

H * A * P * P * Y

Trails

BY KARA WILLIAMS

The most luxurious ranch resorts in the West offer not only horseback riding, but also decadent spa treatments, gourmet meals, and dozens of other outdoor adventures.

Forget any preconceived notion you might have of vacationing at a working cattle ranch. That is, if you think a ranch holiday equals “City Slickers” -- i.e. lots of dust and dirt, canned beans for dinner, and extreme saddle soreness -- it’s time to reconsider a Western excursion in the great outdoors.

After all, today’s most luxurious ranch resorts (or “guest ranches” or “wilderness resorts”) deliver the white-gloved attention you’re accustomed to at the world’s finest hotels. From Frette linens and in-room Jacuzzi tubs to butler service and Thai massage, the best upscale ranch resorts don’t skimp when it comes to providing a “wow” factor for their guests.

Horses in the morning at Rancho de los Caballeros in Arizona.





The Resort at Paws Up, Montana takes glamping to a whole new level.



Hot air ballooning at Vista Verde.



Team penning at Colorado's Vista Verde.

Opportunities to ride horses, learn from experienced wranglers, and herd cattle (if you really want to) abound at guest ranches. But even if you're not a huge fan of horseback riding, the menu of outdoor activities is so ridiculously vast you may not be able to fit in everything you want to do during a week's stay. "Ranches today are multi-sport facilities," says Gene Kilgore, owner of the online guide *RanchWeb.com*, with options like hot-air ballooning, golfing, whitewater rafting, rock climbing, or Zorbing (yes, Zorbing). In fact, you can spend your entire vacation at a ranch resort and never ever sit your fanny in a saddle. If the only appointments on your week's agenda are with a massage therapist and the cocktail-hour bartender, that's perfectly okay, too.

Another plus for booking a ranch vacation: they're all inclusive. "It's a hassle-free trip, with lodging, activities and meals all taken care of for you," points out Jody Dahl, founder of *Top50Ranches.com*. Gratuities, airport transfers, childcare and entertainment like campfire sing-a-longs or cowboy poetry readings are often included in the package price, as well.

For your next back-to-nature vacation, consider these top ranch resorts west of the Rockies. Each has its own distinct personality, amenities and accommodations. But rest assured, no matter which you choose for your couples' trip, romantic escape, or girlfriend getaway, you'll enjoy genuine Western hospitality amid some of North America's most spectacular scenery.

Resort at Paws Up, Montana

Home to a few hundred head of Black Angus cows, this working cattle ranch northeast of Missoula takes "glamping" to a whole new level with its luxury tent accommodations featuring ceiling fans, en suite bathrooms, expansive decks...and a butler servicing guests in each of four tent camps on the 37,000-acre property. There's brick-and-mortar lodging here, too: spacious multi-bedroom homes for extended family or a few couples to share. Can't choose? Book a luxury home with a tent pitched in the yard.

Indulge in a Gold Flake Oil Massage -- or any number of body treatments -- at Spa Town, a series of white tents set along a wooden boardwalk; from your massage table you'll hear wind whistling in the trees or perhaps bald eagles calling overhead. The Resort at Paws Up, named for the dogs on hind legs that might enthusiastically greet guests, is also home to Zorbing, where you roll down a hill -- shrieking and laughing -- in a giant, clear, flexible ball. Sixteen stations of clay shooting, fly-fishing on the legendary Blackfoot River, cattle drives, upscale chuckwagon dinners and private riverside picnics are also on offer. www.pawsup.com

Vista Verde, Colorado

With a guest to staff ratio of 1:1, "on a bad day," quips reservation manager Stephanie Wilson, and accommodation capped at 40, Vista Verde guarantees personalized service at this family-friendly guest ranch north of Steamboat Springs. Schedule activities --

hiking, whitewater rafting, hot-air ballooning or a shopping trip into town -- when you like; the ranch's small size allows for flexibility. Tell stories of the day's adventures over leisurely evening meals, which include casual barbeque cookouts and more formal dinners served on white tablecloths. By the end of the week your fellow adventurers -- as well as the incredibly warm staff -- will feel like longtime friends.

The horse program here is topnotch. If riding's your thing, you'll be assigned a horse for the week for morning and afternoon trail rides that weave through aspen groves and across wide-open meadows with spectacular views of snowcapped Rocky Mountains. Learn from friendly, down-to-earth wranglers at a heated indoor arena, open year round. In fact, winter is a delightful time to visit Vista Verde for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and sleigh rides. www.vistaverde.com

*Clayoquot Wilderness Resort,
British Columbia*

Imagine this: whale watching by Zodiac raft in the morning, then horseback riding through old-growth forest in the afternoon. Clayoquot "eco safari" has the unusual ranch distinction of being located on the water on Vancouver Island -- guests have dubbed it "Fantasy Island, western style." So surfing and ocean kayaking are included in the rate of your stay, as well as ziplining, archery, bear watching (!), and rock climbing. New this year, for an additional fee, are heli-hiking, heli-fishing, and helicopter photography tours.

Getting to the resort is an adventure in itself -- from Vancouver International Airport, a charter seaplane whisks guests to the west side of Vancouver Island, near Tofino on Clayoquot Sound. The seasonal resort is open May through September, and luxury tent accommodations are put up (then taken down) each year. Reserve en-suite bathroom tents or "rough it" in tents with composting toilets just outside and private showers nearby. Meals are taken in the 3,000-square-foot Cookhouse Restaurant with massive log beams, stone fireplaces and a comfortable outdoor lounge. Seafood shines on the menu; favorite items include oyster chowder, prosciutto-wrapped halibut, and poached Dungeness crab. www.wildretreat.com

The dinner tent at British Columbia's Clayoquot Wilderness Resort.



Thai Yoga on the Baan Thai Pavillion Terrace at Echo Valley Ranch & Spa in British Columbia.

Echo Valley Ranch & Spa, British Columbia

An intriguing blend of East meets West sets the tone at this guest ranch, where balance of mental, spiritual and physical health takes center stage. That's because one of the owners is

Thai, and you can find her influence in many of the on-site offerings -- from a traditional Thai yoga-style stretch class each morning to Luk Pra Kob herbal rejuvenation massage in the full-service Baan Thai spa to the Thursday evening



Granite Lodge serves as home base for The Ranch at Rock Creek with a saloon (see right), great room, dining room and deluxe guest rooms (see right).



cultural feast with authentic dishes from Thailand, as well as Thai dancing and musical entertainment.

Of course, Western-style ranch activities are offered at this guest ranch set in a valley amid the rolling Cariboo Mountains of British Columbia. Trail rides by horseback are offered for all levels of equestrians; if you're relatively new to riding, you can take lessons from patient wranglers in an outdoor arena -- more advanced riders, try barrel racing! Combine a stay at Echo Valley with another quintessential Western experience: premium train travel aboard the luxurious Rocky Mountaineer. A Ride the Rail package features the Vancouver to Banff "First Passage to the West" train itinerary, plus three nights at Echo Valley Ranch & Spa. www.evranch.com

Rancho de los Caballeros, Arizona

Although Rancho de los Caballeros is only an hour's drive from the Phoenix metro area, you'll feel a world away from the chaos of city life at this desert ranch resort, open seasonally October through May. Charming casitas with hammered-tin accents and vintage handcrafted furnishings, coupled with the laid-back pace of the ranch, may harken back

to a proverbial "simpler time." But its Southwest charm is complemented by modern in-room amenities, such as flat-screen televisions and wi-fi, plus a full-service spa and an 18-hole championship golf course.

Rancho de los Caballeros has been family owned since 1948, and much of the staff has worked at the ranch for more than two decades. Returning guests -- and there are many -- are welcomed back like family. The complimentary Caballeros Kids morning program includes supervised activities such as hiking, swimming, tennis, golf, and a field trip to a mine; evenings bring trivia contests, bingo and arts and crafts. While the kids are entertained, parents can go horseback riding (100 horses are on-site), bird watching, skeet shooting or on an old-fashioned hayride. www.ranchodeloscaballeros.com

The Ranch at Rock Creek, Montana

Tailor-made outdoor experiences against a spectacular Rocky Mountain backdrop are the hallmark of this luxury ranch resort just outside the historic mining town of Philipsburg. Be as busy as you'd like, with not only trail rides on your time frame, but also archery, paintball, mountain biking, and tours of the ranch

in an authentic 1860s stagecoach. Then there's indoor fun at the Silver Dollar Saloon, with a four-lane bowling alley, karaoke, ping-pong and shuffleboard. Note, however, that rest and relaxation are highly encouraged at The Ranch at Rock Creek: guests can hike or get driven to one of six remotely located "napping hammocks" -- stocked with pillows and blankets -- for rest and repose.

Home base at the ranch is Granite Lodge, a grand stone-and-timber building housing the saloon, a great room gathering spot, dining room and nine deluxe guest rooms. Other accommodations include a one-bedroom cabin, rooms in a remodeled 19th-century barn, multi-bedroom log homes, and luxury canvas cabins. The canvas cabins may be the least luxurious of the accommodations on the ranch -- each with an in-room eco-friendly commode and private bathroom in a shared bathhouse -- but they still feature Frette linens and custom-made duvets, twice-daily housekeeping and stocked mini bar. Plus, a shared fire pit encourages socializing with your neighbors, and the murmur of the nearby river helps lull you to sleep on your back-to-nature getaway. www.theranchatrockcreek.com □

For more ranch vacation ideas, check out the extensive listings at DudeRanch.org, RanchWeb.com and Top50Ranches.com.