

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

The dude ranch, that is, where special memories are easily made. Saddle up with a veteran “rancher” as she leads our tour

words: Sophia Dembling

I got the biggest and the hungriest horse, but I remembered what the guy said and I pulled those things and got him on the trail!” boasted 7-year-old Eamon after dismounting from his first horseback ride. Indeed, though Chester would rather eat than walk, Eamon kept the hungry horse’s head up and was proud as a rodeo cowboy.

That was a decade ago. My little godson is now an enormous teenager with a rumbling voice, but he and his brother still reminisce about our weekend together at the Dixie Dude Ranch in Bandera, Texas. The two citted boys from New Jersey loved the ambling trail rides through the Hill Country’s golden sun-baked hills, with hawks reeling overhead, horses that were clearly unwilling to make any sudden moves, wranglers with an extensive repertoire of corny jokes and the huge carb-laden meals, culminating the last morning in both pancakes and French toast for the boys.

We played horseshoes and tetherball and took a two-step dance lesson by the swimming pool (which their mom and I enjoyed more than they did). I don’t think the boys have been on a horse since, but we’ll always have Bandera.

And me? Any ranch, any time. I don’t care if the rides are slow nose-to-tail plods or lopes across the dusty plain; a bad day on a horse is better than a good day at a desk. I love everything about being around horses, from their velvet noses to the mingled scents of barn and leather. Plus, guest ranches tend to be located in the West’s prettiest places. I’ve ridden through pine forests, across prairies, over hills and through their attendant dales.

Many ranches across the West started as working ranches. The growth of guest ranching is in roughly inverse proportion to the viability of ranching as a way to make a living. The Dixie, for example, was founded in 1901 as a working stock ranch but started welcoming dudes during the Depression. Today the place is still operated by descendants of its founder, William Wallace Whitley. Like many historic ranches, the Dixie maintains a nominal ranching operation while focusing on entertaining people of all ages.

Other historic ranches were designed for guests from the giddyup. For example, many ranches in the Wapiti Valley, by the East Gate of Yellowstone National Park, were built around the turn of the last century for the first wave of tourism to Yellowstone.

My husband Tom and I stayed at the historic Elephant Head Lodge in the Wapiti Valley, which is not a full-scale dude ranch (which usually implies all-inclusive) but was built as a guest ranch and offers horseback riding. There, we slept under a colorful quilt in a wee cottage surrounded by whispering pines. After a pancake breakfast in the cozy main lodge, circa 1910, we took a trail ride through the fragrant, piney Shoshone National Forest.



Though he had never before looked a horse in the eye, Tom became an instant dude that day—although he complains that wherever we go, wranglers tend to take one look at him and say, “OK, you’re going to be riding old Monster here,” or “Tom, we’re putting you on Widowmaker....”

Fortunately, though, these horses never live up to their terrifying names. Dude ranch horses are gentle—at worst, they can be difficult to goad into motion. For the most part, the chances of being run away with on your average dude ranch horse are slim unless you specifically seek out ranches catering to skilled riders.

I’ve done countless nose-to-tail rides like those at the Dixie and the Elephant Head Lodge, but other ranches do offer more ambitious riding experiences. Having ridden as a teenager (English style, not Western) but not much since, I am comfortable but not particularly skilled on a horse. However, in the sheltered venue of guest ranches, I’ve been able to explore my inner cowgirl.

At The Hideout at Flitner Ranch, a 100-year-old working ranch on a quarter-million acres in Wyoming, I spent a day on a horse driving cattle under a big blue sky. While that was not as hard-riding as it sounds, I was nevertheless head-to-toe sore after eight hours on horseback. Fortunately, the Hideout has a hot tub as well as pre-dinner cocktails and gourmet multi-course meals. I survived.

At the Molokai Ranch in Hawaii, I tried the rodeo and ranch skill of calf cutting, which is separating a calf from a herd. That is, I rode a horse that knew what he was doing so I just hung on and enjoyed the feeling of speed and competence. Hawaii has a long paniolo (cowboy) tradition descended from Mexican and Californian vaqueros, and you can taste it at Molokai Ranch—at 65,000 acres, one of the largest ranches in Hawaii. Here, the scenery looks less tropical and more like the deserts of California. From astride my talented steed, I could sense the thundering presence of the Pacific Ocean a few miles away.

While many dude ranches offer an ideal family vacation, many cater to adults. Ranches such as the Hideout and the Flying A Ranch in Pinedale, Wyoming, target adult travelers used to high-end comfort, including fine linens and gourmet meals. At these ranches, riders are not held to a tame walk but may lope across the grand scenery.

Ranches vary in style and in the packages they offer. The classic dude ranch is all-inclusive, including lodging, food, riding and other activities. Some of these require Sunday-to-Sunday or minimum stays.

Look, too, for special weeks. Paradise Ranch in Buffalo, Wyoming, for example, has adults-only weeks and ladies-only weeks. Also on my life to-do list is a women-only yoga-and-horsemanship retreat at The Home Ranch, a Relais & Châteaux property in Colorado. (On a weeklong ranch vacation, you’re likely to be paired with a horse for the duration of your stay; I know one woman who so bonded with hers during a dude ranch vacation that she decided to buy him.)

While “dude ranch” usually implies all-inclusive, other guest ranches operate on an a la carte basis, with activities and meals at an additional cost. At the Wildcatter Ranch in Graham, Texas, activities such as lolling at the pool are included, but most everything else—from horseback riding to archery and skeet shooting—is extra. (I was OK at archery but skeets have nothing to fear around me.) Still others offer a choice of plans, either all-inclusive or a la carte. Many ranches also offer optional overnight pack trips at an additional cost.

The dude ranch experience can be fun for all, even those who have no interest in ranching, because although horses are the centerpiece of any stay, many ranch resorts offer other activities as well, from hammock-lounging to fly-fishing, golf to spa treatments. The ratio of equine-related activities to others can vary greatly, which makes choosing a ranch comparable to choosing a cruise ship—the right fit makes all the difference.

But once the fit is right, a dude ranch vacation is guaranteed to make memories. ■

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Ranching Out

As with any other vacation, it pays to shop around before choosing a dude ranch. A good source of information is The Dude Ranchers' Association (www.duderranch.org); it's been around since 1926 and requires members to undergo a two-year approval process. The website offers a variety of tools and advice for selecting a ranch that fits for your interests.—S.D.

Dixie Dude Ranch / Bandera, Texas: 800-375-9255; www.dixieduderranch.com

Elephant Head Lodge / Cody, Wyoming: 307-587-3980; www.elephantheadlodge.com

Flying A Ranch / Pinedale, Wyoming: 888-833-3348; www.flyinga.com

The Hideout at Flitner Ranch / Shell, Wyoming: 800-354-8637; www.thehideout.com

The Home Ranch / Clark, Colorado: 970-879-1780; www.homeranch.com

Molokai Ranch / Molokai, Hawaii: 888-627-8082; www.molokairanch.com

Paradise Ranch / Buffalo, Wyoming: 307-684-7876; www.paradiserranch.com

Wildcatter Ranch / Graham, Texas: 888-462-9277; www.wildcatterranch.com

