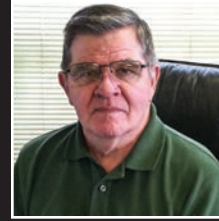




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Real-life 'City Slickers'

'WORKING' VACATION: Guests and ranch hands slowly trail cattle across Lick Creek in north-central Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains, where rancher Dana Kerns, along with family members and employees, operates a real-life "City Slickers"-style cattle drive business.

By **ROBERT WAGGENER**

If Billy Crystal was searching for the real McCoy, he and his fellow "City Slickers" cast should have joined a Double Rafter Ranch cattle drive instead of trying to soothe their midlife crises in Hollywood fashion.

"Our clients quickly learn that it takes a tremendous amount of skill to successfully handle livestock while riding horseback," says north-central Wyoming rancher Dana Kerns. "What we offer is reality — something that Hollywood never portrays."

For 15 years, that reality has made the annual land payment on a 200-acre ranch that Dana and Alice Kerns purchased near Ranchester.

"When I was younger, I thought I could make a go of it with hard work alone," says Kerns, who grew up on a family ranch along the Wyoming-Montana border.

He knew an expansion was necessary to feed one more family. That expansion certainly took hard work, but it also took a little ingenuity combined with tons of patience.

Key Points

- Ranch family starts cattle drive business so guests can learn to be cowboys/girls.
- Extra income funds the yearly land payment for the Kerns family.
- This kind of work isn't for everyone; guests need help during bad weather.

Together, those three things helped Kerns to secure his family's ranching future.

Ingenuity first

For the past 120 years, members of the Kerns family have trailed cattle to and from summer pastures high atop the Bighorn Mountains. They ride horseback through spectacular scenery, cook in Dutch ovens, play campfire songs and sleep under a pitch-black sky full of twinkling stars.

"Why couldn't others join us on these trips? Why couldn't they enjoy some of the most beautiful country God created?" Kerns recalls asking.

That led to the start of Double Rafter

Cattle Drives more than two decades ago. Today, guests pay around \$2,500 to spend one week as working cowboys and cowgirls with the Kerns family and their employees.

Kerns makes it clear right away this isn't an experience for pretend city slickers. In fact, the only "low" mark the business got from *top50ranches.com* is one of its appeals: "For some, considered a rough trip, but if you're looking for the real deal, no-frills cowboy lifestyle and lots of riding freedom in beautiful country, this is it."

After being matched with a horse and learning basic horsemanship skills, guests spend the rest of their vacation away from cellphones and TVs as they ride some 30 to 50 miles moving cattle — rain or shine, snow or sleet, wind or calm.

"We are not interested in having you come and watch us be cowboys. We will teach you to be a cowboy," Kerns says.

Patience and hard work

Though this might sound like a pretty glamorous, lucrative business, Kerns quickly points out that the reality can be

quite different from the illusion.

"It's definitely not for all ranchers. It's a heck of a lot of work to manage up to 20 guests, and you have to have patience beyond belief to be able to do what we do."

Imagine trying to get that many clients out of their sleeping bags during a blinding rainstorm, and then riding horseback with them throughout the day as the rain turns to sleet and then snow.

"We don't quit until the day's work is done," Kerns says. "When we're moving cattle, some riders might be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and that creates more work. But our guests are buying a learning experience, and we let them get that experience."

Though there have certainly been some real-life "City Slickers" moments, Kerns has never thought twice about trying to find another source of side income to make their land payments.

"We always have a lot of fun and truly enjoy the company of our guests," he says.

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