

Head for the Hideaway!

by Treva Wygle

On your journey to a unique and raw experience of solitude, romance and adventure in a peaceful country atmosphere, you may have to cross over a couple of cattle guards along the way. As you travel down County Road 196 between Glen Rose and Stephenville, you know you are there when you come to the entrance way decorated overhead by a set of longhorns, and the sign that so proudly stands presenting the words - "The Hideaway Ranch and Retreat"!

As you enter the property of The Hideaway Ranch and Retreat, don't be surprised if you are greeted by various livestock and colorful characters along the way to check-in at the main office/general store. You will instantly be captivated by the endless scenic view of rolling hills and lingering oak forest. As you drive down the long and peaceful country road drive, you will pass oak covered passage ways leading to secluded and charming cabins. They set back hidden, restfully awaiting the presence of the next guest looking to experience the rustic elegance and romantic escape offered with each stay.

The Hideaway features 10 cabins tucked away on 155 acres of beautiful hill country of North Central Texas. Each cabin has its own personality and theme and are heated and cooled with A/C. Each features a fully equipped kitchen. "You can even receive a breakfast basket filled with farm fresh eggs right from the ranch upon request," adds owner, Traci Niedziela. Other amenities are satellite TV & DVD player, and on the deck you will find a hot tub, charcoal grill and outside dining area overlooking the beautiful views of the ranch.

As you continue down the stretch of road to check-in for your unforgettable stay at The Hideaway, don't be surprised to see Rama Llama Ding Dong, the head llama, grazing freely along the dirt road path. Once at the office you will surely be greeted by the beloved Rosco, the family dog, tour guide and head of ranch security. Not far behind, you will be pleasantly welcomed by Traci Niedziela, hostess extraordinaire!

"Rosco is the ruler of the ranch!" says Traci with a smile. "People will write and ask about Rosco. He is a large part of the operation as he is sweet and personable toward our guests. He wants to protect everyone and keep them happy. People just seem to fall in love with him. People will even bring him treats!"

The Ranch is a working ranch complete with livestock, country charm, tractors and even an old west mini village. The whole family takes part in keeping up the ranch with delegated chores for everyone in the family. Every member is valuable to the operation of the Ranch and Retreat! Owners, Jason and Traci Niedziela, head up the main operations of the ranch. Jason is the Trail Boss and Chief Cook while Traci specializes in housekeeping and guest services. The Niedziela's have four enthusiastic kids that help out with the chores. Cassi Jane, age 11, helps her Dad out with the horses, Jess, age 10, feeds the pigs, Luke, age 5, feeds Rosco, while Zeke, age 4, gathers the fresh eggs. It is truly a family effort.

Upon check-in you are surrounded by country living at its best, the whole and real experience! To the left in the distance you will see Texas Longhorn grazing in the pasture soaking up the morning sun. Who could overlook Butch and Sundance, ranch pigs, rooting around in their cozy little pen? The beautiful Paint and Appaloosa horses gracefully move about the property awaiting their next guest to take on a trail ride. In a nearby chicken hutch, marked "Henrietta's EGGstravaganza", you will find hens perched and laying fresh eggs for your morning breakfast basket. You will feel a warmth and tranquility and feel a part of the family as you experience all that The Hideaway has to offer. In addition to their array of animals roaming the ranch, the Niedzielas are looking forward to adding some buffalo to the mix.

The Niedziela family takes pride in country living and lives in respect of their surroundings, being grateful of the beauty and tranquility of nature and the land they inhabit. "Nature is very

healing and people who visit are looking for peace and quite – solitude.” shares Traci. The Niedzielas truly live the country lifestyle, so it is easy and natural for them to give their guests a true country living experience. “It is funny to watch people at check-in,” Traci explains. “They are very tense and stressed – and then to see their transformation when they check-out, they are much more relaxed.”

The Niedziela’s moved to Bluff Dale from Colorado six years ago to start this family business. Traci was originally from Texas, living in Houston, and had always wanted to move back to the state she loves - she’s a true Texan and country girl at heart! Jason says, “I always wanted to have a ranch and find a way to make a living doing that. I’ve worked in tourism in the past, (being from Vale, Colorado, a major skiing and tourist mecca). I wanted to have a tourist-based business and always dreamed of having a ranch and working with horses.”

Jason and Traci have a genuine love and respect for people, culture and the cowboy way of life. Their experiences through life have prepared them for the journey at hand and equipped them to be true caregivers and servants to others. Jason was in the Marines for fourteen years and his travels have taken him to sixteen different countries. In addition, his repertoire includes; firefighter, paramedic and history major who loves to study about the old west. This combination sets the stage for the perfect trail boss and overseer of the Hideaway! Traci, with her country charm and sweet spirit, oozes hospitality and has a true servant’s heart! You can see the joy and warmth in her eyes and the sincerity in her voice as she welcomes her guests and caters to their every need. Traci has a background in human resources and teaching. She too has traveled abroad, experiencing seventeen countries through the JET teaching program (Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme). “When Jason and I met, we recognized the commonality between us - the love to serve and sensitivity to different cultures,” shares Traci.

When the Niedziela’s bought the property there were only 5 cabins. They have made many additions and modifications to the property and cabins since then and established an array of features and activities for their guests to enjoy. “We don’t want our business to go stale. When people come we want them to see something new and different, so we keep changing or updating the look and keeping things fresh and new,” says Traci.

“I prepare each cabin like my grandmother did, with attention to detail and a lot of love,” Traci shares. The cabins are each individually decorated with a different theme. When you walk into one of the cabins, you immediately feel the warm and tranquility as you are taken in by its rustic charm. There is such a cozy feeling about the cabins and you can sense the love and care that went into prepare each one. The decor is unique and joyful, a true home away from home. The light feels the room as you experience a morning sunrise or an evening sunset. Either way, it adds a romantic glow over the Hideaway for its guest to embrace.

The Hideaway features a cowboy swimming hole, 4 stocked fishing ponds for guest enjoyment and you can even get a cane fishing pole at the office/general store. Guests also may enjoy horseback rides, led by Trail Boss, Jason. Hay rides, archery, hiking trails, wagon rides, and for the full country/western experience - Friday night chuck wagon diner is prepared by Chief Cook, Jason. You can also enjoy cowboy coffee and cobbler by the campfire. “We will do as much or as little as our guests want, some people just want to be left alone while other are looking for adventure!” explains Traci. In fact, Traci is even learning to play the guitar to even further enhance the experience and to entertain her guests.

“We now have a new facility for group events – weddings, corporate meetings, reunions, birthdays, graduation parties, etc. called Cantina Del Sol,” explains Traci. The Cantina is rustic but colorful with a cheerful presence about it, perfect for gatherings and country weddings. As you enter the beautifully and uniquely painted door with a colorful Spanish theme it makes you feel like you are entering a secret place far away from the hustle and bustle of everyday living. The decor is as country as you can get with packed dirt floors, cedar stays and tin siding. The inside is tastefully decorated with a colorful Spanish flare. There are hay bales to sit on as well as Spanish style stools. You will find a catering service area for your convenience set up like an old

west bar and it is also equipped with a PA system and stage area for live music. For colder months there is a wood burning stove nestled in the corner to keep you warm. During warmer months, the Cantina opens up as windows swing out and pop open to allow the cool breeze and country air to captivate you in this charming but rustic setting. The Cantina also features a covered outdoor area with picnic tables and grill area for overflow of larger groups. All is conveniently located next to the fully equipped Cowboy chuck wagon. "We recognized the need for this type of facility and experience right here in the 'Cowboy Capital of the World' so that was part of our motivation for designing and offering the Cantina," concludes Jason.

To emphasize on offering the best wedding setting possible, the Hideaway plans to add a cowboy pergola for their couples to utilize. Jason already has plans at hand to build the pergola and has just the right spot in mind. Jason explains, "I've already picked out the perfect wedding site on the ranch. It's a beautiful location where the trees will frame the view of the cedar post pergola complete with uniquely crafted stone benches overlooking the perfect sunset."

"Buffalo Gulch" is the name of the Hideaway's fictitious old west town. Right in the heart of the ranch you will find the beginnings of this old west town displaying a general store, jail, and saddle shop. "Buffalo Gulch is a work in progress, we add new and creative features to it whenever we can and always are looking for unique ways to bring a true cowboy experience to our guests. We want them to have a little "step-back-in-time" experience," states Jason. "We hope to add a Chapel in the future to our little town," gleams Traci.

Another addition Jason and Traci plan to add to the Hideaway is a food section to the office/general store area. "Since we are located in the middle of nowhere, we want to offer some food and snack items to our visitors," says Traci.

The Hideaway is always looking for ways to add adventure to your stay. They have created a fun activity for the kids to enjoy that come to visit on family vacation, the "Bank Robbery Scavenger Hunt". This activity keeps the kids entertained for hours as they search the ranch for clues to solve a mystery. Upon completing this challenge, kids receive a shiny silver deputy badge for their efforts in cracking the case - a real favorite with the kids! "The kids have so much fun with this that we have decided to add a similar, more sophisticated adventure for the adults," says Traci. They plan to add a geocaching challenge in the near future. (Geocaching is a high-tech treasure hunting game played throughout the world by adventure seekers equipped with GPS devices. The basic idea is to locate hidden containers, called geocaches, outdoors and then share your experiences online. Geocaching is enjoyed by people from all age groups, with a strong sense of community and support for the environment.)

"People come to us from the major metro areas, although several have visited from the U.K, Demark, Germany, Japan, Europe, Great Britain, Russia and China. Most people from other cultures come to us looking for a real Texas cowboy experience and that's what we give them! A man from China, who visited, couldn't wait to ride a horse," Traci states giggling.

Jason and Traci are committed to their work, business and community. "We want to make Erath County a tourism destination - we want to bring tourism here," Jason passionately shares. In addition to the unique experience you can encounter at The Hideaway Ranch and Retreat, there are other nearby tourist attractions in neighboring communities such as, Glen Rose, Stephenville, Granbury and Dublin. You can visit Dinosaur Valley State Park, Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, Veldhuizen Cheese and Dairy, Dublin Dr Pepper, Stephenville Opra House, and experience shopping galore on the square in downtown Granbury.

Aside from their aspirations for being a true tourism destination, the Niedzielas also want to appeal and cater to their local clients. "Our long term goals are to reach out to our local communities and offer day trips. We are always thinking of events and activities to offer to give people something to do," explains Jason. Some ideas Jason and Traci are kicking around that would appeal more to the local crowd are adding a 9 hole miniature golf course, a corporate team building course, and a "Cowboy Kids Club" for kids to have a mini "Dude Ranch" type experience during Summer and Spring months.

The Hideaway Ranch and Retreat is packed full of adventure but at the same time offers the tranquility of nature. Just being there gives you a sense of peacefulness as if you have stepped into a time warp to experience all that country living and the old west have to offer. Romance and magic fills the air, even the sky overhead seems to be different portraying beautifully artistic sunsets as well as starry nights - true "Home on the Range" feeling.

Traci concludes, "We want to make people feel welcomed and that they are the only ones on the ranch. I make sure that every person who leaves the ranch is sad to leave and that they want to tell other people about the Hideaway. I want to make a human connection and let them know that we genuinely appreciate their business," Most of the clientele are returns and referrals. I try to make people feel like they are coming home – like they are coming to the ranch to visit old friends."