

# **America's Hallmark Horseback Adventure™**

## *The Undiscovered Canyon Of The Middle Fork Of The Gila River*

**By JOE KURMASKIE**

The Gila is a place of spectacular beauty tucked away in the Southwest corner of New Mexico. It lays claim to the title of America's first and largest wilderness area, but this unique distinction does not begin to brush the surface of a powerful country, with the extraordinary diversity, tranquillity and enchantment guarded at its heart.

Until recently, the Gila Wilderness, with its 1,000 square miles of awe-inspiring vistas, peaceful meadows, majestic rivers and deep, carved out canyons was a hidden treasure experienced by rugged trappers of the past and only the hardiest adventurers of today.

For those who make the effort to delve into the most exotic reaches of the Gila, it is considered a truly unique journey, one which has the power to move the spirit and transform the soul.

The crowning jewel of the Gila is said to be an undiscovered canyon which lies at the very center of the forest called the Middle Fork of the Gila River. It is widely known that traversing the entire length of this canyon in one journey, one which allows the individual to experience a ever building crescendo of beauty, is a nearly impossible task... until now.

Jim Mater, with a horseback adventure company, U-Trail™ The Gila Wilderness has tackled the daunting logistics for such an adventure and is pleased to offer, for the first time on horseback, America's Hallmark Horseback Adventure™ -- The Middle Fork.

In 1997, U-Trail™ The Gila Wilderness will begin sharing the six day Middle Fork of the Gila River journey with the public. From Mater's experience, there's no other canyon ride like it in all of America.

Beginning at a placid body of water called Snow Lake, the ride meanders through wide, lush meadows and gentle canyon slopes as it works a steady magic over its participants. By the second day of the journey the canyon narrows and heightens to expose rock spirals and deep pools of crystal clear water then widens again. Massive caves and great erosion craters are the result of water's strength over time.

The ride camps for the night in a peaceful meadow along the edge of a creek which is recorded as the true birth place of Geronimo. Each step of the way takes the group deeper

into the forest until 1500 foot high cinnamon colored canyon bluffs tower over the river and the rider experiences the feeling of being transported to another world.

The canyon floor is dotted with old growth cotton woods, sycamores and pines. Some liken it to being on top of the world along the bottom of a deep canyon.

At dawn on the fifth day the participants reach the "top of the world" by climbing 1000 feet out of the canyon. It is here that one can see for countless miles up and down the Middle Fork. Before descending back into the canyon, this magnificent sight gives riders an opportunity for perspective and a sense of the gothic beauty which is this breathtaking canyon.

The final day of the journey offers canyon walls so unique its as though they were fighting hard to hold onto the rider for a few more magic moments, offering their colors and shapes as a way to seal themselves inside memories which will linger for a life time.

Every turn is an unfolding experience of new wonders. During the ride participants explore Indian Cliff Dwellings, soak in some of the most beautiful hot springs in the world and take with them a sense that life can be a wild, challenging endeavor drenched in uncompromising beauty when seen through eyes reborn with new experience.

The publishers of National Geographic are in agreement. The Middle Fork of The Gila River is the same canyon a team from the magazine traveled through under the sure-footed mules and horses of U-Trail™ while researching an article about the wilderness. The article will appear in National Geographic during 1997 and feature the canyon and Mater's company.

Mater explained that these veterans of visits to countless scenic locations around the globe were overwhelmed by the country.

“U-Trail™ has grown out of my love for the diversity, vastness and beauty of this country. I would like nothing more than to show people the Gila any way I can. Horses are the vehicle to get them out there,” explained Mater. “Also, I want to make new acquaintances and friendships which will last long after the rides are over.”

Mater began exploring the deep canyons and high mountain country meadows of this part of the world more than a decade ago. Then, it was just Mater, a mule to carry gear and miles of unexplored country. Once Mater left his feet and discovered how much trail he could cover on horseback, he was roaming the vast national forest and surrounding wilderness area as often as possible.

Mater wants to showcase the wilderness rather than create a city slicker type business or a company known as a cowboying attraction. He feels the Gila is a place to have a genuine wilderness experience, for many, a once in a lifetime event which can renew and

refresh their spirit in the natural world. From high mountain meadows to deep canyons and wide open vistas, Mater's rides take people of every skill and endurance level on customized rides.

Mater points out that the area can claim five ecozones, alpine meadows, clear streams, breathtaking sunsets and a wildly diverse collection of flora and fauna.

U-Trail™ will customize trips to what the customers want to see and do. If people want to fish he knows of many good places along the trail. From hot springs to vistas, Mater has a feel for the land, though he's quick to point out that someone could spend a lifetime wandering the Gila and not know it all... its just that vast.

U-Trail™ can take groups through every type of canyon imaginable, all with ample water and plenty of wildlife. On recent rides bear, elk, deer, eagles have been common sights.

If the Middle Fork of the Gila River journey is not possible for riders on their first trip into the Gila Wilderness other time tested adventures are offered year round by U-Trail™ with fewer trips available in the Winter months. It should be noted that the Gila wilderness affords riders a longer pack season due to its southern location.

The company provides camp fire, cook-out meals which include tasty Cajun dishes, pastas and cowboy stews and Mexican dishes.

Mater is one of those unique individuals who truly wants to share the country with others and make it easier to see the splendor which is out there.

