



15 Riding Vacations to Book Today

... and 5 for Your Wish List

FROM WORKING-RANCH
RETREATS
TO LIFE-LIST-WORTHY
EXPEDITIONS,
HERE'S A ROUNDUP
OF 2009'S BEST
HORSEBACK HOLIDAYS.

STORY BY **AMY SEIGEL**

WITH THE ECONOMY DOWN and the price of most everything else up, you might find it hard to imagine splurging on a weeklong riding retreat. But before you woefully commit yourself to a homebound year, at least give yourself the vicarious pleasure of perusing 20 fantastic trips we've found for you. If you look carefully at the rates for most of these adventures, you'll notice that even those that might not appear to be outright economical offer a pretty darn good value when you take into account the cost of meals, lodging and transportation.

Plus, no trip to Disneyland can begin to offer the satisfaction you'll get from a week of adventure, exploration or education, all from the back of a horse.

OUTFITTER-LED TRIPS



Alberta *Banff's Wild Side*

Price: \$1,546 per person, 5 days/6 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Easy-Moderate

It doesn't seem like an encounter you'd want to plan: watching from the back of a horse as a grizzly saunters through the brush less than 100 feet away. But on this wild adventure led by former park warden and internationally renowned grizzly researcher Mike Gibeau, it's exactly the kind of encounter you'll hope for. With Gibeau as your guide, you'll ride through the prime grizzly habitats of Banff National Park on a horseback adventure as wild and untamed as the bears themselves.

If close encounters of the grizzly kind aren't exactly your idea of a great vacation, Warner Outfitters offers a mountain photography trip with world-renowned *National Geographic* photographer Raymond Gehman. This adventure follows the same breathtaking route as Gibeau's grizzly trip, but without the bear-seeking bent.

On both of these wilderness pack trips, you'll spend evenings in the relative luxury of tent camps at Stoney Creek, Flints Park and Mystic Valley. And whether you're looking through a camera lens or a pair of binoculars, the abundance of spectacular scenery and wildlife, and the cowboy lifestyle should provide you with a picture-perfect vacation.

Contact: Warner Guiding and Outfitting, Banff, Alberta, (800) 661-8352, horseback.com.

When to Go: August



Arizona *Absolute Arizona*

Price: \$1,550 (one week); \$2,450 (two weeks)

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate-Strenuous, 6 to 8 hours in the saddle each day, often on steep, mountainous terrain.

While spending two weeks in the Arizona desert might seem like a bad survival scenario, on this stunning, 200-mile cross-country tour of the Grand Canyon State, serenity, not survival, will monopolize your thoughts.

From the minute you mount up and ride off into the Coronado National Forest, the startling biodiversity and unparalleled vastness of this region will eclipse any and all preconceptions you might've had about the desert Southwest. As you wind your way north from the Mexican border to the high desert of the Grand Canyon, you'll climb through shrub oak foothills and old-growth pine forests, rolling grasslands, red-rock canyons and arid, Saguaro-studded lowlands.

After hard days in the saddle, enjoy the comfort of spacious tents and fresh food cooked to perfection over an open fire. And, thanks to the vehicle-supported nature of this adventure, you'll be free to take a break from camp every now and then to catch some local rodeo action or other festivities in nearby communities.

Contact: Hidden Trails, (888) 9-TRAILS, hiddentrails.com, tour code: RTAZ15-CC.

When to Go: March, November



New Mexico *Chiricahua Apache Ride*

Price: \$950 per person, 6 days/7 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate, 6 to 8 hours of riding a day.

The Gila is one of the Southwest's most remote and least developed national forests. Within the boundaries of its more than 3 million acres—an area larger than some Eastern states—is a contiguous section of wild terrain largely untouched by the modern world.

Here, among winding dead-end trails and towering cliffs, the Chiricahua Apache, led by Cochise and Geronimo, made their last stand during the final Indian Wars of the late 1800s.

Geared toward the experienced rider who has a taste for adventure, this trip gives you a chance to explore endless miles of challenging trails while learning about the history of the region and the ins and outs of leave-no-trace wilderness travel. Throughout the week, Joe Saenz, of Chihe'ne (Warm Springs Apache) ancestry, will teach you plant and animal identification methods, as well as seasonal foraging techniques that will help you become more comfortable in this vast, unforgiving environment.

Contact: Hidden Trails, (888) 9-TRAILS, hiddentrails.com, tour code: RTNM05.
When to Go: December, January



Wyoming
Sweetwater Cowgirl

Price: \$2,400 per person, 7 days/6 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate, 5 to 6 hours of riding a day.

If your day-to-day barn routine feels like a far cry from your childhood cowgirl fantasies, this “women’s only” trip is for you. You won’t find any frou-frou spa treatments or nouvelle cuisine here. This is a vacation for women who want to ride hard all day and unwind in the evening with a glass of wine and a few laughs.

By day, you’ll lope across the arid expanse of the Red Desert, crisscross the badlands of the Honeycombs, and splash along the banks of the Sweetwater River. By night, you can relax with a simple shower, unfussy hors d’oeuvres, and a cocktail before settling down for a hearty, home-cooked meal. As you gallop along historic trails well worn by cowboys, cattle and wild horses that are still a part of this “high, wild and lonesome” landscape, you’re sure to find your girlhood enthusiasm for both horses and the outdoors completely renewed.

Contact: High Wild & Lonesome Adventure Horseback Vacations, Big Piney, Wyoming, (307) 260-7990, hwl.net.

When to Go: June, August



Utah/Arizona
Long Valley Cattle Drive

Price: \$1,525 for the spring drive; \$2,630 for the fall drive

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate

In the sparse grazing grounds of the desert Southwest, moving cattle from high-country summer pastures to their winter range is a considerable undertaking. And in the challenging landscape of canyons, piñon-covered foothills and sagebrush flats that separate Bryce Canyon from the north rim of the Grand Canyon, this task is even more daunting.

The Heaton family, owners of the historic Bar 10 Ranch, have run cattle on this land for five generations. Twice a year they offer a handful of outsiders the chance to experience the dust, grit and excitement of this seasonal task. If you’re looking for a place to test your cattle-handling skills, this “dude-free” drive will give you plenty of opportunities to master cutting, sorting and herding, while riding through some of the West’s most spectacular scenery.

Whether you choose the autumn drive, or the spring trip from the ranch headquarters near Alton, Utah, back into summer pastures, you’ll have plenty of time to soak up cattle-coaxing techniques from your affable, experienced hosts.

Contact: EQUITOURS, (800) 545-0019, ridingtours.com/horseback-riding/arizona-utah-cattle-drive.cfm.

When to Go: June, October



Montana wranglers prep their stock for the day’s ride. Affordable opportunities abound for outfitted trips throughout North America. Outfitters can provide saddle and pack stock, as well as equipment and experienced guides.

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HORSEMANSHIP VACATIONS



California *Richard Winters' Ultimate Horse Course*

Price: \$1,700 per person, 7 days/6 nights (lodging and meals included)
Difficulty/Pace: Easy–Moderate, catered to individual skill level and interests.

Spend an entire week at the Thacher School in Ojai, California, learning advanced horsemanship skills from Richard Winters, winner of the 2007 Monty Roberts Equitarian Award for outstanding achievements in horse/human relationships.

If you're in search of a fun, low-pressure environment where you can work out the kinks in your horse-human partnership, this course is for you. Winters is a "performance horse trainer with a natural horsemanship touch," and he's designed this week to meet your individual needs. In this course, you'll cover everything from ground manners to lead changes, trail riding in the Las Padres to cattle working, and everything in between. In addition, Winters enjoys his meals with participants in the school's dining hall, so he's available throughout the weekend to answer

lingering questions you might have about your rides.

This is designed to be a "couples" week for you and your equine partner, but if you're unable to bring your own horse, you can lease a Thacher horse for \$50 per day.

Contact: Cheryl Winters, Ojai, California, (805) 640-0956, wintersranch.com.
When to Go: June, July



Montana *Buddy Up with Buck Brannaman*

Price: \$2,500 and up, 5 days/6 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Easy–Moderate

In the wide-open West, mileage to the mailbox is a good estimate of a ranch's remoteness. The McGinnis Meadows Cattle & Guest Ranch is seven miles from the nearest postal drop and is a quiet, secluded place to spend a week learning horsemanship techniques from one of the icons of the industry—Buck Brannaman.

During July, the ranch hosts Brannaman for two weeklong clinics that cover horsemanship and working cattle. In the spring, Brannaman teaches a "horsemanship from the ground up" colt-starting clinic, a perfect

opportunity to learn the ropes of starting youngsters the right way before putting your skills to the test on your own stock. And because the owners and staff at McGinnis Meadows follow Brannaman's horsemanship methods in all their ranch work, you'll have a chance to practice everything you've learned in your three-day clinic during the rest of your six-night stay on the ranch.

Contact: McGinnis Meadows Cattle & Guest Ranch, Libby, Montana, (406) 293-5000, mmgranch.net.

When to Go: March/April (colt starting), July (ranch clinics)



Texas *Craig Cameron University*

Price: \$1,250–\$1,995, 3 to 7 days (per person, lodging and meals included for both human and equine)

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate–Strenuous

Whether you choose a three-, five- or seven-day clinic at Craig Cameron's Double Horn Ranch in Bluff Dale, Texas, you can be assured of two things: You'll learn horsemanship skills that will take you from beginning to winning, and you'll

have an unbelievable amount of fun in the process.

These clinics are designed to offer riders plenty of one-on-one time with Cameron and the chance to learn horsemanship in a logical progression, from round pen and arena to the natural environment of Cameron's challenge trials.

While the working clinics are designed for novices, advanced clinics cater to riders ready to learn the technical and mechanical components of lead changes, stops, backing, rollbacks, lateral movement and spins. After a hard day's work, participants retire to the comfort of the ranch's restored 100-year-old cabins; hearty, home-cooked meals; and a post-dinner Q&A session with Cameron.

Contact: Double Horn Ranch, Bluff Dale, Texas, (254) 728-3082, craigcameron.com.

When to Go: April, May



Texas *Canyon Class with Brent Graef*

Price: \$1,000 per person, 6 days/7 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate–Strenuous

Brent Graef believes the horse is often the horseman's greatest teacher, and in this exciting clinic format, the natural landscape becomes the classroom for long days of learning from your equine instructor.

This open-range class provides a unique opportunity to re-connect with nature, refresh your spirit and improve your horsemanship skills. Based out of Graef's ranch in Canyon, Texas, you'll spend six days riding through some of the most beautiful country Texas has to offer, including Palo Duro Canyon and Caprock Canyon, searching all the while for natural obstacles that can serve as tools for improving your horsemanship.

In the course of the week, you'll experience real-life cow-working situations, and have an opportunity to become more comfortable interacting with cattle in a slow, low-stress, ranch environment.

Contact: Brent Graef, Canyon, Texas, (806) 499-3239, brentgraef.com.

When to Go: May



Wyoming
Ranch Horse Intensive
with Jody Cunningham

Price: \$900 for 3 days, \$1,500 for 5 days (per person, lodging and meals included)

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate–Strenuous

If you've ever wondered what it would take to transform your horse from uni-dimensional to versatile, sign up for the Ultimate Working Ranch Horse Clinic at Slate Creek Outfitters. For either three or five days, you'll have a chance to immerse yourself in the five events that make up the American Quarter Horse Association's versatility ranch horse class: ranch riding, ranch trail, ranch cutting, working ranch horse and ranch conformation.

During this intensive course, you'll explore Slate Creek's 350,000 acres and practice your dry work, boxing or roping alongside the ranch's owner: horseman, clinician and author Jody Cunningham. During the week, Cunningham's no-nonsense philosophy of "practical horsemanship geared toward the practical horseman" will help you gain the respect of your horse and understand his language. And with "wet saddle blankets and long hours in the saddle, guaranteed" you can feel certain you'll get your money's worth on this demanding "vacation."

Contact: Slate Creek Outfitters, Kemmerer, Wyoming, (936) 222-1271, slatecreekoutfitters.com.

When to Go: June, October



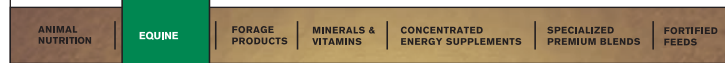
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WORKING RANCH RETREATS



Alberta Canadian Cowboy Experience

Price: From \$1,200 for a 6-day/5-night ranch stay, to \$3,250 for a 13-day wilderness expedition.

Difficulty/Pace: Varied, Easy–Strenuous

Just an hour and a half south of Calgary, the big ranch country of Southern Alberta stretches far and wide along the rolling foothills of the Canadian Rockies. Here, you'll find the Willow Lane Ranch, a no-nonsense working cattle operation steeped in the region's cowboy heritage.

Owners Keith and LeAnne Lane have opened the gates of their ranch to visitors, and invite anyone with a passion for horses, cattle and the outdoors to accompany them on daily chores as they check cattle, mend fence, or help with seasonal roundups, drives or calving.

If you're in the mood for something more adventurous, the ranch's "Great Canadian Cowboy Package" combines phenomenal opportunities for cattle work with an unsurpassed wilderness experience. From your base camp at the well-equipped Porcupine Hills Cow Camp, you'll ride past wild horses and glacier-fed lakes, and hunt for strays in the rugged Porcupine Hills.

Contact: Willow Lane Ranch, Granum, Alberta, Canada, (800) 665-0284, willowlaneranch.com.

When to Go: June–October



Colorado San Luis Splendor

Price: \$1,695 per person, 5 days/6 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Varied, Easy–Moderate

In the Rocky Mountain Serengeti—otherwise known as the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado—there is a place where wild bison still blacken the meadows and the diversity and abundance of wildlife is much as it was 200 years ago. This peerless landscape is home to the Zapata Ranch, a 103,000-acre cattle and bison ranch owned by the Nature Conservancy.

Bordered by the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve and the towering peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the ranch has one of the world's most spectacular and diverse landscapes. A stay at the Zapata will not only give you a chance to work side-by-side with the ranch's cowboys, but will provide you a perfect home base for exploring this special place.

At the end of your day in the saddle, you can relax in the historic lodge, head to one



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Why spend your vacation surrounded by "dudes," when you can ride with working cowboys? Plenty of cattle ranches take in paying guests, who pitch in with gathering, sorting and branding.

of the area's hot springs, or even tackle the short hike to Zapata Falls, one of the most unique waterfalls in Colorado.

Contact: The Zapata Ranch, Mosca, Colorado, (888) 5-ZAPATA, zranch.org.

When to Go: May–October



Idaho Cowboys, Colts & Cows

Price: \$1,250 per person, 7 days/6 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate–Strenuous

Whether tending a thousand head of cattle on summer range or starting colts destined to become ranch horses, for a working cowboy each day holds a new challenge and a new adventure. At the Silver Spur Ranch, located just a few miles from the Idaho/Montana state line, at the base of Medicine Lodge Canyon, you can choose your own adventure.

Come for one of the colt-starting weeks and you'll be given a saddle horse to ride and a 2-year-old colt to start. Or, if you prefer ranch work, come for a hands-on cowboy vacation second to none. No matter how you choose to spend your days, long hours in the saddle are rewarded with big cowboy dinners, campfire entertainment and comfortable accommodations.

Contact: Silver Spur Ranch, Dubois, Idaho, (208) 374-5338, silverspurranchidaho.com.

When to Go: June–September



Montana Sweet Grass Ranch

Price: \$1,485–\$2,040 per person, 8 days/7 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Easy–Moderate

Located in the secluded Crazy Mountains of south-central Montana, 40 miles from Big Timber, the Sweet Grass Ranch sits along the

banks of its namesake creek at an elevation of 6,100 feet. You won't find any shows or schedules, premeditated penning sessions or regulated round-ups at this ranch. This is a place to come when you want to let go of programs and agendas.

Play with the foals and yearlings, start a colt, or simply enjoy a long ride to check cattle, doctor or help move the herd as grass and water dictate. At night, unwind in the historic lodge before tucking into a meal of ranch beef, garden-fresh vegetables and home-baked breads, then saunter off to your cabin, where the sounds of Sweet Grass Creek will lull you into a peaceful slumber.

Contact: Sweet Grass Ranch, Big Timber, Montana, (406) 537-4477, sweetgrassranch.com.

When to Go: June–September



Nebraska Ponderosa Ranch

Price: \$150 per person, per night

Difficulty: Varied, Easy–Moderate

Nestled within the timbered high country of Pine Ridge in northwestern Nebraska, this working cattle and guest ranch offers all the basics: cozy, comfortable cabins, fantastic home-cooked meals and plenty of riding and cattle-working opportunities.

If you feel like adding in a mule deer or Merriam turkey hunt, or even a relaxed day of railroad photography (the BNSF railroad runs through the western part of the ranch), the ranch can easily accommodate you. This is a place to bring the kids and kick back for a week of riding and relaxation.

Contact: Kim and Jeff Lund, Crawford, Nebraska, (308) 665-3983, ponderosaranch.net.

When to Go: Year-round, if you don't mind cold-weather riding. Special rates for low-season stays.

LIFE-LIST TRIPS



Australia

The Sunshine Coast

Price: \$2,495 per person, 7 days/6 nights, and 5½ days

riding

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate, 2 to 5 hours of riding a day.

The first indication that the Sunshine Coast Inn-to-Inn tour is not your average equestrian vacation is the background of its leader and host, Alex Watson. An Australia native and four-time Olympian (modern pentathlon), Watson was instrumental in putting together this exceptional point-to-point ride that highlights some of the impressive, varied landscapes of this region.

With its inviting climate, the Sunshine Coast is a dream destination for a riding holiday. And the region's ever-changing panorama—beaches, cattle ranges, gold-rush country and rainforest hinterland—ensures an itinerary as exciting as the landscape itself. Even though the trip features vehicle support to take you from one home base to another, this is no “easy rider” beach tour. Instead, it's a perfect combination of superb cuisine, luxurious accommodations, action and adventure.

Contact: EQUITOURS, (800) 545-0019, ridingtours.com/horseback-riding/australia-sunshine-coast-inn-to-inn.cfm
When to Go: February–November



Chile

Andes to the Ocean

Price: \$2,395 per person, 8 days/7 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Strenuous

By any standard, Patagonia is one of the last best places, an untouched, unspoiled region too rugged, remote and unforgiving to yield to the forces of our modern world. On this weeklong equestrian journey, offered just one month out of every short Patagonian summer, you'll trek across the Andes from Chaiten to Futaleufú on a trail that, until 1975, was the only route across this vast wilderness.

On this trip, you'll camp out in the high country, where low temperatures and summertime snow are commonplace, and experience sights and terrain rarely seen, much less traversed, by humans. On your Chilean Corralero horse, you'll ride through temperate rainforests; up narrow mountain trails; past overhanging glaciers, extinct volcanoes and waterfalls; and across rivers and streams swollen with snowmelt.

There are no cozy haciendas or plush lodges on this trip, just the promise of ultimate solitude and a wilderness pack trip you will not soon forget.

Contact: Expediciones Chile, (888) 488-9082, exchile.com/horsebackridingexpedition.html.
When to Go: This trip runs once a year, during the height of the Chilean summer, which is January in the Northern Hemisphere.



Costa Rica

Central American Odyssey

Price: \$2,300 per person, 10 days/9 nights, and 6½ days

riding

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate

Costa Rica is a land of contrasts, and this ambitious ride will give you the chance to experience them all. It hardly seems possible any tour could offer all the highlights of a country in less than two weeks, but this equine odyssey does just that.

Your journey begins in the dry, central Pacific region at Hacienda La Maravilla, riding along rolling hills and meadows and into the gallery forest along the Cuarros River, a phenomenal location for observing the country's diverse wildlife. From there, you'll set out on rides that range from shoreline gallops along the Pacific Coast to scenic tours of dramatic river canyons, forests and mountain ridges.

Add in some excellent accommodations, meals and the attitude of the Costa Rican people, and you have a vacation that embodies the lifestyle of *pura vida* (pure life).

Contact: EQUITOURS, (800) 545-0019, ridingtours.com/horseback-riding/costa-rica-odyssey.cfm.
When to Go: Year-round, low season discounts available.



Ecuador

Cotopaxi Horse Round-Up

Price: \$2,360 per person, 11 days/10 nights



ELISEO MICHU

Horseback excursions in Central and South America offer riders the chance to trek across regions seldom seen by humans. Here, riders cross a remote Andean valley.

Difficulty/Pace: Moderate, 4 to 7 hours of riding daily

The remote Cordillera Oriental of the Andes is a region few Ecuadorians, let alone visitors, ever see. In this country of cloud forests, active volcanoes and towering peaks, chagras (Andean cowboys) live and work this land just as they have for generations.

On this challenging tour of the "real Ecuador," you'll have a chance to see many of the highlights of the region before arriving at your final destination, Yanahurco Hacienda, the largest hacienda in the Ecuadorian highland. Here you can explore the ranch's 72,000 acres and ride with the chagras in a traditional roundup of the wild horses that roam this spectacular country.

This roundup is not a spectacle organized for the benefit of tourists, but a time-honored annual event in the calendar of a working ranch.

Contact: Hidden Trails, (888) 9-TRAILS, hiddentrails.com, tour code: IT-ECRT05-H

When to Go: March



Mexico

Copper Canyon's Semana Santa

Price: \$1,395 per person, 9 days/8 nights

Difficulty/Pace: Strenuous; a trip for the truly adventurous and experienced rider.

Combine a spectacular cultural experience with challenging riding and breathtaking scenery, and you have the recipe for a once-in-a-lifetime Mexican adventure. During Holy Week in the Copper Canyon region of Northwest Mexico, thousands of Tarahumara Indians leave remote ranchitos to walk hours, even days, to isolated religious centers, where they participate in ceremonies that originated with Jesuit priests over three centuries ago.

Distant drumbeats, candlelit processions and incense-filled 17th century churches define the traditions of *Semana Santa* in this rugged country's remote villages. While the cultural component of this trip makes it truly remarkable, the riding and scenery are equally dramatic. From swimming the horses under a 400-foot-long suspension bridge to hiking alongside your mount as you traverse steep sections of mountain trails, this is a ride that will challenge your equestrian skills and cultural perceptions.

Contact: Hidden Trails, (888) 9-TRAILS, hiddentrails.com, tour code: IT-MXRT02.

When to Go: April

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