

Romantic getaways in Germany, Italy, California, Morocco, and more.

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

A person is seen from behind, standing on a wooden observation deck that juts out over a dense forest. The forest is filled with trees showing autumn colors, ranging from green to yellow and orange. In the distance, rolling hills are visible under a clear sky. The wooden deck has a railing and is supported by thick wooden beams.

Fall Escapes

Travel doesn't
stop when
summer ends.

52

vacations to
take before
the holidays.

C O M E

At the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, **KATE DONNELLY** discovers the thrill of commanding raptors, under the guidance of one of the country's foremost master falconers.

F L Y



W I T H

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN

M E

Chase, a saker falcon (above), and Earl, a peregrine falcon (opposite), are among the raptors tended to by the Broadmoor's head trainer, Deanna Curtis.



▼
Curtis shows off
Maverick, a Harris's
hawk, during a
training session.



IN EARLY-MORNING JUNE sun peeked over the Broadmoor, a sprawling, 101-year-old resort in Colorado Springs known for its Italian Renaissance stucco façade and rugged Rocky Mountain setting. Legend has it that, back in the 1920s, the resort's eccentric founder, business tycoon Spencer Penrose, kept a menagerie of exotic animals that included an elephant named Tessie who doubled as his golf caddy. Most roamed freely across the Broadmoor's 3,000 acres until a few unpleasant encounters with guests prompted Penrose to establish the nearby Cheyenne Mountain Zoo as a new home for the whole lot. It seemed only fitting that I had arrived at a hotel steeped in such lore for a lesson in falconry.

The practice is thousands of years old. In medieval times, seemingly every social rank had a bird. Emperors flew eagles and vultures; kings flew gyrfalcons; and ladies flew merlins, a species favored by Mary, Queen of Scots, in the 16th century. While falconry has remained fashionable in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, it wasn't widely practiced in the United States until the early 1900s, and soon waned after firearms grew popular for sportsmanship and hunting. Hotels have played a role in rekindling interest by offering workshops and hands-on activities. Equinox Golf Resort & Spa in Manchester, Vermont, coordinates lessons for multiple skill levels at a nearby falconry school, while both Greenbrier, in West Virginia, and Sea Island, the Broadmoor's sister property in Georgia, have independent programs. The latter also offers a half-day expedition with staff falconers during which the birds hunt eastern gray squirrels in local forests.

The Broadmoor has been a leader not only in promoting the sport but also in championing its evolution. Last year, the

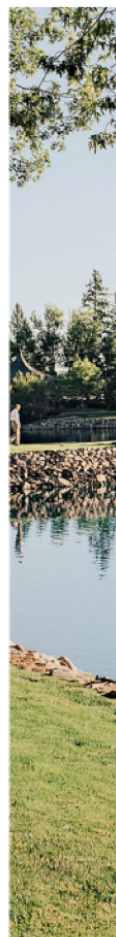


▲
Some of the
traditional tools
used at the
Broadmoor's
falconry academy.

►
The hotel sits
on the southern
edge of the
Rocky Mountains.

resort hired its first female falconer, Deanna Curtis, to run the four-year-old program. On a particularly cloudless day, I met her inside the mews, a concrete building housing the resort's captivity-bred raptors: four falcons, four hawks, and an owl. As she casually collected Dassi, a female saker falcon, from her chamber, Curtis told me that the entire sport is becoming more woman-oriented; in her program, female guests now outnumber the men. As the bird screeched, Curtis weighed her, explaining that males and females share the same brown-gray coloring, but female falcons are larger and stronger.

"I always craved a connection with the wild," said Curtis, who grew up catching frogs and snakes in rural Oregon. About 20 years ago, her focus turned to birds after seeing a raptor demonstration at her sons' Cub Scouts meeting. In 2004, she finished her seven-year master falconer training and, in 2007, started a nonprofit dedicated to raptor conservation efforts. According to the North American Falconers Association, there are about 4,000 licensed practitioners in the U.S., of whom



20 percent are women. “Women have always had a huntress instinct,” Curtis said. “Now they’re reclaiming their place and bringing a new perspective.”

The Broadmoor offers an observation-based beginner’s course, which I completed last spring. I returned for Curtis’s 75-minute intermediate session, in which I would absorb training techniques, learn how to call a hawk, and watch a lure-flying demo with a peregrine falcon—the fastest creature on earth. On a defunct golf fairway, Curtis opened the tailgate of her Jeep, revealing two cages. Inside one was Maverick, a chocolate-colored Harris’s hawk, a species prized for its sociable personality. Curtis removed a small, hand-stitched leather hood from the bird’s head, signaling to the creature that it was time to fly. We walked over to a path that stood in the shadow of the triple-peaked Cheyenne Mountain, which was dotted with brush and violet phlox. “You can either whistle or shout his name,” Curtis explained. “The bond here is the food; they know they’re about to be rewarded.” When I asked about losing sight of Maverick, Curtis motioned to a dime-size bell affixed to the raptor’s ankle. “You can always hear him flying above you.”

I held out the bait, a pair of chicken feet, in my clenched left fist, which was protected by a thick suede falconer’s glove, and whistled. From a high evergreen branch some 25 feet away, Maverick swooped down with a few flaps of his

four-foot wingspan and landed his surprisingly light frame on my hand. I watched in awe as he snapped up the treat with his strong, craggy talons and swallowed it whole. Then, twisting my fist, I cast him to a nearby tree. As five minutes of this catch-and-release exercise passed dreamily by, I found myself understanding the allure of taming these raptors. “It’s a wild animal that can choose to leave you anytime,” Curtis said. “But it continually comes back.”

Next, she brought out Chase, a juvenile saker falcon, to show off lure-flying. The technique, practiced only by seasoned falconers, uses a bird-shaped piece of equipment, usually made of heavy leather, as a lure. “We don’t let guests participate because the birds can get injured,” said Curtis, who, minutes later, stationed herself in the middle of the open field and swung the lure above her head like a lasso. Chase plunged like a fighter jet from his rocky perch at 49 miles per hour—as tracked by a small GPS transmitter pinned to his tail—to grab the faux prey with his talons. In a choreographed exchange, Curtis reached into her bag and handed Chase his reward, then quickly tucked the lure back into her satchel.

“Everyone comes to falconry with something different,” Curtis told me. For me, flying birds of prey in this great expanse of the American West felt positively elemental. Falconry offers a primal bond of falconer and falcon, predator and prey—a notion as seductive as the Colorado air. ✦



Falconry at U.S. Resorts

The Broadmoor

About four miles southwest of the Colorado Springs Airport and 90 miles south of Denver International Airport, the 784-room property stretches across some 3,000 acres. Guests can rent a car at either airport, or the hotel can arrange for shuttle transfer. *broadmoor.com*; doubles from \$545; falconry lessons from \$162.

The Greenbrier

Beginning and intermediate enthusiasts can enroll in 90-minute lessons with hawks and falcons at this hotel in West Virginia’s Allegheny Mountains. *greenbrier.com*; doubles from \$209; falconry lessons from \$145.

Equinox Golf Resort & Spa

In Manchester, Vermont, this 250-year-old golf and spa resort partners with the Green Mountain Falconry School to offer handling lessons with a master falconer. *equinoxresort.com*; doubles from \$269; falconry lessons from \$150.

Sea Island

The Broadmoor’s sister property, which sits along a gorgeous stretch of beach in Georgia’s idyllic Golden Isles, offers small-group experiences or a half-day program with its hunting club, Broadfield. *seaisland.com*; doubles from \$395; falconry lessons from \$45.