

WHERE the DEER and the ANTELOPE PLAY

(And cowboys and cowgirls dine on truffle ice cream)

By Vera Marie Badertscher

Ahh, for the life of a cowboy. Riding the range, watching the sunset as you settle beside the campfire. So romantic. As long as you can skip the fence-mending, meals of beans and coffee, sleeping-on-the-rocky-ground parts. If you are looking for a little less “wild” in your Wild West, here are three Arizona dude ranches that pamper the part-time cowboys and girls.

RANCHO DE LOS CABALLEROS

Rancho de los Caballeros in Wickenburg has been catering to people following the winter sun to Arizona since 1948. The drive to this former gold-mine bonanza town from the Phoenix airport takes about an hour and a half. Once you get outside the metro area, the view opens up in a desert worthy of a John Huston movie. The effect is calming, and the sight of the centuries-old, towering saguaro cactuses studding hillsides inspires awe. Perfect to get you in the mood for becoming a cowboy. (Wickenburg also has a small airport if you want to fly your own plane.)

Just past the weathered board facades in Wickenburg, take the evocatively named Vulture Mine Road to the ranch. In moments you arrive at los Caballeros. The golf course, with its carefully maintained greens, dominates the entrance. Next, you see the swimming pool and a circle of appealing desert-sunset-pink Mexican-style casitas and in the distance – somewhere – are stables and horses.

With 20,000 acres of desert where the tall saguaro cactuses stand like the abandoned fence posts of some giant, you and your horse will have plenty of room to roam. That is, if you choose to get on a horse.

From its first season, vacationers appreciated luxury touches at the ranch: A private bathroom in every room! Separate tables in the dining room and meals off a menu, instead of family-style dining! An oval swimming pool!



Left to right: Rancho de los Caballeros strikes the balance between dude ranch and luxury getaway. The living room at Rancho de los Caballeros is an inviting space for guests with its Western feel and beautiful finishes. • Guests can participate in wagon rides, just one of the Western activities available at Rancho de los Caballeros. • For those who desire a break from riding and roping, Rancho de los Caballeros' lush, green golf course is just the thing.

While those features wowed people who described the ranch as “swank” in the late '40s, it has to offer a bit more nowadays, and it does. Rancho de los Caballeros still has all the Western activities expected of a dude ranch, like riding, roping, and wagon rides plus skeet shooting. Novice riders may welcome the full-service spa at the end of the trail. And those who would rather be gripping a two-wood than leather reins play on an award-winning 18-hole golf course (off limits to horses).

You cannot help but be impressed with the large living room, which would be called the lobby in most hotels. Touches like wall and corner sconces at least 3 feet tall made of ornate tin work, and comfortable chairs clustered in conversation groups on the saltillo tile floor keep the ranch true to the vision of the original Santa Fe interior designer, Bruce Cooper, who worked with the ranch until the early 1980s. A copper-clad fireplace hood imprinted with the Sun-C brand of Rancho de los Caballeros reigns over all.

The dining room runs as a full-service restaurant, open to the public, in the evening by reservation. A mark of the seriousness with which they take their food is a rare-in-Arizona dress code. Well, a Western dress code. Men get away with a Western jacket or vest instead of a sports coat. The code of the West, so to speak.

Lunch is served buffet style on a poolside indoor/outdoor patio. A stunning punched and cut Mexican-style tin panel stretches most of the way along the back wall of the dining room. Brightly painted designs on wooden window frames carry the cheerful Southwestern vibe throughout the ranch.

Manager Rui Pereira says many major corporations send employees to the ranch for conferences or employee incentive vacations. A conference center with a capacity of 250 people hunkers down on the far side of the pool so as not to obstruct mountain views from the big dining room windows of the main lodge.

Families utilize the ranch, too, particularly in the spring. Pereira says that a pool table opposite the check-in desk was built in 1886 and has seen a lot in its years, but it now gets most use from youngsters rather than seasoned hustlers. Parents who come with children know that the kids will have a full range of activities to keep them occupied, from crafts to corral and trail rides.

The Mariposa Suites in particular lend themselves to family use. Each of three buildings is divided into four connecting suites. The living room includes a Murphy bed and sofa bed. The large master bedroom's king bed keeps company with painted



OF COURSE, ARIZONA DOES NOT HAVE A LOCK ON LUXURY DUDE RANCHES. WE'VE RUSTLED UP THREE IN OTHER WESTERN STATES.

WYOMING

In Wyoming, the Flying A Ranch provides classic dude ranch experiences tucked away in a secluded area 50 miles from Jackson Hole and 75 miles from Yellowstone National Park. Log cabins with names of pioneers were part of the original dude ranch in 1929 and have been restored to today's comforts, including Wi-Fi. With a maximum of 14 guests in six cabins, wranglers and staff can concentrate on what you most want from your vacation. Whether you want to learn to cast a fly, identify some natural features on a trail ride, or just sit on your porch and watch the deer and antelope roam, you can find it here. Pilates and yoga classes, in-cabin massages or facials, and cooking classes can be arranged at certain times. Gourmet meals on white china and crystal end a day on the range. No pets here because of the wildlife. This ranch is exclusively adult (over 16). All inclusive. Weekly rates (ask for three to four days when they are not full). Open the third week in June through late September, but call by April to assure a space.

Flying A Ranch
771 Flying A Ranch Road
Pinedale, WY 82941
307.367.2385
www.flyinga.com

NEW MEXICO

In New Mexico, Rancho de San Juan provides total luxury, the best restaurant in the state, and the scenery of Georgia O'Keefe country. Original art pieces make each of the dozen casitas or rooms an individualized retreat at this Relais & Château property. No horses, no activity director, no activities, no TV. You will find, however, ample hiking in the surrounding desert to a variety of nearby ancient Indian sites. Or go up the arroyo to an artist-created cave-like art installation, a shrine called "Windows in the Earth" that many choose as a wedding location. Or walk a short way to see a holy spot used two centuries ago by the Penitente. And if you wish, helpful owners David Heath and John Johnson will introduce you to artists who live and work nearby, and

guide you to expeditions in this beautiful part of New Mexico. More appropriate for adults. In-room massage can be arranged. Most art in rooms can be purchased. Rates include breakfast on the patio.

Rancho de San Juan
P.O. Box 4140
Espanola, NM 87533
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ranchosj@windstream.net

TEXAS

Texas Hill Country begins in San Antonio, and the Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa presents a great introduction to the area. While this resort is not a dude ranch, it sits on land that was once a ranch and planners have preserved the natural beauty of live oak trees and fields of wildflowers. Materials salvaged from old ranch buildings make up Windflower, the spa. A windmill stands as a landmark in the center of the property, and the modern lodging portion of the resort, with 500 luxurious rooms, has the limestone rock and weathered-board look of Hill Country ranch houses. Stately live oaks surround the 27-hole golf course, helping it blend in with walking paths and a nature trail, the 950-foot Ramblin' River with inner tubes for floating, and a beach for picnics. Teens have their own spa section and a teen club called Underground. Children are entertained at Camp Hyatt and a 4-acre water park. Although there are no horses on the old ranch any more, horse stables are a short drive away, but then, so is Sea World, Six Flags theme park, and the Alamo in downtown San Antonio.

Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa
9800 Hyatt Resort Drive
San Antonio, TX 78251
210.627.1234
<http://hillcountry.hyatt.com>



Left: The oldest dude ranch in the Tucson area, Tanque Verde Ranch offers the classic dude ranch experience against the backdrop of the Rincon Mountains. Above: The grounds of Tanque Verde include an 1868 ranch house.



Majestic Cut Crocodile, with color and inlays on top.

Stallion's intricate, stylish patterns come to life by combining top-quality materials sourced from around the world.

Next to Stallion's signature soft-tanned alligator and crocodile, other leathers like calf, ostrich, lizard, stingray, kangaroo, various snake, water buffalo and bison are used to make a Stallion boot. Stallion is- so far- the only company who uses fossilized walrus and mammoth ivory in their boots. It is carved into works of art in Bali before it is incorporated into Stallion's boot designs. Upon request, Stallion performs custom designs and fittings.



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furniture that has a Mexican flair. A small kitchenette, a spa tub, and a Kiva fireplace add to the luxury. All of the 79 rooms and suites except the original "Ranch Rooms" connect with one other room.

Rates include three meals and use of pool and tennis courts, but you pay extra for activities and instruction. Just like some desert creatures, the ranch ducks out of sight in the heat of summer when it shuts from mid-May through August; temperatures that reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit, or even higher, tend to discourage people wanting to go outdoors - except golfers, of course. They start when the sun comes up and the wild-life starts stirring.

See www.sunc.com for details.

TANQUE VERDE RANCH

Mountains ring Tucson, Arizona, but if you are headed for a roundup at Tanque Verde Guest Ranch, you want to keep your eye on the Rincon Mountains that rise out of the Sonoran Desert east of Tucson. Speedway

Boulevard steers straight east toward the Rincons, passing urban shopping strip mall territory and city-fringe housing developments, and finally enters gently rolling mesquite-bosques of small ranches. At the end of the road, quite literally, just before the boundary of Saguaro National Park, a left turn takes you down a dirt road to the headquarters of Tanque Verde Ranch.

As you drive through the desert to the parking lot, the first thing you see is a milling crowd of horses. Many of the 180 horses belonging to the ranch will be hanging out in corrals here, waiting to go to work on trail rides.

Once there were more than a dozen dude ranches circling Tucson. The winter sun drew visitors to the lush Sonoran Desert, where a proliferation of mesquite and palo verde trees shade patches of ground near washes, and prickly pear, spiky ocotillo, and stately giant saguaro cactuses fill in the dry stretches. Today only two of the old time ranches remain, and the oldest, Tanque Verde Ranch (pronounced TANK-uh VER-dee), presents the classic dude ranch experience, with some extras that Tucson pioneers never dreamed of.



Between crafts, lasso lessons, and riding instruction, kids can have adventure after adventure at Tanque Verde.

Just because they provide a lot of family-friendly activities, do not think of Tanque Verde as a strictly family place, overrun with kids. This is a really big outfit. Depending on season, up to 150 staff members cater to guests. Weddings, corporate events, and Women of the West Getaways, complete with lessons from a horse gentler, fill the calendar.

Meals in the dining room consist of choices between buffet and off-the-menu, and always offer a choice between beef, chicken, or fish and a vegetarian entrée. Once a week, the whole she-bang moves down to the Cottonwood Grove for an evening cookout with entertainment by a singing cowboy. Wild javelina come scrounging around the cook's fire looking for handouts. And happy dudes walk back up the dirt paths listening for the coyote's howl and gazing at more stars than they knew the sky was capable of.

With hundreds of miles of trails surrounding the property, separate corrals for adult activities, and all-day trail rides into the surrounding Saguaro National Monument's beautiful foothills country, adults can totally surrender to their inner cowboy. Or they can never set foot in a stirrup, opting instead to walk a little, spy some wildlife, read a book by the outdoor pool, or stay indoors at La Sonora spa, exercise room, and indoor pool. Lasso or luxuriate, at Tanque Verde, it's up to you.

For details check www.tanqueverderanch.com.

HIDDEN MEADOW RANCH

If the smell of pine, or watching elk graze or trout leaping in cold mountain streams appeals to you, try Hidden Meadow Ranch in northern Arizona's White

Photo courtesy of Tanque Verde Ranch

TOURING



Fishermen can try their hands at the two stocked trout ponds at Hidden Meadow Ranch in Arizona's White Mountains.

Mountains. This luxurious ranch hides farther away from civilization than the other two ranches. Private jets and a small regional airline land at the small airport at nearby Springerville, where the ranch hands will pick you up. But if you enjoy driving, try the road from Phoenix that plunges down into the Salt River Canyon and unfurls up past an unforgettable string of views.

As you climb from the cactus-studded valley floor, you see the life zones shift from low desert through scrub oak and juniper until the hillsides become mountains and the stubby trees become stately ponderosas. And once you get to the ranch, you can sink into the cool

mountain forests, take a deep breath of pine, and forget you ever saw a building made of concrete and steel.

If at first glance Hidden Meadow's 10 peeled-log cabins remind you of the log cabin summer camps of your youth, it may be because it once was a camp for young people. The property, first homesteaded when Teddy Roosevelt was president, took two years to convert from kiddie camp to a dude ranch where the motto is "Escape from Everything but Luxury." Now instead of bunk beds, you bed down on pillow-top mattresses and down pillows, lulled to sleep by your XM Satellite Radio.

Photo courtesy of Hidden Meadow Ranch

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Left: The cabin accommodations at Hidden Meadow Ranch are simultaneously luxurious and cozy. Above: A campfire is the perfect way to end a day of trail rides and nature walks at Hidden Meadow before turning in for a great night's rest.

Each cabin features a living room with fireplace. The mini dining area contains a microwave and an apartment fridge stuffed with complimentary soft drinks and water. A divided bathroom off the master bedroom includes a tin watering-trough tub in one room and toilet in the other. That's so the people (perhaps your children) sleeping up in the loft will not disturb you when they come into the bathroom at night. The loft includes a queen bed, sofa bed, games, books, and a work desk with Wi-Fi connection. It's enough to make a round-up cowboy want to burn his bedroll.

Since this ranch is in the high mountains, some guests choose to come in the winter when wood fires crackle in their cabin's fireplace. They stay snug indoors unless snowshoe treks and cross-country skiing draw

them outdoors. Pictures of the main lodge piled with snow and Christmas celebrations with a decorated tree in each individual cabin remind everyone that not all of Arizona is covered with desert. But this is a cool place in the summertime, too.

The ranch provides about 40 horses that guests take out with wranglers for trail rides in the summer, when thunderheads build up in the wide blue sky each afternoon. Would-be cowpokes can sign up for optional classes in roping, horseshoeing, and working cattle. Trail hikes and nature walks of various difficulty, leather working, and fly-fishing also keep people occupied. Racks of fishing rods stand beside the two stocked trout ponds (catch and release), so fishermen can cast a line any time of day. Or they can drive a couple of miles

through the little town of Greer and use their own tackle at the Little Colorado Creek.

An indoor swimming pool and a full-fledged spa are in the planning stages. Meanwhile, get your exercise outdoors and if you need a massage, the staff will arrange an in-cabin masseuse visit.

You may need both exercise and massage to work off the calories piled up in the dining room. At Hidden Meadow, cowboy grub gives way to dishes like elk meat medallions tenderized in an anchiote marinade and served with a mushroom whiskey sauce. And what "cookie" on the trail ever served truffle gelato? The resort prides itself on a fine selection of wines and even hosts wine weekends. In case you miss the old-style cowboy food, the staff obliges with an occasional cook-out breakfast with Dutch oven biscuits, coffee poured from an enamel-ware pot, and sausages and hash browns. A cook bends over a portable grill making omelets to order. If they had food like this in the Old West, there might have been a lot fewer shoot-outs on the streets of Tombstone.

After dinner, mosey on back to your cabin, watching for deer and elk along the way. Sit a spell on your front porch looking into the woods, or on your back porch watching the colts do their imitation of unstable pipe cleaner sculptures in the horse pens on the other side of a grove of trees. Make plans for a morning of swinging lazily in the hammock and watching the birds. Get up early enough and you'll catch the daily rounds of the enormous buck elk that wander between the cabins foraging.

Who needs the clamor of TV? Really, all the sound effects you need are the crackling of the fire, the creaking of the wooden floors, the rustle of the pines, and maybe the far-off cry of an elk.

For more details check www.hiddenmeadow.com.

