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NORTH TEXAS HILL COUNTRY



Wildcatter Resort a starting point

BY JUDY WILEY
Special to the Express-News

About an hour and a half outside Fort Worth, the rest of the world has disappeared. Wildflowers rush over fields in wide washes of brilliance at springtime, lone oaks in their midst silhouetted against the sky. Caves hide in cream cliffs that are the rugged, bare skins of hillsides.

Once I reach Wildcatter Ranch Resort and Spa, I sink into a big, wooden rocker facing the plateau's



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edge, looking down over the Brazos River Valley and doze.

This is the country where Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving's famous cattle trail began, a base of operations for the two men whose story became "Lonesome Dove." Today, it's a place to shake off the rest of the world on the back of a horse in the hills, or from a hammock gazing at the Milky Way.

This swath of rolling, spacious land in Young, Palo Pinto and western Parker counties often is billed as the North Texas Hill Country.

While it may be argued that Hico, farther south in Hamilton County and Granbury in Hood County also are part of the North Texas Hill Country, I've focused my trip on the less familiar patch of pretty north of I-20. These hills to the north have their own life and times — with plenty to see and do and learn.

First, there's luxury — well-appointed cabins and suites, a fine-dining steakhouse and a spa right on top of the plateau, at Wildcatter. Owner Anne Street Skipper's high-end resort is about eight miles from Graham, the small town founded by her great-grandfather in 1872.

Wildcatter; the oilfield term for a driller who tries



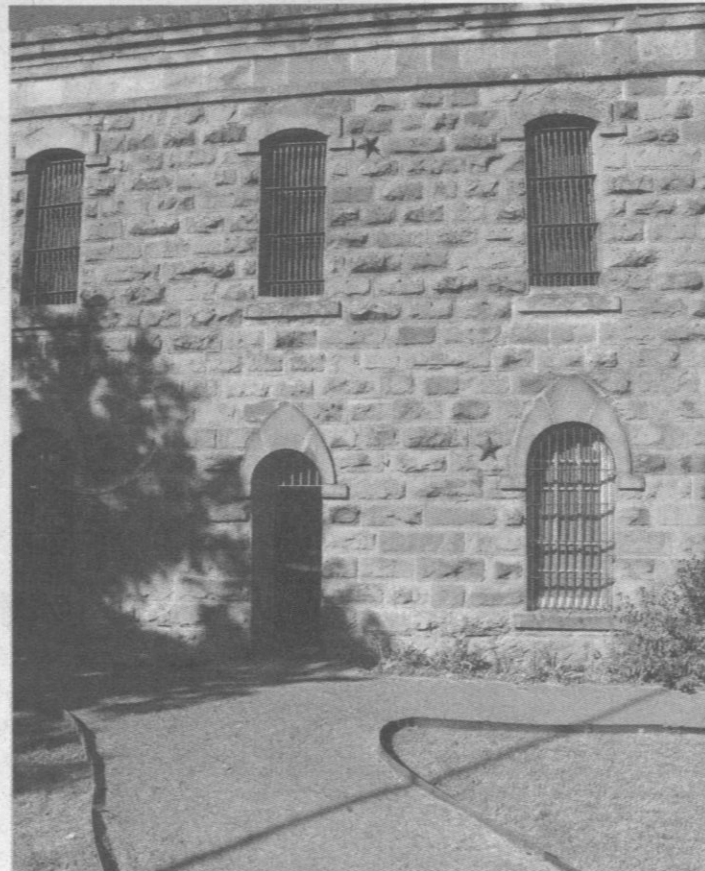
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TOP: The porches on the cabins at Wildcatter Ranch Resort and Spa in Young County are perfect for relaxing and taking in the view.

MIDDLE: Guests at the resort ride horseback along the Brazos River.

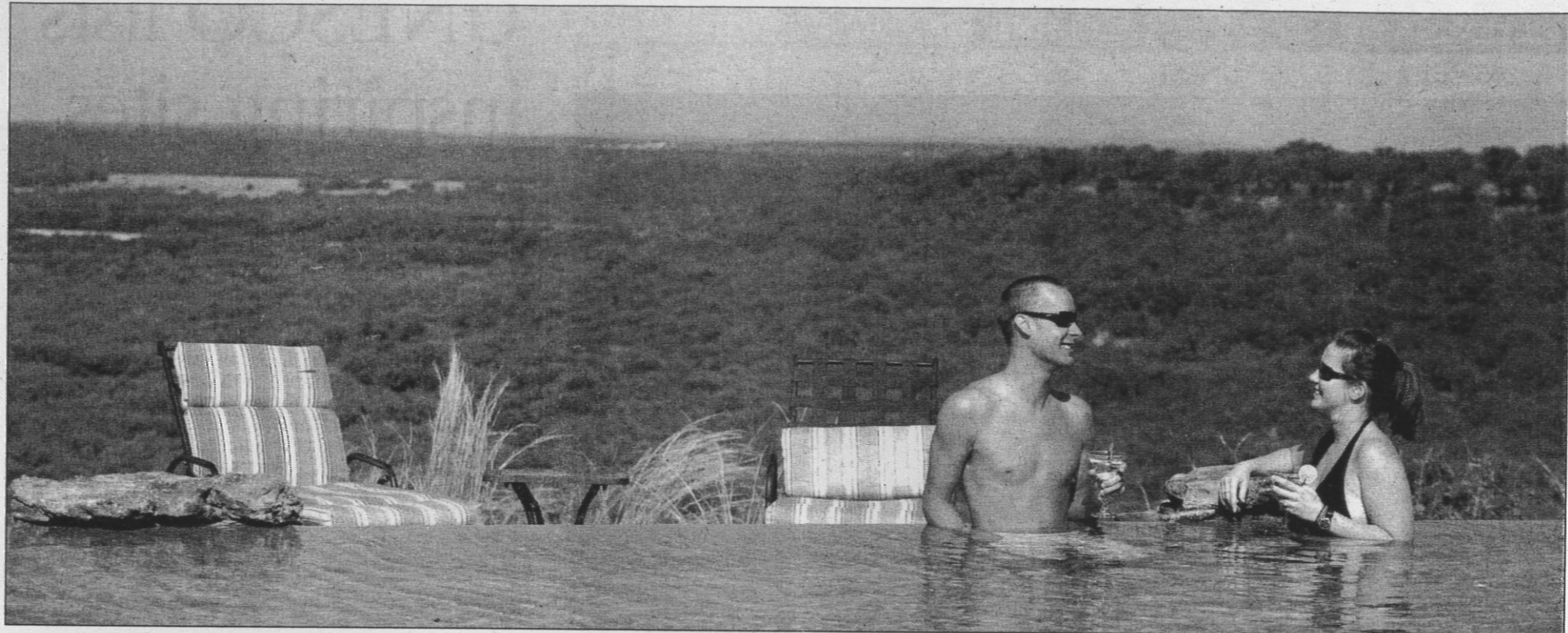
ABOVE LEFT: A rope bed and a baby carriage help re-create a typical bedroom in a historic cabin at the Old Jail Museum Complex in Palo Pinto.

RIGHT: The jail at the Old Jail Museum Complex in Palo Pinto was built in 1880.



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The infinity edge pool at Wildcatter Ranch Resort and Spa looks out over the North Texas Hill Country.

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COUNTRY

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untested territory, was appropriate, Skipper says, when she and her brother came up with the untested idea of a ranch resort in Young County and began to buy property for it.

Their great-grandfather probably never imagined the plateau and surrounding 1,500 acres would hold a resort with an exquisite infinity-edge pool that seems to drop off the edge of a cliff down to the Brazos, along with a soothing spa, stables and more. A fleet of bicycles for kids is ready for action near a sand volleyball court and tetherball poles. Families can hike, fish or ride horses. Adults can go skeet shooting — or sit on the porch with the ranch's adopted bloodhound Major snoozes nearby.

Wildcatter is a good base of operations for exploring the area, which is home to a huge lake, gorgeous drives and small-town charm.

Watersports, rock climbing

For those who crave waterskiing and boating, parts of Possum Kingdom Lake are only about six miles away.

The lake — 5,000-18,000 acres, depending on water levels — is a result of the Morris Sheppard Dam on the Brazos River. Its clear waters are a playground



Live music is part of the scene at Wildcatter Ranch Steakhouse.

for everyone for miles around in this landlocked part of the world. Rock-climbers favor Lake Mineral Wells State Park and Trailways to the west. The 3,000-acre park has trails for hiking, horseback riding, backpacking and bicycling, and allows climbing and rappelling on several sheer rock formations. Climbers and rappellers must check in before scaling the heights, and no one is permitted on the rocks in wet weather.

History

Young County is peppered with 50 historical markers where various battles, raids and massacres took place. A CD-led driving tour, which you can find at the Graham Convention and Visitors Bureau, just off the square at 458 Oak St., is the best way to take in the history. Plan to devote the better part of a day to the tour if you want to stop and spend time at sites such as

Fort Belknap, established in the 1850s, or pull over and imagine the days of the Marlow Brothers ambush.

An easy half-day trip is down to Palo Pinto, about a hour away on Texas 16 South and FM 4 South, to get a more personal look at the area's history at the Old Jail Museum Complex. It's made up of historical buildings moved to the area around the sandstone jail that still stands where it was built in 1880.

For one of the prettiest scenic drives in the area, continue on FM 4 through the Palo Pinto Mountains to Granbury, just over an hour from Palo Pinto.

Small-town charm

Granbury, built around Lake Granbury, has a busier shopping and tourist scene than the smaller towns up north. You'll find antique stores, restaurants and shops around the historic courthouse.

North Texans swear by

If you go

Where to stay

The 1,500-acre ranch resort in southeast Young County features luxury suites and cabins, a spa and steakhouse. Rates start at about \$129. Located Off Texas 16 south of Graham, about 2½ hours from Dallas Love Field. Info: WildcatterRanch.com or (888) 462-9277.

Outdoor recreation

■ Possum Kingdom Lake, brazos.org or (888) 922-6272.

■ Lake Mineral Wells State Park, tpwd.state.tx.us and search "Mineral Wells" or (940) 328-1171.

Sights and shopping

■ The Old Jail Museum, Fifth and Elm streets, Palo Pinto. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. Free. PaloPintoHistory.com or (940)-659-2555.

■ Clark Gardens Botanical Park, 3 miles east of Mineral Wells, technically in Weatherford. From Texas 180, you'll see a small sign. Turn north on Maddux Road

Babe's Chicken Dinner House, just off the square, where perfectly fried chicken is served with family-style side dishes. It's a popular, small North Texas chain.

Back toward Graham, don't expect potpourri-scented gift shops. The

and go about a mile. Admission, \$5-7; 4 and younger, free. ClarkGardens.org or (940)-682-4856.

■ An Ancient Art Soap Co., 108 N. Central, Strawn. StrawnSoap.com or (254) 672-5421.

Dining

■ Babe's Chicken Dinner House, 114 W. Pearl St., Granbury. BabesChicken.com or (817) 573-9777. Fried chicken. Moderate.

■ Neri's Gild and Nosh, 523 Fourth St., Graham (940) 549-8000. Soups, sandwiches, homestyle specials. Inexpensive to moderate.

■ Mary's Café, 119 Grant Ave., Strawn. (254) 672-5741. Chicken fried steak. Moderate.

More info

■ Graham Convention and Visitors Bureau, VisitGrahamTexas.com or (866) 549-0401.

■ Granbury Convention and Visitors Bureau, GranburyTX.com or (877) 936-1201.

downtowns are quiet places for the people who live and shop here for necessities. When I visited, the courthouse lawn in Graham was packed. The occasion: The local hospital's ladies' auxiliary was having its popular, fundraising Mexican dinner at

noon.

I opted to try Neri's Gild and Nosh, also downtown, and was rewarded with amazing chilled avocado soup. Neri's also serves up specials from mahi-mahi to meatloaf.

If you make many stops between Dallas-Fort Worth Airport and Graham, you'll probably hear more than one recommendation to try the chicken fried steaks at Mary's Café in Strawn while you're in the area.

Do it, but go hungry and go early. Mary's is standing-room-only at lunchtime.

While you're in Strawn, also check out An Ancient Art Soap Co., where you can buy a range of hand-crafted soaps in bulk and have bars cut and wrapped for you.

Back at the ranch, don't forget to set aside at least one evening for dining at the Steakhouse. I enjoyed a juicy, perfectly cooked filet and attentive service in the fine-but-not-stuffy restaurant.

If you appreciate gardening, you should not pass up Clark Gardens in Mineral Wells.

What began as a private garden has become more than 100 acres with educational and scientific components, using sustainable practices and many drought-tolerant and native species.

It's a peaceful way to end the trip before you re-enter the rush of the world.