

Pigeons in Paradise

Skeet shooting is one of many reasons to visit Colorado's Keyah Grande.



"PULL!" I BARK, but before I can draw a bead on the target, it plummets into the scrub oak, and my shot sails toward the heavens. Scoring a hit seems a remote possibility, for I apparently lack the necessary intuition and panache that skeet shooting demands. But this realization fails to diminish the fun of trying my hand at the sport here in the pristine setting of Keyah Grande, an intimate resort situated at an altitude of 7,500 feet in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, near the town of Pagosa Springs. The shooting takes place in an isolated valley against a backdrop of mountains and acid blue sky. The setting lends to the sport a sense of exhilaration that is rarely found at a suburban skeet range.

The resort's firearms expert urges me to keep my cheek on the gun, counsel that is as rudimentary as telling a novice golfer to keep his head down. "Follow through" is another watchword common to both sports; because the clay continues to travel while I am pulling the trigger, it is imperative that I keep swinging the gun just ahead of the target, trying to hit it at the peak of its arc. When I finally do shatter one of the elusive orange disks, known as a pigeon in the sport's vernacular, I experience a thrill that is visceral and addictive.

Skeet is a game of free-flowing energy rather than one of careful calculation, my guide explains. It involves action without thought. After a time, the shooting comes more naturally, and the clays burst with more regularity. Still, it is daunting to know that in actual competition, shooters

must contend with two targets released simultaneously.

In the autumn and winter months, you can stalk elk instead of pigeons at Keyah Grande. The animals are raised on Keyah Grande's working ranch and released months before the hunt into the resort's nearly 2,000 acres of preserves. The resort's owners, Barbara and Alan Sackman, are themselves avid hunters and maintain a home on the property. They initially intended Keyah Grande as their private Western retreat, but later added the guest house, which contains eight rooms, each eclectically decorated in a motif based on a country that the couple has visited: Japan, France, China, and Spain among others.

Keyah Grande also offers fly-fishing, hiking, and horseback riding, and it has a spa and an outdoor hot tub modeled on a Roman bath. From the tub, you can enjoy dramatic cloudscapes while soaking off the effects of an afternoon spent in the saddle or tramping the backcountry. Meals at the lodge are prepared by the husband-and-wife team of Alex Talbot and Aki Kanozawa, who met and trained at the acclaimed Clio restaurant in Boston and now present such flavorful adventures as chipotle ice cream. Once you consider all of the resort's features, then, like shooting skeet, the decision to visit Keyah Grande becomes an action that requires no further thought.

—JACK KELLY

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