Cattle drive

I don't get it: cattlemen couples spend 51 weeks a year slaving away on the ranch, and what do they do for their one week of vacation per year?

They go on a ranch tour, of course! Talk about a busman's holiday.

Ah, there's nothing like a tour of other ranches to get away from it all. I don't know why ranch couples do this. Do they ride the chuck line, seeing the country through the window of a bus and eating one beef barbecue after another at ranches that would appear to be very much like their own, just to see how the other half lives? They could stay home watching home movies and see the same thing.

They belong to the Infrequent Flyers Club. They don't want to fly to foreign places to see the wonders of the world, rub elbows in big cities or see "pretty" places. Take away all that scenery and what do you have, besides costly hotels and foreigners with cameras around their necks.

Instead, ranchers prefer the splendid isolation of being on civilization's fringe. As tourists they prefer to go to where there are no tourists. They know they need a change of pasture, and they want to spend it making memories with others of their kind; people who know what eight-way, shrink and brucellosis are.

There are no strangers in ranch country, and going on tour with fellow cattlemen is the next best thing to staying home. They trade good dollars for bad quarters knowing full well that they won't be staying at four-star hotels with bell hops to lug their old-fashioned hard-sided luggage or concierges to tell them where they might buy a postcard. But they don't sell postcards of the sights they're seeing anyway or "genuine" imitation local artifacts for the tourist trade. They often fill up every motel in town in places with names like Hereford and Bovina.

These are folks who know the majesty of simple things. The women identify the birds and

wildflowers while the men stand in circles for hours examining a handful of feed, weeds or seeds. They can look at hay balers and bulls endlessly and still be excited to go see the same thing at the next stop. And they know the rules of the road.

They know not to ask their hosts how many cows or acres they own, and if one of their buses breaks down they don't complain, they just all get out to help fix it. These are not fussy or hard-to-please people.

I remember one time in the Big Bend area of Texas when our three buses descended on a park near Fort Stockton expecting to find a barbecue. We circled that park three times before realizing there'd be no beef that night. And so I spent half my month's salary on beer and bags of chips and everyone was as happy as if they'd had a steak at K Bobs.

Then there was the tour of ranchers who went to California and stopped at a winery where they loaded up on bottles of red wine to take back home. But the wine didn't last past their next stop, where Gene Rambo, the great rodeo cowboy and rancher, made some of his world-famous homemade ice cream. (At least it was world famous in our neck of the woods.) It was so cold you had to eat it slow or you'd get a headache. But that's not really why the men's heads throbbed the next day.

I don't know who got the bright idea to mix the vanilla ice cream with the red wine to make fermented milkshakes, but they did. And the next morning you never saw three busloads of sicker cowboys in your entire life.

Yet they still signed up the next year, and all the years thereafter, to see the same old sights, the same old people and to tell the same old stories.

So what if the price you pay is a splitting headache? So, while the women pressed the clothes they'd wear the next day on tour, the gentlemen of the bar held court: "Remember those wine milkshakes out at Rambo's place out in California?"

Remember! How could they ever forget.

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