

8 Great Ranch Resorts

Here's the scoop on eight guest-ranch resorts where you can stay with your own equine friend and ride to your heart's desire. Bonus: How the Dude Ranchers' Association can help you build the ultimate ranch experience.

Are you looking for a luxury guest-ranch vacation, but would rather ride your own beloved trail mount than an unfamiliar horse? These eight guest-ranch resorts will happily welcome both you and your horses to their facilities and on the spectacular trails that surround them.

For each ranch, we'll give you the location, an overview, the name of your host/s, a description of human and horse accommodations, the horses provided by the ranch (should a travel buddy need a mount), the trails, best time of year to go, and contact information.

Choose your ranch, and pack your saddlebags for the vacation of your dreams!

320 Guest Ranch

Region: Rocky Mountain.

Location: Gallatin Gateway, Montana.

Overview: Relive the early West, and enjoy the down-home hospitality at 320 Guest Ranch's beautiful, historic property. Located in the heart of Big Sky Country, this ranch offers you a gateway to Yellowstone National Park. The 110-year-old homestead is one of the oldest operating guest ranches in the country. You can take advantage of the ranch's à la carte options, for flexibility.

Your host: John Richardson.

Accommodations: 320 Guest Ranch's cabins all provide a "home away from home." Choose a private historic cabin, a cozy room with a fireplace, or a riverfront



Located in the heart of Montana's Big Sky Country, 320 Guest Ranch offers access to breathtaking trails within the Gallatin National Forest.

cabin. All feature big-window views of the surrounding scenery.

Horse accommodations: Your trail horse will stay in a standard-sized box stall with a 12-by-24-foot run. An indoor ring, complete with a new roof, is available for use year-round.

The horses: All horses and guided trail rides are geared toward beginning riders. Guided trail rides are available only to guests on ranch horses.

The trails: The beauty of the Gallatin National Forest is best seen on horseback. 320 Guest Ranch gives you access to high mountain meadows and the tops of 10,000-foot peaks. You can see the Sunken Forest that natural forces created in 1959. Wildlife includes elk, deer, eagles, moose,



coyotes, bears, and, if you're lucky, maybe even a wolf. Wranglers maintain the trails throughout the summer.

Best time to go: September is a quiet month, with ideal weather and all the opportunities of summertime.

Contact: (800) 243-0320; www.320ranch.com.

A to Z Guest Ranch

Region: Southwest.

Location: Smithville, Oklahoma.

Overview: Located in the beautiful Kiamichi Mountains in southeastern Oklahoma, the A to Z Guest Ranch will take you back to a simpler time, when families came first. Sweeping panoramic views, along

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Online bonus! For a listing of travel documents your horse will need for your ranch vacation, go to TrailRiderMag.com.

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with other scenic highlights, are just a small part of what's to be discovered at this destination.

Your hosts: Andy and Zondra Lewis.

Accommodations: A to Z offers several updated cottages and cabins, as well as the Coachman Camper, if your family is looking for a camping experience with a few modern amenities. Or, make yourself at home in a shady campsite, with your horse nearby. Amenities include two bathhouses, picnic tables, and fire rings.

Horse accommodations: Twenty dirt corrals, either 10-by-10 or 12-by-12 feet, accompany the campsites. Spigots and hoses are easily accessible, so you won't have to haul heavy buckets. The corral spots offer plenty of shade. Each cabin also has a corral just outside the back door, so the view out your window can also include your happy horse. Or, you can upgrade to one of the 22 covered stalls in the large wood-paneled barn. You're responsible for your horse's care.

The horses: The trail horses at A to Z fit every type of rider and include a variety of breeds. Several smooth-gaited horses are available.

The trails: A to Z offers 150 miles of mountain trail riding. The rocky, hilly ter-

rain is mostly suitable for riding at a walk; however, you can ride through some areas at a faster gait. Get your horse fit before taking on these trails. Guided rides aren't available if you ride your own horse, but you'll be provided with a thorough map and the helpful staff will always send you off in the right direction.

Best time to go: Spring and fall are popular seasons to visit A to Z. When there's enough rainfall, the vivid colors are beyond compare, and the creeks are crystal clear.

Contact: (580) 244-3729;
www.atozguestranch.com.

Brushy Creek Lodge & Resort

Region: Midwest.

Location: Black, Missouri.

Overview: When it comes to vacationing with your horse and family, Brushy Creek Lodge & Resort is the ideal getaway. Located in the Eastern Ozarks in the heart of Mark Twain National Forest, the beauty and the accommodations at Brushy Creek make it a destination that attracts regulars. Many guests return more than once in a season, sometimes more than a dozen times in one year.

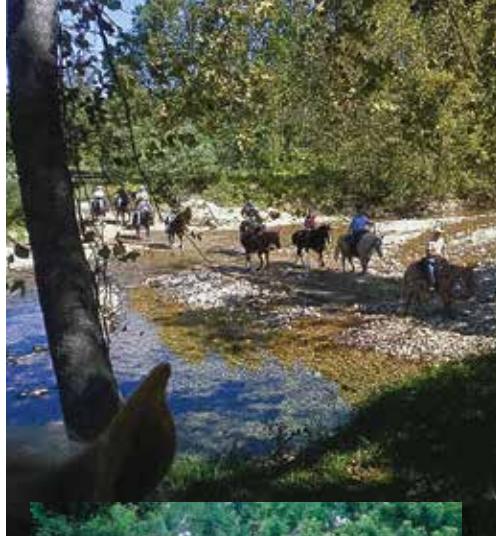
Your hosts: JoAnn and George Becker.

Accommodations: If you visit the resort, you'll have your choice of making yourself at home in the equestrian campsite, or in one of the rustic, well-furnished cabins tucked back in the trees. If you choose to camp, you'll have access to showers and free wireless Internet.

Horse accommodations: Brushy Creek's five barns offer more than 90 box stalls; choose 8-by-8-foot or 10-by-10-foot. Campsites are nearby, but if you prefer to be closer to your equine travel buddy, you can set up corral panels instead. Wash bays at every barn are handy for post-ride bathing. Shavings are provided free of charge, but bring your own feed and water buckets.

The horses: Brushy Creek offers organized rides on the ranch's gentle horses. Missouri Fox Trotters are the ranch's specialty; put in your request in advance.

The trails: With access to 150 miles of trails in Mark Twain National Forest, you'll likely feel as though you have the backcountry all to yourself; you'll ride for miles without passing another group. Grab one of



With Brushy Creek's access to 150 miles of secluded trails in the heart of Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest, you may be tempted to visit again and again.

the resort's handy, color-coded maps before heading out for the day or an overnight pack trip. Trails offer a first-class view of Taum Sauk Mountain, Missouri's tallest point. Annual spring and fall trail rides feature a poker run, live music, and a barn dance.

Best time to go: Fall is an excellent time to visit Brushy Creek to enjoy cooler nights and the array of changing colors. It's also the prime season to see a variety of birds (including wild turkey) and deer.

Contact: (573) 269-4600;
www.brushycreeklodge.com.

M Lazy C Ranch

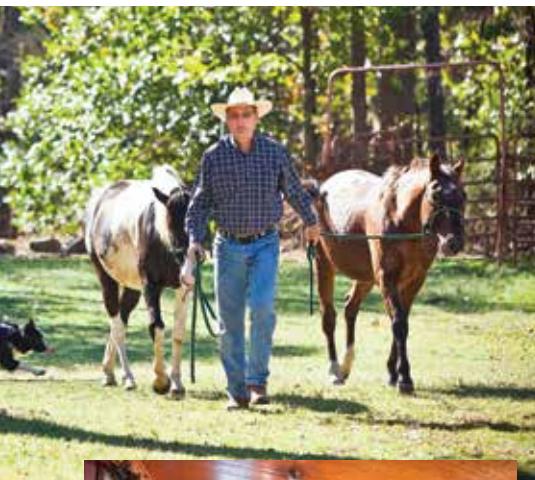
Region: Rocky Mountain.

Destination: Lake George, Colorado.

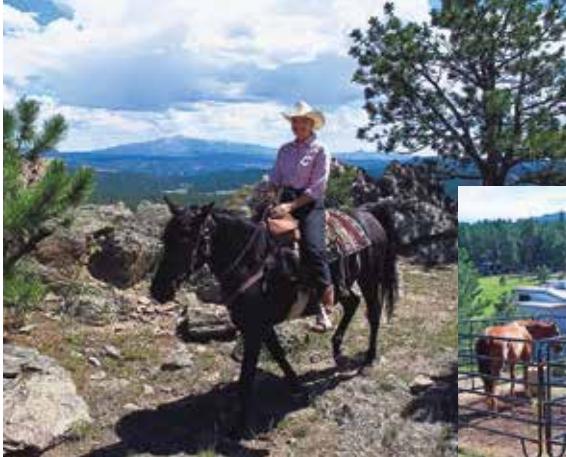
Overview: Owners Randy and Brenda Myers have been making vacation dreams come true at the M Lazy C Ranch for 30 years. Their guests often become friends and return for weeks at a time, every year. Since the ranch is a family business, they specialize in activities the entire family can participate in.

Your hosts: Randy and Brenda Myers.

Accommodations: The ranch offers rustic cabins that have been rebuilt with the design of the original homestead in mind. In addition, 20 recreational-vehicle sites of-



If you're looking for a family vacation to be remembered, the A to Z Guest Ranch, nestled in Oklahoma's Kiamichi Mountains, offers unforgettable experiences.



M Lazy C Ranch, a family-oriented destination, lies just outside Pike National Forest in the Colorado Rockies.



fer full-service electrical, water, and sewer hookups; or, you can choose just electrical and water. A primitive camping area offers wall tents, or you can pitch your own tent. Amenities include bathrooms, showers, and a centralized campfire area.

Horse accommodations: Your horses will enjoy the spaciousness of a 12-by-12-foot or 16-by-16-foot dirt pen, directly behind one of the RV sites. Campers stay tucked back in the trees at the back of the property, so there's often shade over the pens. The ranch has a limited number of covered 16-by-24-foot deluxe pens, but you'll need to reserve them far in advance.

Each site has water and electrical hookups. Some cabins also have pens behind them, such as the cozy Homestead Cabin.

The horses: A selection of gaited horses, Quarter Horses, and mules make up the herd of available mounts. Everyone from disabled riders to advanced horsemen can be accommodated.

The trails: At the M Lazy C, you can ride out the back gate to 300,000 acres of special-use permit land in Pike National Forest. You

and your riding buddy will enjoy the two-track roads that wind through historic mining claims, follow open meadows, go along the Tarryall River, and head into the Colorado Rockies. If you ride for several hours, you can view the damage of 2002's Hayman Fire, as well as the miraculous recovery that has already taken hold in the area. The ranch is surrounded by so much pristine wilderness, it's hard to see it all in an hour or two. Guided pack trips lasting one, three, and five days into the wilderness are available on ranch horses and your own.

Best time to go: Weather in this central Colorado location is best for trail riding from Memorial Day through September.

Contact: (800) 289-4868; www.mlazyc.com.

The Mountain Top Inn & Resort

Region: Northeast.

Location: Chittenden, Vermont.

Overview: The Mountain Top Inn & Resort is located on 350 beautiful acres, surrounded by vast stretches of the Green Mountain National Forest and overlooking a recreational mountain lake. Situated 11 miles northeast of Killington, the secluded resort provides an ambiance of both relaxation and outdoor adventure. The staff will

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Trails at The Mountain Top Inn and Resort overlook Chittenden, Vermont's majestic mountain lake.

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help you to create a personalized riding vacation to suit your needs and ability level. A variety of onsite activities are offered in both the winter and summer.

Your hosts: Roger Hill and Khele Sparks.

Accommodations: Stay in the lodge, where suites, luxury, and classic lodge rooms are offered. Or, bunk down in a rustic one- or four-bedroom cabin.

Horse accommodations: The 100-by-25-foot, single-story barn has matted stalls and plenty of ventilation. There's one turn-out pen, for guest horses only. The staff is available for feeding and care during your stay. Just outside the barn, you'll be treated to Vermont's beauty, with Mount Carmel to the northeast, and the resort's surrounding meadows and the main trailhead across the road.

The horses: Ranch horses are available for experienced riders, as well as those new in the saddle. Professional instructors will help improve your Western or English skills.

The trails: Enjoy The Mountain Top's spectacular property as you walk, jog, or lope through serene mountain pastures

and miles of wooded trails that offer colorful spring flowers and beautiful fall foliage. There are 40 miles of trails to explore during your stay. Riding clinics are offered all year.

Best time of year to go: Each season brings something new to the resort. Winter and summer are busy seasons, with a variety of activities offered. Off-season months, such as November and April, bring quiet and solitude to the ranch.

Contact: (802) 483-2311; www.mountaintopinn.com.

Rancho Oso

Region: Pacific.

Location: Santa Barbara, California.

Overview: A short drive from the city and Santa Ynez Valley wine country, Rancho Oso offers fresh air and a change of pace from everyday busy life. Spectacular forest and mountain scenery, combined with rich history, provide one of the most memorable riding and recreational experiences found anywhere in California. Since the mid-1990s, families and solo travelers have enjoyed the village's peaceful surroundings, easy access to miles of trails, and top-notch



Set in the backcountry hills of Southern California, Rancho Oso offers a wide variety of accommodations for both you and your horse.

horse facilities. Check the ranch's website for scheduled clinics on horsemanship, Western dressage, and more.

Your host: Bill Krzyston.

Accommodations: Rancho Oso has every type of accommodation available. Stay in a full-amenity resort cabin, or a cottage with all the comforts of home. Pitch your own tent, or set up in a large "Safari" canvas tent, equipped with ceiling fans, lights, electricity, and cots. If you have an RV or a living-quarters trailer, reserve a site with electrical and water hookups under shady oak trees. As a camper, you'll have access to all resort amenities.

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Rancho Oso offers spectacular forest and mountain riding in Los Padres National Forest. Keep a sharp eye out for such forest creatures as deer, wild turkey, and eagles.

Horse accommodations: With more than 30 separate corrals and two campsites to choose from, Rancho Oso guarantees a comfortable experience for your horse. Corrals range in size from 12-by-12 to 24-by-24 feet. All have water buckets, wash racks, and hose access. Large oak trees tower over some of the Western Village's corrals. Circular driveways make loading and unloading your horse a breeze. Trails start right behind the corrals, making it easy to saddle up and ride out. At the smaller camping area along the shady Santa Ynez riverbed, corrals are arranged in twos at five distinct sites.

The horses: Most of the stock consists of Quarter Horses or Quarter/draft crosses. The ranch values the health and well-being of its horses, thus limits rides on ranch horses to slow speeds on the trails' challenging terrain.

The trails: Rancho Oso is set in the beautiful backcountry hills of the Los Padres National Forest. Experience what it was like to live on an authentic California rancho, with unlimited access to the national forest trail system. Guided rides are available if you bring your horses; to arrange a guide, call before arrival.

Best time to go: Winter and spring bring rain, green vegetation, and possibly water in the Santa Ynez River. Pesky insects and dust are nowhere to be seen during these times of year. For wildlife watchers, the forest comes alive with deer, wild turkey, eagles, and other creatures.

Contact: (805) 683-5110; www.ranchooso.net.

Running R Ranch

Region: Southwest.

Location: Bandera, Texas.

Overview: You won't feel like just another guest when you visit Running R Ranch, but more like a member of the family. Once an established cattle ranch, this Southwestern gem is located right in the heart of picturesque Texas Hill Country, and offers both modern amenities and the charm of simple ranch life.

Your host: Scott Brose.

Accommodations: Fourteen Western-style cabins blend in with the surroundings and offer air-conditioning and heating. Each one sleeps four to six people and features a seating area, refrigerator, and a view of the horses after they're turned out for the evening.

Horse accommodations: The cheery red barn where both ranch and guest horses stay has 30 stalls. Two stalls with spacious outdoor pens are available to rent. Stabling is free if you choose to care for your horse. Or, for \$30 a day, the staff will tend to him. Cabins also have paneled pens nearby if you choose to keep your horse within sight.

The horses: Running R has 35 horses to suit every riding level, from beginning to advanced. Breeds range from Quarter Horses, Paints, and Appaloosas to Mustangs and

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Thoroughbreds. A hands-on approach guarantees a complete equestrian experience.

The trails: While exploring the trails, you can amble into the Hill Country State Natural Area. The 5,500-acre park, once a popular private ranch, was donated to the state, and now adjoins Running R's 230

acres. The state park offers more than 40 miles of trails and a prime view of Bandera County's highest point. Trail rides last up to six hours. Choose a short-and-sweet route, or spend the day loping on long stretches of open countryside and tree-lined trails. Due to steep, rocky areas, the management strongly suggests that you shoe your horse before you leave home.

Best time to go: While Running R Ranch is open 365 days of the year, winter can be an ideal choice if you're looking for mild weather.

Contact: (830) 796-3984; www.rrranch.com.

Salamander Resort's 25-acre horse facility is surrounded by nine lush paddocks. From there, you can explore hundreds of acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Two hundred of the property's acres are set aside for conservation easement.

Salamander Resort and Spa

Region: Southeast.

Location: Middleburg, Virginia.

Overview: Salamander Resort & Spa is a luxury resort set on 340 acres amid Virginia's famed horse country, lush vineyards, and the storied village of Middleburg. The facility, which opened for business just last summer, offers upscale equestrian, spa, and culinary experiences.

Your host: Sheryl Jordan.

Accommodations: The resort is designed to blend into Virginia's surrounding rolling countryside, and features 168 spacious rooms and suites. Dog-friendly rooms are available on the terrace level, if



Once an established cattle ranch, Running R is located right in the heart of picturesque Texas Hill Country, and offers both modern amenities and the charm of simple ranch life.



Dude Ranchers' Association

Trying to find the right guest ranch online can mean information overload and results that aren't necessarily the best choices. The Dude Ranchers' Association was created to help equestrian vacationers build the ultimate ranch experience by taking a more personalized approach.

"When we walk onto a ranch, we look for six things: horses, hats, history, hon-

esty, hospitality, and heart," says DRA executive director Colleen Hodson.

To become a certified DRA destination, ranches have to meet rigorous standards. "We make sure they have a quality horse program and that they market themselves as what they truly are," says Hodson. "A lot of places call themselves dude ranches. But a place that only offers two-hour rides is not a dude ranch."

The DRA's easy-to-navigate website provides a thorough search engine for users, with extensive information, videos, and photos. But it's not just the online tools that are helpful — vacationers are en-

couraged to call at anytime during their search. Hodson has been to each of the ranches and is ready to help.

"This is their personal vacation, so it's nice to have a personal touch from the start," she notes. "Especially for people who don't know what to expect from a dude ranch."

Tip: When browsing the DRA website, use the Saddle Bags feature like a shopping cart to narrow down and compare your favorite choices. If you need more time to decide, you can e-mail yourself a copy of the list.

Contact: (866) 399-2339; www.duderanch.org

The Dude Ranchers' Association will help you plan the perfect trail-riding vacation through web tools and person-to-person interaction. Shown is the A Bar A Ranch, a DRA-approved ranch.



PHOTO COURTESY OF A BAR A RANCH



Full-service boarding is an option at Salamander's 22-stall stable.

your other furry friend will be joining you on vacation.

Horse accommodations: Salamander Resort's 25-acre horse facility is surrounded by nine lush paddocks. Full-service boarding is an option at the resort's state-of-the-art, 22-stall stable. The staff will provide top-level care, including daily feedings and stall cleaning at your request. A 28,000-square-foot riding arena with Thor-Turf footing is also available for use.

The horses: Horses for every level of rider are available for exploring the trails with a guide. Beginners can enjoy the scenic walking trail rides, while skilled equestrians can participate in a more vigorous adventure. Currently, only one-and two-hour guided rides are available, but this will change as the resort expands its program.

The trails: At Salamander Resort, you can explore hundreds of acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Two hundred of the property's acres are set aside for conservation easement. Miles of trails ensure that riders can easily spend a full day out and about exploring. If you bring your horse, the resort asks that you go out with a staff member on your first ride to learn the areas that permit riding. After that, you're free to roam, but guides are always available.

Best time to go: The equestrian program operates year-round. Fall and spring show off Virginia's changing colors and ideal weather.

Contact: (866) 938-7370; www.salamanderresort.com.

Journalist Lauren Back is a lifelong equestrian. She grew up competing on the East Coast's hunter/jumper circuit. After moving to Denver, Colorado, she worked as a children's wrangler and trail guide on a guest ranch, and enjoys experiencing the Rocky Mountains by horseback.

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