

SPECIAL RIDING-VACATION ISSUE FOR AVID TRAIL RIDERS!

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7 Steps to a Perfect Ranch Vacation

Ready to plan a fun ranch vacation? Here's a seven-step guide to finding ranches geared toward seasoned trail riders. Bonus: Handy packing checklist.

I can't think of a better way to spend my vacation than exploring beautiful wilderness trails on a good horse. If I get to travel to a different place and ride every year for the rest of my life, I'll be the proverbial "happy camper," even if I'm not necessarily camping!

Here, I'll give you seven steps to planning your perfect ranch vacation: (1) Decide on your mount; (2) find your destination; (3) check reviews; (4) watch for red flags; (5) choose when to go; (6) choose your travel companion/s; (7) book your trip early.

I'll also give you a handy packing checklist. (See "What to Pack" on page 30.)

1 Decide on Your Mount

When people hear I'm planning a riding trip, they usually ask if I'm taking my own horse. Most are surprised when my answer is, "No, and I wouldn't want to take him."

Of course, it might be delightful to ride your own horse if time allows and your destination is an area where your horse is acclimated to the surroundings.

But you may find that riding a horse you don't own works out just fine and actually enhances the experience.

There are several reasons why you can have a perfectly satisfying riding vacation while leaving your horse at home.

- **Save on hauling time.** Time is a huge factor. Depending on where you're headed, driving your truck and trailer to



A vacation with your favorite riding buddies can be the trip of a lifetime. Here, Cynthia McFarland (left) and friends pause for a photo while riding at Drowsy Water Ranch in the Colorado Rockies.

and from your riding destination can take days. When you work full-time, you want to spend your vacation having fun, not driving.

- **No conditioning.** Also consider the time it would take to condition your horse to tackle the challenging terrain — and acclimating him to a higher elevation, if you'll be heading to the mountains. Horses at a guest ranch or outfitter's stable are accustomed to the terrain, surroundings, and footing where you'll be riding. Your own horse probably isn't, even if he's in great condition.

- **Worry-free riding.** If you ride the facility's horse, you don't have to be concerned about crossing a fast-running, belly-deep creek with a rocky bottom, or spooking at unfamiliar wildlife. You don't have to worry whether your horse

is drinking enough water or toting the right feed.

And if you're traveling over rough, rocky trails, you don't have to waste a moment worrying about future soundness issues. While you're scaling mountains, your horse is content at home being cared for by your meticulous horse-sitter.

2 Find Your Destination

As a trail rider, your goal is likely to find a vacation where riding is the main focus. If you're planning to spend most of your time riding, you need to be specific about this when researching a vacation.

It helps to refine your search if you have specific goals, such as riding in a certain part of the country, or taking part in activities, such as working cattle.

First, ask your riding buddies if they

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Online extra! To read about Cynthia McFarland's trip to Drowsy Water Ranch in Granby, Colorado, go to TrailRiderMag.com.

A Perfect Ranch Vacation

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have any recommendations. Then look for destinations in the following ways:

- Internet search engines.
- Equestrian-vacation websites.
- Equine and travel magazine articles.
- Advertising, both online and in print.

Use technology to your advantage, and do as much research online as possible before you start making phone calls.

On ranch-vacation websites (such as EquitrekkingTravel.com, RanchWeb.com, and Top50Ranches.com), scroll through to find vacations that appeal to you. This will save time as compared to randomly searching online for ranches/outfitters/tours in the area you wish to visit.

Once you find listings that catch your interest, click on a link to visit their specific websites. Just about every place that offers riding vacations has a website. If it's an excellent website, this is a good starting point, but it still doesn't guarantee a great vacation.

By their very nature, guest ranches often attract "dudes" or cowboy/cowgirl "wannabes." After all, this is the only way many people get the experience of riding.

This doesn't mean that seasoned trail



A good ranch will own its own riding horses, have a wide range of horses to match different rider abilities, and have quality tack in good condition, as is the case at Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in Winston, New Mexico.

riders can't have a wonderful time at the same destination. But make sure it's the place for you by asking the following questions ahead of time:

- How much time can I expect to spend riding?
- Do you have horses appropriate for experienced riders?
- Can I change horses if I'm not satisfied with the one I first ride?
- How much of the riding is "nose-to-tail"?
- Are any trails suitable for trotting and loping, and if so, is this part of the routine?
- Are rides broken up so that novice/inexperienced riders aren't put together with more experienced riders?
- How many riders are typically in each group?
- What's the wrangler-to-rider ratio?

I've had fabulous vacations on trips where there were a number of guests who'd never ridden before. That's because those ranches were well-staffed and divided riders by experience.

At one ranch, my companion and I were helping to move cattle with several other experienced riders, while the novice riders went on a separate walking ride. However, if a ranch has a small staff, this may not be possible.

Seasoned riders tend to hate the whole "nose-to-tail" mentality, and with good reason. As an avid trail rider, I want a responsive horse, not a dud who plods along inches behind the horse in front.

That said, I also realize that on many rugged mountain trails, the only safe way to ride is single-file at a walk. The scenery on such trails usually makes up for this.

(And of course, riding single-file isn't necessarily the same as "nose-to-tail.")

3 Check Reviews

Before you even call the ranch, you can narrow things down by reading online reviews. These aren't the same as the testimonials you'll find on the facility's own website, because these reviews aren't edited. They're from real people giving honest feedback about their experiences on specific vacations.

To find such reviews, visit www.tripadvisor.com and similar sites. Here, you can read reviews written by past guests of specific vacations.

Look for guests who have similar backgrounds as your own to get a better idea of how you'll relate to the trip.

For example, the review of another experienced trail rider who owns her own horse will be far more applicable to your decision-making process than that of the family of four who never rode before their trip.

"Tripadvisor.com has never steered us wrong," says Gary Cocks of Norfolk, England. He and his wife, Sandra, recently traveled to the United States and spent several days at Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in Winston, New Mexico (www.geronimoranch.com).

"We wanted something small where we could have hands-on experience with the horses, and this exceeded our expectations," says Cocks.

The couple learned about booking future trips after a not-so-pleasant experience at another ranch.

What to Pack

The ranch/outfitter/tour operator will send you a list of recommended things to pack. Be sure to take these essential items for comfort and safety.

- Riding helmet
- Cowboy hat with stampede strings
- Ball cap
- Riding boots
- Sneakers for hiking
- Comfortable riding jeans
- Long-sleeved shirts (light and heavy)
- Short-sleeved shirts
- Jacket
- Down vest
- Rain poncho/slicker
- Riding gloves
- Canteen or water bottle
- Sunglasses
- Sunscreen
- Lip balm
- Insect repellent
- Bathing suit
- Camera
- Notebook and pen
- Saddle (if you can bring your own)



When you ride the ranch's horses, you know they've been exposed to many situations, such as loose cattle and creeks, which might not be the case with your own horse. At Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch in New Mexico, it wasn't unusual to encounter open range cattle, and we had plenty of water to cross.

"A few years ago we went to one ranch and had a great vacation," relates Cocks. "When we went back a second time, they had changed hands and our second visit wasn't nearly as good.

"In the future, we would ask to make sure it's still the same owners. You should also research a ranch's website, and see that it's professional. Make sure they're connected with the dude ranch associations, and check online reviews."

Spend enough time reading reviews to get a good feel for the vacation. If you feel confident after reading numerous reviews, then it's time to call the ranch. Ask the following questions, plus any others you may have:

- How much time can I expect to spend riding?
- Do you own your horses or lease them?
- What type/breed of horses do you use?
- What type of tack is used (Western, English, endurance, etc.)?
- Will I be riding the same horse for the duration, or several different horses?
- Is instruction offered?
- Are rides separated according to rider experience?
- Do rides include a chance to trot and lope?
- What other activities are available besides riding?
- Does the overall price include all meals/activities, or are there additional charges?
- What are your payment/deposit/cancellation policies?
- What are your room/camp accommodations?
- Will I be sharing bathroom facilities with other guests?

- If an outfitter ride, is there a shower tent or similar option?
- What's your response plan in case of injury or illness on the ride?
- How close is the nearest medical facility in case of emergency?
- How close is the nearest airport (if you plan on flying)?

4 Watch for Red Flags

Even if you have your heart set on a specific destination, be alert for "red flags."

- **Numerous negative reviews.** Pay attention if you come across numerous negative online reviews. It's not unusual to find one or two complaints about a trip. But numerous negative reports is a sign you should reconsider this particular trip.
- **Evasiveness.** Move on if the ranch is unable or hesitant to answer your questions, or if the person you speak with is rude or unhelpful in any way. There are plenty of vacation destinations to pick from, so the representatives should be pleasant and more than willing to help you.
- **Horse ownership.** It's a big red flag if the facility doesn't own its own horses. Some ranches lease strings of horses, so they don't have to feed a large herd through the winter. But this means they don't know the horses as well, nor do they have the same concern for the animals as they would if they owned them, as they're only using them for a few months.

I found this out the hard way when I neglected to ask if a ranch owned its own horses. Upon arrival, I found out they only owned a few of their own; most were leased.

Unfortunately, it was the end of the season, and the horses looked like they'd had a hard summer and were ready for a break. Not what you want to find when you show up ready for a week of good riding.

5 Choose When to Go

Since I live in north Florida, I plan my riding trips in September as an end-of-summer getaway. I love being able to ride in a sweatshirt or down vest when at home I'd still be doing chores in shorts.

The timing of your trip is completely personal, but it also depends on your destination. Some guest ranches offer year-round vacations, but many are seasonal, because of their locations.

Geronimo Trail Guest Ranch, where I recently rode, is located in the Gila Wilderness area of New Mexico. This locale allows for an extended season that runs from March right up until Thanksgiving. My late-September visit saw nights around 30 degrees and gorgeous days in the 70s — absolutely perfect.

On the other hand, at Drowsy Water Ranch in the Colorado Rockies (www.drowsywater.com), the snow can come early and last well into spring, so their guest season runs early June through mid-September.

I enjoyed spectacular fall foliage when I stayed at Drowsy Water during the ranch's final week of the season

Also ask about special activities offered. Some ranches have adults-only weeks and women's retreats.

A ranch may also have specific times when it hosts natural-horsemanship clinics or equine-photography workshops. Noted photographer David R. Stoecklein offers intensive workshops at top ranches in the West and Southwest (www.stoeckleinphotography.com/workshops).

6 Choose Your Travel Companion/s

Again, this is personal preference. I've been on several trips where people came alone, but I prefer to travel with at least one close friend to share the adventure. I love to travel with a great riding buddy who has the same expectations from the trip.

The trip can still be wonderful even if your travel companion isn't your riding buddy. If, for example, your spouse or part-

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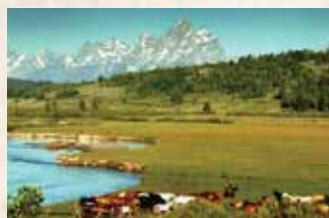
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A Perfect Ranch Vacation

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ner doesn't ride, but wants to come along, just be sure to choose a destination that offers more than riding.

Plenty of ranches have additional activities, so you can spend several hours a day riding, while your significant other hikes, golfs, goes fishing, etc.



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Some ranches, such as Drowsy Water Ranch in Granby, Colorado, offer a variety of activities. (Shown is team penning.) Ask about additional activities when you contact the ranch.

You know better than anyone else whose company you'll enjoy for an extended period of time, so keep that in mind, too.

Ask ahead about accommodations. If you don't like sleeping in the same room with someone or sharing a bathroom, be sure to ask about these arrangements. Paying attention to such details beforehand will result in happier results for everyone involved.

Of course, you can't control everything. On the riding trips I've taken, there's usually someone who complained, talked too much, or acted the expert and wanted to shower the rest of us with advice. That's life. I try not to let it interfere with the fun I'm having.

You and your friends can always look back and laugh about the cranky guest later. You just never want to be that annoying person!

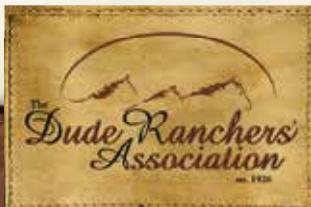
7 Book Your Trip Early

Once you've made your decision, book early.

Many vacation spots book up quickly, especially if they only have a summer season. Some have return guests who come back the same time every year.

Once you decide on a place, book it as soon as possible so you don't lose the time slot you want.

You'll have to send a deposit (in some cases, 50 percent) to hold your reservation. The amount of the deposit and refund details if you have to cancel will vary, depending on the specific policies of the specific ranch/tour/outfitter. Make sure you get these details in writing before you send a check. 



Cynthia McFarland is a seasoned trail rider and full-time freelance writer based in Central Florida. She regularly contributes to national equine magazines and is the author of eight books.