Channel’s *Man vs. Wild*, shot an episode here. He went down into that canyon, surviving for a





Left: "Red" Strachan, owner of Old Alazan Ranch  
Below: Small spiny cactus

When did horses get so big? I've been up close to horses before. I've ridden on their backs twice. But most of my equine experience has come while gambling at racetracks, wearing a suit and tie. But even up close, those thoroughbreds didn't look as large as the ones at Old Alazan. Maybe I'm getting smaller.

Alonzo saddles up. Joining him are Kevin, the Strachans' son-in-law, and two of his friends, who are here to hunt aoudad. Wayne tells me that Buck is my mount. The plan is to ride north to where a few dozen cattle are gathered and lead them down a hill a bit. It's not so much a cattle drive as it is a cattle walk-around.

Suddenly, I can't remember how to ride. I'm almost positive I'm too short to reach Buck's saddle, which I'm now grasping for. "No, no!" Alonzo says. I've

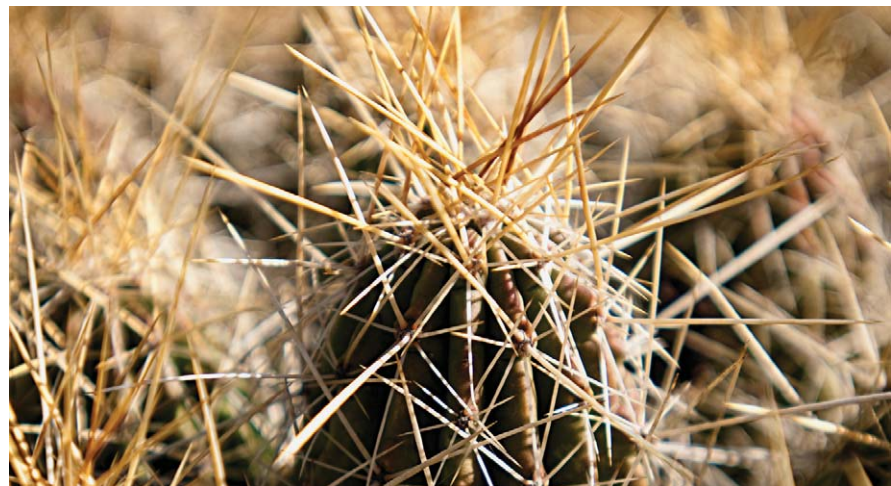
gone for the horn — the little knob at the front of the saddle — with both hands. "One hand on the back," he tells me. I grab again, correctly this time. I swing up and over. John Wayne would be proud. Now, a light grip on the reins, a gentle nudge to get Buck moving and we're off.

Except we're not. Buck flicks his ears but doesn't move. I start to sweat in the afternoon sun. Wayne makes sure I'm holding the reins correctly. I am. But my feet are barely touching the bottom of the stirrups. I push down, trying to settle in. I suspect

dismounting the Mule, it's time to really ride. We head for the stables.

Alonzo has to fetch the horses. I follow him up the hill behind the ranch house, where a few horses graze on a ridge in the distance. Alonzo whistles loudly. The horses eventually heed him, walking first and then galloping toward us. They get bigger. And bigger. And louder. And faster. I'm going to be trampled! I scramble back down the hill. This is not a good start.

After



## Best in the West

Want to test your mettle on the open range? Here are more guest ranches where wannabe cowpoks can go to horse around. —J.G.

### UPSCALE AMENITIES

Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort

Solvang, Calif.

Just 40 miles north of Santa Barbara, Alisal stables 100 horses and caters to both experienced riders and first-timers. After riding the range, guests can either hit the links of two 18-hole golf courses or get pampered in the 6,000-square-foot fitness center and spa. [www.alisal.com](http://www.alisal.com)

Falcon Point Ranch

Seadrift, Texas

About three and a half hours from Houston, Austin and San Antonio, this 6,000-acre ranch, adjacent to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on Texas' Gulf Coast, offers fishing, kayaking, hunting, a huge luxury lodge, a day spa and, oh yeah, an active cattle ranch complete with guided horseback riding. [www.falconpointranch.com](http://www.falconpointranch.com)

### FAMILY-FRIENDLY FUN

Bar H Working Dude Ranch

Clarendon, Texas

You'd expect to find an authentic, rugged Texas ranch experience just an hour outside of Amarillo, and Bar H Working Dude Ranch delivers. The ranch offers overnight accommodations, hunting and a chuckwagon, and they'll even set up Little Buckaroo Parties for the kids. [www.barhduderranch.com](http://www.barhduderranch.com)

White Stallion Ranch

Tucson, Ariz.

White Stallion Ranch is a working ranch where longhorn cattle roam 3,000 acres adjacent to the Saguaro National Park. The third-generation owners will arrange horseback rides for the entire family and promise a trip that can be "as horsey or horseless as you like." A petting zoo, a swimming pool, a basketball court and a tennis court are among the saddle-free activities. [www.wsranch.com](http://www.wsranch.com)

### AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE

Lazy F Guest Ranch

Smiley, Texas

Don't let the name fool you: A trip to the Lazy F, located just about an hour outside of San Antonio and only a bit farther from Austin, is no vacation. The owners here expect guests to "learn to cowboy." That ranges from participating in the annual 90-mile trail ride to helping out with the daily chores of this 2,500-acre working ranch. [www.lazyfranch.com](http://www.lazyfranch.com)

Buck doesn't even know I'm on his back. I should have had more tortillas at lunch.

"Kick him," Waynelle tells me.

But I can barely move the stirrups — my legs are too far apart to get up any momentum. I'm angry with my parents. Couldn't one of them have been taller? Buck turns his head at the pull of the reins. That's all I get. The seconds seem to drag on longer than the 32-mile ride down that rocky ranch road. I start wishing the longhorn had charged me and spared me the humiliation. Billy Crystal rode a horse (and birthed a calf) in *City Slickers*, for goodness' sake. Why can't I get Buck to go anywhere? Why didn't I Google "how to ride a horse" before I left home?

Finally, Waynelle calls it. She grabs the reins from my hands and leads Buck out of the gate. She at least wants to be sure I get my picture taken on horseback. I'm like a little kid at the state fair.

As I dismount, Waynelle blames Buck. "He's just ornery because he hasn't been worked in a while," she assures me. Indeed, when one of the hunters takes over on Buck, he, too, has trouble getting any giddyap. I feel better. But not much. I'm downgraded back to the Mule for the walk-around and hunting excursion.

On the 25-minute ride back to the ranch's bunkhouse, we stop suddenly. "There's a buck over there," Alonzo says from behind the wheel of the Mule. The buck is at least 200 yards away, halfway up a hillside and hidden in the brush. I could live on this ranch for a decade and never spot something like that — not from that distance, not in a moving vehicle, not ever. But, I wonder: Could Alonzo sight an available cab, in SoHo, at 5:30 p.m., in the rain, from four blocks away, when everyone on the street is hunting the very same thing? I can, for what that's worth.

I am kept up all night by a vibrating cell phone. Impossible — there's no service here except on the hilltops. Still, I'm sure I hear it. No matter, as I can't sleep, anyway; I keep thinking about getting back on Buck and trying again.

By the time the sun rises, I've come up

Right: Alonzo Flores  
Below: A weather vane at dusk at the ranch

with a plan: Find Alonzo and beg for a second mount, a chance at redemption, an opportunity to go back to the city this evening knowing that I've been a Texas cowboy, if just for a half hour. Maybe less. Just long enough to let the morning sun dry up my ClarinsMen Moisture Gel.

I shower and shave and dress with conviction. If I skip Red's biscuits and scrambled eggs, I'll have enough time for a ride before I depart.

Outside, it is barely above freezing. As I walk near the horse stables, I hear the phone again. It turns out that it's nothing more than a calf named Buster. He's not vibrating, he's mooing. I can't even tell a cow from a phone call.

Now, where's Alonzo? I'm ready to get on that horse — until, that is, I realize I've instinctively put on my traveling clothes. Today's ensemble consists of a French-cuff shirt, cuff links (these from Kraków, Poland) and a jacket with a pink-and-maroon handkerchief tucked elegantly into the pocket. John Wayne would cut me down like an aoudad if he saw me now. I can't rightly ride like this. And, anyway, Alonzo is trying to fix a car whose battery has died or carburetor has clogged or something.

So that's it: I will not ride a horse. At least I have my picture on Buck's back as proof of my efforts. Now, I am to begin the drive north — back over those tire-slicing rocks, with Old Alazan in the rearview mirror. Back to civilization as I have come to know it. Yet I don't want to go. In my short stay, I may not have become a Texas cowboy. But maybe, after a couple of days, I could learn to live without all those people Waynelle had wondered about. And maybe, after a few days more, without the cuff links. **AW**

**JOSEPH GUINTO**, a freelancer based in Washington, D.C., plans to take riding lessons later this year, right after he buys a new pair of sunglasses.

