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WEEKEND TRIPS

Ranch-style relaxation



PHOTOS: SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM/CHRISTOPHER KELLY

You can swim, kayak and even fish at East Texas' Deer Lake, which is populated with bass, catfish and crappie.

A skeptic is won over to rural getaways, thanks to charming cabins and acres of seclusion

BY CHRISTOPHER M. KELLY
Special to the Star-Telegram

Blame it on the fact that I grew up in the Northeast, where the phrase “going away for the weekend” connoted very specific, exceedingly temperate images: long walks on the beach of the Connecticut sound, breezy clambakes on Cape Cod or leisurely morning strolls through the woods of Vermont, where, even in the middle of July, you would sometimes need to bring along a jacket.

Or blame it on that fateful trip that I took to a ranch in Marfa in 2002, when no

one warned me that flip-flops would not be appropriate footwear for the weekend. Seriously bloodied, brush-scratched and bug-bitten feet are not my idea of a leisurely getaway.

Whatever the specific reason, though, I've long puzzled over the tradition of the Texas ranch vacation — those trips where you're supposed to ride horses, chop down trees, shoot quail and smoke brisket, usually on a bone-dry expanse of land in a corner of the state where the odds of getting cell service aren't very good.

Indeed, throughout the 2000s, my ranch bias would only be renewed each August, when images of President George W. Bush sweating profusely and working on his Crawford ranch would



The pet-friendly property allows four-legged friends for a modest additional charge. (The author's dog, pictured here, is unleashed and thus flagrantly disobeying property rules.)

be broadcast around the world. That's supposed to be a vacation? Traveling to somewhere actually hotter than it is in the city? Couldn't the president just borrow his dad's place in Kennebunkport, Maine, for a couple of weeks and enjoy some civilized time off?

As the old saying goes, though, beggars can't exactly be choosers, which is what my partner and I realized this summer. We needed a break from our weekly grind in Fort Worth, but we've also been saving our money for a big European trip next spring — so jetting off to Nantucket was definitely not an option.

And while we love our go-to affordable getaways, Houston and Austin, we were both pining for a place free from cars and people and noise, where we could unplug from civilization for a couple of days.

It seemed like it was time to face down my Texas ranch-phobia once and for all.

We started by setting parameters: We only had two nights to spare, so it would have to be a place within reasonable driving distance. We wanted to keep our lodging expenses below \$500, so a luxury spot like the Picoso Ranch Resort near San Antonio was also out of the question.

Most critically, we wanted a swimmable lake — even if the water was no cooler than a freshly served bowl of split-pea soup — because when it comes to chlorinated swimming pools, we have plenty of options at home. And since we also didn't want to kennel our dog for



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A group of lakefront houses is part of King's Country, adjacent to the Double S. There are paved roads throughout the private development where you can ride bikes.

the weekend, we were looking for a pet-friendly destination.

And as if by some celestial miracle — or at least the miracle of Google and Trip-Advisor — we found our ranch paradise.

Deer Lake Cabins is located on Double S Ranch, an 800-plus-acre working cutting horse ranch in the East Texas town of Scroggins, about two-and-a-half hours from Fort Worth.

There are 12 cabins and lake houses available, ranging from the one-bedroom Sunshine Cabin (\$350 per weekend) to the four-bedroom Texas Star Lake House (\$675 per weekend).

Pets are welcome for a modest fee (\$25-\$40 per pet for your entire stay, depending on which property you're renting).

Seven of the properties are situated around Deer Lake, with five others at more secluded spots around the ranch. (There are also a number of owner-occupied homes on the property. Provided you keep your dog off the locals' lawns — a lesson we learned the hard way — they'll welcome you like family.)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

To get to Double S Ranch, you first need to find the gates of King's Country, an adjacent community of vacation houses set around Lake Cypress Springs and tucked away off Farm Road 115.

At first glance, you may think you've stumbled onto the set of a Children of the Corn-style horror movie — remote, eerily quiet, strangely absent of many people. (Enhancing the whole Stephen King vibe: Every single street name begins with the word "King" — King Larry Road, King Oliver Court and so forth.)

But once you make your way through the ranch gates of Double S, you discover a genuine picture-postcard vision, with a placid blue lake surrounded by trees and rustic cabins, and the owners' two dogs, Shiner and Blue, eager to greet you.

We arrived in the early afternoon and settled into the Sunshine Cabin, a simply appointed one-bed room with a modest kitchen and a back deck that overlooks the lake. And after taking one look at the inviting water, and the collection of

rowboats and kayaks available at no extra charge, we immediately changed into our swimming suits.

(If fishing is your thing, both the main Deer Lake and the smaller Dream Lake, also on the ranch, are stocked with bass, catfish and crappie.)

OK, so it's not exactly the most refreshing body of water on the planet. (My first words, upon dipping my feet into the water: "I think I just burned myself.") But as we paddled away from our cabin and out to the center of Dream Lake, with the occasional dragonfly skimming the surface of the water and the gentle buzzing of cicadas coming from the tree tops, our work-week anxieties began to fade.

Suddenly this whole ranch-getaway thing was starting to make sense.

We only had two full days at Deer Lake Cabins, but almost immediately we fell into a routine: Upon waking in the morning, we took the dog for a long walk through the woods. There are 12 miles of walking trails, hilly enough that you



PHOTOS: SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM/CHRISTOPHER KELLY

work up a sweat and an appetite but not so steep that you end up exhausted.

Periodically we would hear a rustling or see a flicker of movement, and look up to see a deer staring at us in the distance. (Had we only brought along a cellphone or video camera, we might have created a YouTube viral-video sensation titled “Jack Russell Terrier Meets a Turtle.”)

After our walk, we would eat breakfast on our deck and go for a bike ride. (The property stocks bikes you can borrow, though we brought ours from home.)

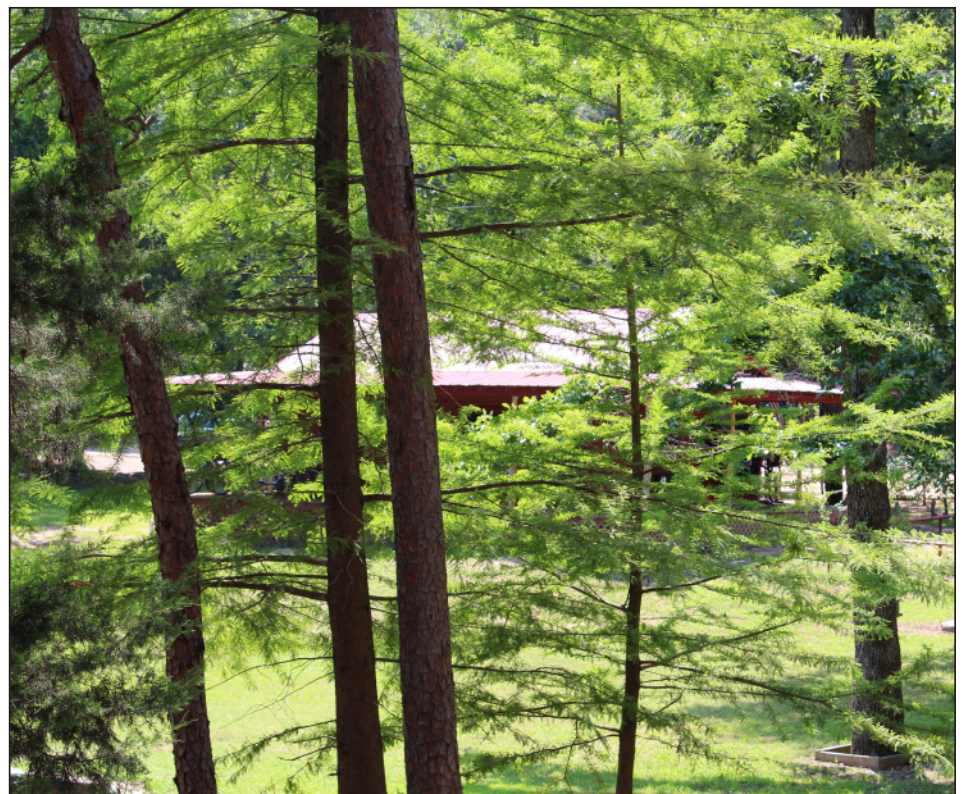
And while the trails on the Double S property proved a little too steep and the earth a little too soft for our city bikes, we rode through the paved streets of King’s Country, gazing at the sprawling lakeside mansions and BMWs in the driveway, and indulging in what I like to call the eighth deadly sin: property envy.

Later we could return to the cabin for a quick dip in the lake, followed by a light lunch and some lazy summertime reading.

Around 7 each night, we fired up the charcoal Weber grill (one comes with every cabin) and started prepping dinner.

Determined not to turn on the TV or look at our laptops for the weekend, we were happy to discover that our cabin

Above, the one-bedroom Sunshine Cabin is one of 12 cabins on the property. It features a back deck that overlooks Deer Lake. Below, There are 12 miles of tree-lined walking trails on the Double S Ranch property, with options for leisurely morning strolls or more vigorous afternoon hikes.





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Deer Lake is the main lake on the Double S Ranch property, with vacation rentals and privately owned cabins and houses dotting the shoreline.

was stocked with both Monopoly and dominoes, which kept us busy in the late evenings — and for me evoked all sorts of terrific childhood memories of our family vacations on Lake George in upstate New York.

ROOKIE MISTAKE

Our weekend was not without its hiccups, the sort of mistakes that separate the rookies from seasoned ranchers. In our eagerness to get out of Fort Worth, we determined that we would do our grocery shopping after checking in to our cabin.

The drawback, though, is that the closest grocery store is a Brookshire's in neighboring Winnsboro, a 15-minute drive away — so almost immediately after leaving civilization, we had to enter right back into it.

And while Brookshire's certainly isn't a bad grocery chain, it also doesn't have the fresh fish, meat, and beer and wine options you'll find at a place like Central Market or Kroger Fresh Fare. Our advice: Shop near home and pack a cooler.

What was remarkable, though, was that on a trip where we feared we would quickly get bored, we instead found ourselves running out of time and unable to squeeze in all we wanted to do.

If you go

Deer Lake Cabins at the Double S Ranch
838 Kings Country Blvd.,
Scroggins
903-860-3898
www.deerlakecabins.com

Rates

Friday and Saturday: \$350-\$675
per weekend

Sunday to Thursday: \$131-\$270
per night

(Two-night minimum stay required, three nights on holiday weekends.)
Use of bicycles, kayaks and paddle boats included with cabin. Fishing boats with trolling motors and mule carts available for rental.

The ranch also offers organized horseback rides, approximately an hour long, for \$48 per person; we hoped to do the sunset tour Saturday evening, but after an afternoon in the sun, we were worn out.

Beyond the Double S, about a 15-minute drive away, Lake Bob Sandlin State Park offers its own swimmable lake and walking trails. There's also a history lesson to be found at the park: Fort Sherman, one

of the earliest Texas frontier outposts, founded in the 1830s, is believed to have been situated here.

So a return visit to Deer Lake Cabins will be necessary, and we've already identified where we'll be staying next time.

Late Sunday afternoon, just before we had to head back to Fort Worth, we took one last walk around the ranch to explore the other rental options. Honeymoon Hill is a one-bedroom log cabin located at the farthest northeastern edge of a property. A long wooden staircase off the back leads down to a pier overlooking its own private pond.

Make no mistake, we loved our more social Sunshine Cabin, surrounded on both sides by cheerful fellow vacationers who were happy to offer us beers from their cooler and hamburgers off their grill.

And hot as it was that weekend, there's nothing like a summertime vacation.

But when I imagine spending a few days at this completely secluded cabin in September or October — with the weather finally cooled, the chirping of crickets the only sound to be heard for miles — well, it might just be enough to convert me to the Texas ranch experience for life.