



Out in God's Country

Hiking, Heritage, and More Make Philmont a True Scouting Paradise.

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Philmont. Like the Eagle Scout award and the Scout sign, it's one of the symbols of Scouting most people outside the program readily recognize. But they—like many Scouters—don't often understand exactly what Philmont represents.

They may not realize, for example, that Philmont Scout Ranch is the largest youth camping facility in the world. Or that it's also the national volunteer training center of the Boy Scouts of America. Or that it remains a working ranch, just as it has been for decades.

Most significantly, they may not realize—and couldn't possibly understand—how Philmont casts a spell over nearly every Scout and Scouter who visits. But exert a spell it does, so much so that many visitors start plotting their return trips before they ever leave the ranch. Frank Sinatra may have left his heart in San Francisco, but thousands of Scouts and Scouters have left theirs at just a few miles south of Cimarron, N.M.

Into the Backcountry

Philmont's signature attraction is its backcountry program. Every day during the summer, some 20 to 25 crews of Scouts or Venturers arrive at base camp to begin 12-day treks into Philmont's backcountry (and occasionally beyond). That amounts to roughly 20,000 campers a year—even in years like 2005, when a National Scout Jamboree pulls tens of thousands of Scouts in a different direction.

The trek program is so popular that the waiting list is as long as the trail from Clarks Fork up to the Tooth of Time. In fact, if every confirmed crew dropped out before next summer, there would be enough crews on the waiting list to fill all the available slots.

Why is Philmont so popular? One reason is that it provides the closest thing possible to an introductory backpacking experience (if 10 days of hiking up and down 9,000- to 12,000-foot mountains could be called introductory). Crews receive extensive pre-trek information and can check out virtually all the gear they need at base camp. Backcountry commissaries resupply crews with food every three or four days. Most importantly, each crew is assigned a ranger, who trains them in base camp and then accompanies them during their first couple of days, leaving them on their own once he or she is convinced they're ready.

The crews aren't completely alone, however. Each crew follows an established itinerary that is selected months in advance and finalized at base camp. If hikers don't show up at a designated overnight campsite, staff members will track them down.

Staff members do more than just guide and find crews; many work in the array of staffed backcountry camps. Every second or third day, crews visit such a camp, where staff members lead activities that Scouts will remember long after they've forgotten their sore muscles and blisters. Some camps bring alive Philmont's rich history; for example, Scouts can learn about Native American culture at Apache Springs, climb spar poles at Crater Lake, and pan for gold at French Henry. Other camps offer physical challenges: burro racing at Abreu, rock climbing at Cimarroncito, and mountain biking at Whiteman Vega. Still others teach advanced outdoor skills, such as no-trace camping at Dan Beard and wilderness search and rescue at Seally Canyon.

It's those programs that continue to attract Troop 405 from Georgetown, Texas, which has sent 32 crews to the ranch since 1989. "Where else can Scouts participate in rock climbing, spar-pole climbing, horseback riding, black-powder rifle shooting, etc., during a 10-day backpacking trek?" said Scoutmaster Calvin Gray. He also praised the backcountry campfires, which "really add to the whole experience."

The Philmont experience includes a sense of history and heritage that's almost palpable. Scouts hike trails that were blazed by Apache Indians, worn smooth by frontiersmen, and followed by earlier generations of Scouts. Members of Dr. Bob Klein's troop in Arlington, Va., have been visiting Philmont for at least 40 years and consistently rate Philmont as the high point of their Scouting careers. "Troop 111 Scouts were graduating from Philmont when I was graduating from diapers," Klein said. "That's a hell of a legacy."

It's not at all uncommon for fathers to return to the ranch with their sons, and grandfathers even show up from time to time. Chas. Clifton's father hiked at Philmont before he was born, he said, and "I was raised in a dining room where the Philmont grace was spoken before almost every meal, and the Philmont grace plaque hung over the door." The Port Neches, Texas, Scoutmaster led a Philmont crew in 2001 and returned with his family to the Philmont Training Center this summer. Now, his 11-year-old daughter has caught the bug and is looking forward to the time she can join a Venturing crew and go on her own trek.

With the combination of unique programs, an extensive support system, and a reputation as Scouting's Mecca, it's no wonder that Philmont retains its popularity three generations after the first Scouts hiked into its canyons.

Getting A Trek Reservation

Getting a slot at Philmont is about as hard as getting a table at the latest hip Manhattan restaurant—and the wait is even longer. Slots are assigned a year and a half in advanced through a Web-based lottery system. (At this writing, the registration window for 2007 is about to close.)

The first step in making a reservation is to call Philmont at 505-376-2281 and request a registration information packet. You can also download information from the Philmont Staff Association's website at www.philstaff.com. As an alternative, you can contact your local council; many councils send contingents to Philmont every summer. (In fact, if your unit doesn't have enough members to make up a crew, participating in a council contingent is a great alternative.)

Traditional treks aren't the only backcountry programs Philmont offers. Units can sign up for Cavalcades, which are horseback treks, and the ranch offers a variety of individual programs that are rarely sold out. For example, the Roving Outdoor Conservation School (ROCS) is a 21-day program that focuses on conservation and resource management, while the Ranch Hands program combines eight days of working in Philmont's horse department with a special eight-day Cavalcade. Other opportunities include special fall and winter programs that let visitors see the ranch in a whole new way.

In 2004, Philmont opened a satellite facility southwest of Albuquerque. Dubbed the Double H High Adventure Base, it offers a unique backpacking experience that in many ways is more rugged than Philmont itself. Call Philmont for more information.

Into the Classroom

Just down the road from camping headquarters, a very different sort of Philmont experience unfolds each summer. At the Philmont Training Center (PTC), thousands of Scouters participate in weeklong conferences designed to improve the Scouting program back home.

And not just Boy Scouting. PTC offers courses for Cub Scout leaders, Venturing leaders, council and district volunteers, and professional Scouters.

Whether your interest is in Cub Scout roundtables, Hispanic outreach, conservation programs, endowment development, Scouting in the United Methodist church, or utilizing council properties, there's a conference for you. In 2006, 68 different conferences will be offered, some more than once.

That word "conference" is important. Faculty members work as facilitators, and participants fully participate—sharing their knowledge and experience with each other.

Such sharing made a lasting impression on conference participant Regina Peterson of Conifer, Colo. "I was so uplifted by meeting other people who have the same goals that I do in working with young men," she said. "Hearing their experiences and talking about the way they handle various situations was probably the best part."

Faculty members work hard to meet participants' needs. Some faculty members start the week by letting participants create their own learning objectives, crossing them off the list as they're covered during the week. It's not at all uncommon for faculty members to throw out their plans after the first day in order to better meet their participants' expectations.

PTC schedules its conferences in logical groupings—Boy Scout conferences one week, Cub Scout conferences the next, and so forth—so you'll find the place overrun with people from your corner of the Scouting program, even if they're from a different corner of the country.

You'll also find the place overrun with kids of all ages. PTC is very much a family-friendly operation; it offers a nursery for kids as young as two months old, age-based programs for kids from ages 3 through 20, and special activities for spouses and other non-conference adults. Conference and family program schedules are coordinated so families can enjoy meals and evening activities together.

Togetherness was a real highlight of the Philmont experience for conference participant Alison Melton of Louisville, Ky. "Overall we found this to be a relatively inexpensive vacation that gave us a lot of time together as a family and allowed all to enjoy different activities throughout the week," she said.

All the free time initially worried David Wade and his wife of Shapleigh, Me., both of whom took courses in 2004. "Before attending, we wondered what we were going to do after class. We soon discovered that not having enough time was the problem," Wade said.

The Wades, like all PTC participants, were able to choose from a menu of activities, including tours of the Villa Philmonte and the Philmont Museum, hikes on trails set aside just for PTC participants, forays into the village of Cimarron, visits to camping headquarters and the Tooth of Time Traders, nightly worship services, sing-alongs in Tent City, and even a Western night complete with homegrown buffalo barbecue.

Kids who are in Scouting and spouses who are into the outdoors usually look forward to a week at the training center, but other family members sometimes don't relish the idea of sleeping in a tent for a week (even if it does have electricity). 2004 conference participant Bill Brosius of Cross Plains, Wisc., remembers the reaction of his daughter, who was 15 at the time. "She fought us for six months that she was not going to have any fun and tried absolutely everything to get out of trip, including calling my mom who lives 200 miles away and asking her to send a limo to pick her up and take her to my mom's house," Brosius said.

A year and a half later, Brosius' daughter is still friends with kids she met at Philmont. She hopes to work on staff in 2006.

That transformation doesn't surprise Cole Petersen of Burnsville, Minn., who has served on the PTC faculty for four years. "Philmont does something to people," he said. "Everyone is energized, yet relaxed. It's amazing, and it happens every time."

To three-time faculty member and former trek advisor Barry Bingham, it's the people that make Philmont special. "It is the people who come to Philmont that make a difference—their commitment to Scouting and whatever their task while at Philmont, whether it is the staff, the faculty, the participants, the Scouts, their advisors, etc.," he said. "Everyone considers it a 'special place,' so they think and act that way."

Signing up for the Training Center

To attend a conference at the Philmont Training Center, you must be nominated by your local council. This step helps ensure that people take classes that correspond with their Scouting jobs. It wouldn't make much sense, for example, for a Boy Scout roundtable commissioner to take "Supercharging Den and Pack Programs."

Of course, your local council may not know that you're a roundtable commissioner who's yearning to be a den leader, so Philmont encourages you to initiate the nomination process. You can call Philmont at 505-376-2281 or visit the PTC Web site at www.scouting.org/philmont/ptc/index.html for more information.

A Brief History of Philmont

As president of the Boy Scouts of America in the 1930s, Walter Head received a lot of mail. None was more significant than the letter that arrived in December 1937 from Tulsa oilman Waite Phillips.

"For many years," Phillips wrote, "I have carried the thought in my mind a project that I hoped would be beneficial to the Boy Scouts." The project? To give the BSA a 35,857-acre chunk of his New Mexico ranch with virtually no strings attached. He even offered \$50,000 to be used to turn the property into a Boy Scout camp.

Phillips' offer was surprising. He had only begun piecing together his beloved ranch 16 years earlier, and he relished the chance to spend long days in the rugged backcountry, often accompanied by visitors like humorist Will Rogers and Vice President Charles Dawes. His palatial home on the ranch—the Villa Philmonte—was scarcely a decade old. Moreover, he'd had no significant involvement with the Boy Scouts before.

But Phillips was always restless, always looking toward the setting sun. Moreover, having achieved great wealth by his mid 40s, he had a unique perspective on life. One of his favorite epigrams was, "The only things we keep permanently are those we give away."

At first, BSA officials were unsure about Phillips' offer and decided to send a scouting party to visit the ranch in September 1938. The party, which grew to include Head, Chief Scout Executive James E. West, and other top officials, quickly fell in love

with the land and began to envision the possibilities it offered. On October 20, the National Executive Board officially accepted Phillip's gift, creating what was initially called Philtorn Rockymountain Scoutcamp. (The name was a play on Phillips' name and the good turn he'd done for Scouting.)

Plans were quickly made for Philtorn's inaugural camping season in 1939. Despite heavy promotion (and a weekly rate of \$1.00 per camper!), less than 150 campers arrived that first summer. The number quadrupled the next year and continued to grow exponentially as more and more Scouts learned about the magic of the mountains.

When Phillips stayed at the Villa Philmonte, he often drove up to Philtorn to watch the Scouts in action. Pleased by what he saw, he prepared to make a second gift to the Boy Scouts, one that would make his first gift look paltry. The new gift, formalized in December 1941, was staggering: an additional 91,538 acres of land, including the Villa Philmonte and all of the ranch's buildings, livestock, and equipment. As with the first gift, he also offered something to help the BSA fund its operations: the 23-story Philtower Building in Tulsa, which was then taking in \$130,000 in rent every year. All told, Phillips' new gift was worth \$5 million, or about \$66 million in today's money.

Not surprisingly, the Boy Scouts quickly accepted this new gift. They renamed the expanded property Philmont Scout Ranch and began building the backcountry programs Scouts still enjoy today. (An additional property acquisition in 1963 added Mount Baldy and its environs, bringing the ranch's total size to 137,493 acres.)

Training programs for Scouters began in the Villa Philmonte in 1950. However, the idea dated back to the original visit of Scout leaders to the ranch in 1938, when Regional Scout Executive James Fitch proposed establishing "a great university of the outdoors" at Philmont.