

TRAVEL

Saddle up dudes for winter at the Double JJ ranch

By HUGH GALLAGHER
Staff Writer

Winter on a working ranch is a quiet time—a time to mend fences, paint buildings and catch up on paperwork.

But at the Double JJ Resort Ranch, the activity level picks up as guests arrive to cross country ski, tube down a hill, drive a team of hunkies, ride horses across snowy landscapes, hold corporate brainstorming sessions in wooded settings and then come in from the cold to warm by a fire or kick up their heels for a country line dance.

The Double JJ Resort in Rothbury, Mich., near Muskegon, is an all-year, 1,200-acre facility that combines the typical golf and water sports resort with a western style dude ranch. Since 1988, Bob and Joan Lipsitz of Bloomfield Hills have owned the resort, dividing their time between the city and country and continuously adding to the amenities and activities at the Double JJ.

"We were doing a lot of traveling, looking at different sites and getting tired of politics," said Joan Lipsitz. "We'd always worked for large agencies and

decided to forgo that and do this. It was new, looked challenging. We were used to the 24-hour mode not the 9 to 5 mode."

Both Lipsitzes had experience in outdoor activities. Bob, 45, had been executive director of Tamarack camps from 1982 to 1987 and Joan, 40, had worked as a counselor and administrator at the camps.

Bob had also formed a non-profit educational association, with Joan as director, that promoted learning through field experience. This led to formation of "Corporate Challenge," a management training company that provides outdoor experiences for corporate clientele.

The Double JJ was founded in 1937 as the Jack and Jill Ranch by George Storm as an adults-only, all-inclusive vacation resort, originally geared to singles. The Lipsitzes are the ranch's fourth owners.

"When we bought it, it was a typical ranch. Some rooms have bunkbeds, no phones, no TVs," said Joan.

In 1993, the couple opened the Thoroughbred Golf Club, north of the original ranch. The club has an 18-hole golf course

designed by Arthur Hills and once rated by Golf Digest as "best in the state." The Thoroughbred has a modern loft hotel, the Homestead Condominiums (with up to three bedrooms) and a corporate conference center.

In July, the resort will add a new and unusual feature—the Back Forty Resort, which Joan Lipsitz calls a double exclusive resort. The couple have received a state community block grant to help in the \$3 million project.

The Double JJ Ranch has been an adults-only facility. The new Back Forty will recreate a kids-only ranch for the children of ranch guests. The special ranch will feature camp sleeping units designed as conestoga wagons, teepees, tree houses and bunk houses.

"There will be lots of activities for children—horseback riding, target sports, a swimming pool, not just a swimming pool but ropes, swings, more a Tom Sawyer kind of thing and evening entertainment," Lipsitz said.

Mom and Dad will be nearby at the regular Ranch resort doing their own thing, but still able to check in on the kids.

But families can also stay together in a family-exclusive section of the Back Forty which will have family cabins.

"It's really a destination resort, everything is there," Lipsitz said.

Everything includes horseback riding (the ranch has 90 horses); canoes, rowboats and paddleboats on two private lakes; golf; miniature golf; archery; tennis; volleyball; horseshoes; biking; country-style entertainment every evening; a mechanical bull; hayrides and sleighrides; and, in winter, dog sledding, cross-country skiing; tubing and more.

In February, the Double JJ Resort in cooperation with the White Lake Chamber of Commerce sponsors a two-week SnowFest highlighted by dog



Hard riding: Horses are an important part of the experience at the Double JJ.

sled and cross country ski races. The Double JJ Siberian Round-Up sled races includes four, six and eight-dog sprints using Siberians only. The ranch has Siberian and Alaskan huskies.

The ranch gives visitors lessons in dog sledding.

"We have been so well received, no one has been truly uncomfortable," Lipsitz said about the dog sledding. "We're careful how we take care of the animals. We encourage guests to meet the dogs, meet the horses, and they're really comfortable with it. We get them to the point where they mush their own teams."

For horseback riders, the resort offers beginner, intermediate and advanced riding.

"Everyone rides at their own comfort level, of course some adults try to ride beyond their level but we restrain them because we are so safety con-

scious," Lipsitz said.

The ranch atmosphere is emphasized in the summer with a weekly Friday rodeo.

The Lipsitzes divide the time between Bloomfield Hills and the Double JJ. The couple's sons, Brian, 14, and Michael, 12, attend Bloomfield Hills schools.

"One is into horses. The oldest, Brian, he loves every bit of it. And Michael is the golfer," Lipsitz said. "There are great schools here. They like the city and they like the ranch. This is the best of both worlds. They're good kids."

The couple commute three or four times a week. Joan Lipsitz continues her corporate challenge activities, which is another major part of the resort's program.

"We can offer corporate groups exactly what they're looking for. As a ranch, it was too uncomfortable for corporate getaways, but now we can give them what they

want in the surroundings they want," she said.

The couple have more plans for the resort in the coming years, including more hotel rooms and condos, another 18-hole golf course and a "wee links" par-3 course for their young Back Forty guests.

The ranch facility is open May through November. The Left Hotel and Homestead at Thoroughbred are open year round. The resort offers daily, weekend, mini-vacation and weeklong packages. The packages are centered around horseback riding, golf or a combination of the two. All-inclusive packages including dining in the Ranch Chuck Wagon and discounts for meals at the Sundance Saloon and Steakhouse at Thoroughbred.

For more information on the Double JJ, call 1-(800)DOUBLE JJ.



Home on the range: The ranch house at the Double JJ takes visitors back to the Old West.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schulerford, Livonia, MI, 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279.

DRUNKS BARRED

Tough new measures to curb drunkenness by air travelers has been introduced by British Airways to support the safety and security of its passengers and staff.

The airline is empowering its ground and air employees stop passengers who appear drunk from boarding the aircraft and to stop serving in-flight alcohol to anyone who appears to be on the verge of drunkenness. In addition, the carrier is also sanctioning cabin crews to remove duty-free drinks from inebriated travelers.

The British Airways "alcohol policy" follows two recent court cases in Britain where jail sentences of up to two years were passed following assaults on airline cabin crews by drunken passengers.

SNOWMOBILE POKER RUN

The fourth annual St. Ignace Poker Run is scheduled for Jan. 10, Feb. 14 and March 14.

What's a poker run? Snowmobilers register and start in St. Ignace with the option of following routes traveling north, east or west. Stops are made at participating restaurants and businesses along the routes to collect playing cards. The objective being to collect the "best poker hand." When the ride is over and everyone has settled back in St. Ignace for an evening meal, the best hands will be awarded prizes including motel lodging, restaurant gift certificates and clothing.

Registration is free at the State Street Bar & Grill in downtown St. Ignace from 10 a.m. to noon. For more information on the poker run, call the St. Ignace Chamber of Commerce/Tourist Association at 1-800-338-6660 or 906-643-8717.

TORONTO THEATER

For 12 weeks this winter, theater and performing arts fans will have an opportunity to "go backstage" during Stages '98, the second annual celebration of

Toronto's arts scene.

Some 30 theatrical and performing arts productions will be offering either discounted tickets, preferred seating, special gifts or other added values.

As an extra bonus, all visitors who purchase a ticket through Stages '98 will have the opportunity to enjoy for free, "The Phantom Program Part IV: Musical Explorations & Theatrical Effects," an innovative multimedia behind-the-scenes event that looks at Canada's longest

running multi-media behind-the-scenes event that looks at Canada's longest running musical, "The Phantom of the Opera."

For a complete list of Stages '98 events and special packages, visitors can call Tourism Toronto toll-free from throughout North America at 1-800-363-1990, or call direct at 1-416-203-2500.

HOLIDAY TRAVELERS

An estimated 1.2 million Michiganders—13 percent of the state's population—have travel plans for the upcoming holiday

period, AAA Michigan reports. Many of these travel plans include warm weather destinations. Nationwide, a record 44.6 million people are expected to travel 100 miles or more during the Christmas-New Year's period. This represents a 6 percent increase over last year's levels.

Eighteen percent of those under the age of 50 said they were likely to travel, while only 8 percent of those 50 years old or older said they had travel plans. Orlando was the top destination.

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