

SADDLE UP

Harness your inner cowboy with hands-on Western experiences at guest ranches

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TANQUE VERDE RANCH



There remains a mystique and charm about the Old West that draws people from around the world. That allure of cowboys, horses and a home on the range still comes alive at guest ranches, where you can saddle up for some Western fun.

But you might wonder, is there a difference between a dude ranch and a guest ranch? Though both refer to ranches that welcome guests and are often used interchangeably today, originally, the term "dude" referred to city visitors who vacationed on working ranches. Whatever term you use, you can find a variety of experiences ranging from rustic accommodations on working ranches to luxury stays with gourmet cuisine and spa treatments. Most offer horseback riding and all-inclusive vacations, usually with special programs for children. A great resource is The Dude Ranchers Association (www.duderanch.org).

Tanque Verde Ranch: Tucson, Arizona

Tanque Verde Ranch is located just east of Tucson and adjacent to Saguaro National Park. This Arizona ranch was established in 1868, with the first East Coast "dudes" welcomed to the ranch in 1928. The Cote family has been running the operation since 1957.

The accommodations at Tanque Verde feel like a real Western ranch – some have kiva fireplaces while others sport wood-beamed ceilings – and there's plenty of room for family gatherings and reunions. Rooms and casitas are scattered across the property. Walking out at night with the stars overhead, coyotes howling in the distance, and the smell of mesquite fires in the air lends a true Old West feel to the experience.

The 2 1/2-hour breakfast horseback ride to the Old Homestead (with blueberry pancakes waiting at the end of the trail) is a guest favorite, and those who have never ridden can take lessons. Other activities include mountain biking and guided hikes. At the end of an afternoon ride, you can book a treatment in La Sonora Spa or head to The Doghouse Saloon for the ranch's famous prickly pear margaritas. All meals are served in the dining room, but the best experience is the Cowboy Cookout at the Cottonwood Grove every Wednesday and Saturday night, where you can savor great food and listen to live entertainment under the stars. There are a la carte and all-inclusive packages available. Discover more at www.tanqueverderanch.com.

Canyon of the Ancients Guest Ranch: Cortez, Colorado

The old Zwicker Ranch is now home to Canyon of the Ancients Guest Ranch in southwest Colorado. Located just outside of Cortez, the ranch is about a one-hour drive from Mesa Verde National Park and Durango. It's a working sheep and cattle ranch managed by owners Garry and Ming Adams.

This relaxing ranch doesn't have horses – you can book horseback riding at neighboring Canyon Trails Ranch – but there are plenty of other options. Head out with Garry and the ranch hands as they feed the sheep and cattle, arrange for Ming to cook up one of her comforting breakfasts, visit nearby Sutcliffe Vineyards for wine tasting in beautiful McElmo Canyon, enjoy a guided tour of ancient ruins and rock arts, or simply sit outside and breathe in the fresh Colorado air.

Canyon of the Ancients Guest Ranch has six homes available to rent. The Pioneer House is a two-story, three-bedroom log home with a ranch grill in the backyard and a full kitchen for cooking indoors. The luxurious Wagstaff log cabin has a fireplace, a front porch with sweeping vistas, and a full kitchen. Explore more at www.canyonoftheancients.com.

Drowsy Water Ranch: Granby, Colorado

Located just west of the Continental Divide in northern Colorado, Drowsy Water Ranch welcomes generations of horse lovers every summer from late May through mid-September – and it's all about the horses at Drowsy Water. The Fosha family, who has owned and operated the ranch since 1977, invites guests to become a part of their family. This all-inclusive ranch, located at an elevation of 8,200 feet, welcomes guests each Sunday for a six-night stay.

Guests share meals in the main lodge each day. There are two daily rides – optional but included in your stay – and everyone begins with a short riding clinic and saddle fitting. The more advanced loping clinic gives adult riders a chance to learn how to better handle their horses and move at a faster pace.

Included events take place throughout the Sunday-through-Saturday stay: yoga, bike rides, rafting on the nearby Colorado River, hayrides, and dances. Plus, there are a variety of activities for the kids. Of course, you can also choose to relax on your porch, take a dip in the pool, or snooze the afternoon away. Discover more at www.drowsywater.com.

Vee Bar Guest Ranch: Laramie, Wyoming

The Vee Bar Guest Ranch is 21 miles west of Laramie, Wyoming, about a 2 1/2-hour drive north of Denver. Owned by the Cole family since 1994, the ranch offers all-inclusive three- or six-night stays each summer from late May through mid-September. You can also book shorter bed-and-breakfast visits the rest of the year, with optional dinners served buffet-style at the lodge. Sip a drink each evening by the fireside or in the adjacent saloon.

Ranch activities include horseback riding, fly-fishing, hiking and wagon rides. The tranquil Riverside Suites are charming two-bedroom cabins on the Little Laramie River, just steps from the hot tub and close to the main lodge with a front porch that's perfect for watching the sunset. There are also more secluded cabins a bit farther from the lodge, each with two or three bedrooms. Explore your options at www.veebar.com.

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