



PHOTO BY DONNIE SEXTON / TRAVEL MONTANA



Get in on the Action

THE WEST IS FILLED WITH OPTIONS FOR THOSE SEEKING AN OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH ADVENTURE. OUR GUIDE SCOUTS AHEAD TO FIND THE BEST IN ACTION-PACKED FUN.

By Ed Lawrence

On those rare occasions when I plan a vacation, there's not much chance I'll consider destinations that promote lounging by a swimming pool or riding in a golf cart. Most of my weekends are spent astride a four-legged animal, and my forays into the hinterland tend to mirror that hobby, albeit with a higher level of adventure. My cup of tea is an outdoor activity-oriented destination on the prairie or in the mountains, rather than under the bright lights of the city.

So, after flipping through a mountain of tempting options for this year's sabbatical, I narrowed down my options to a handful of out-of-the-way locations in the West.

I could choose a buffalo roundup. Or participate in ranch activities. The irony would be that I'd be paying to play—marking a switch from the way things were in my college years, when I punched cows in exchange for room and board. Or I could relive my childhood by participating in a real life game of cowboys and Indians. These are tough choices in a win-win situation.



Become a Real Hand



Rapid City



For example, there is an ol' boy up in South Dakota who has a horse packing operation in the Black Hills he calls "Gunsel Horse Adventures"—a getaway that combines horsebacking with the area's famous buffalo roundup.

My first question? "What's a gunsel?"

Bob Lantis, who's been running the operation for 40 years, told me that "a

'gunsel' is a would-be cowboy, someone who doesn't yet know what he's doing." I take it to be a term of endearment.

"Our job is to convert them from 'gunsels' to cowboys by combining a vacation with some education for those who want to experience the cowboy way," Lantis adds. By his definition, the "cowboy way" translates to "Riding good horses

in the backcountry, living in tents, and learning to cook campfire style."

Gunsel excursions are organized around four days of riding during an exploration of the remote areas of the Black Hills—uninhabited territory that I've found to be as beautiful as travel brochures advertise.

"This country is so beautiful you'll forget you're on a horse. If you want to learn, even if you're a beginner, we'll teach you to saddle pack horses, set up for pack trips, load the pack animals, and set up a tent," Lantis says, citing all of the things you'd expect of a Sherpa. "Or, you can just sit back and let us do all the work," he adds. "We build the itinerary to suit our guests." A typical itinerary might include getting your bearings and checking out a buffalo herd on the first day, then a ride up to the Badger Clark Cabin the next day, which was named after the poet who penned the classic "Cowboy Prayer." That might be followed by a five-hour ride up French Creek Canyon.

"The last day is spent at the Governor's Annual Buffalo Roundup at Custer State Park," he says. The park owns 1,500 head of buffalo, which are moved into corrals every fall to cull those that will be sold. Lantis' guests ride on the fringes of the herd, this year in the company of honorary trail boss Michael Martin Murphey.

The last time I participated in the buffalo roundup there was lots of hooting and hollering, including "Hizzoner" hollering at me. He forcefully explained that he thought that my camera and I were too close to the thundering herd as it roared by. Naturally, I moved.

Gunsel Horse Adventures

Rapid City, S.D

**(605) 343-7608 or (605) 342-3387,
www.gunselhorseadventures.com**

The drive starts slowly, but doesn't always finish that way.



PHOTOS BY BOB LANTIS, GUNSEL HORSE ADVENTURES

Ride like *Hidalgo*



Canutillo,
Texas

Endurance riding is making great strides in the West.

PHOTOS BY C&T WEBB

At the other end of the scale is Flight Leader Farm, an endurance horse racing school in the desert in Texas and New Mexico, which sounds to me like it would rank right up there with driving a NASCAR racer. “Endurance riding is on the increase in the U.S., is among the fastest-growing equestrian sports in Europe, and is the largest in the Middle East,” says Tracy Webb, who operates the program.

“Sounds like the movie *Hidalgo*,” I told her. “Well, the concept is the same, but you don’t have to go to the Middle East to participate,” she says. “Endurance riding is a rewarding opportunity to bond with an equine athlete and test your mental and physical strength” by participating in races of 25 to 100 miles.

Riders of all ability levels and ages attend training sessions, and then compete on the school’s Arabians.

“Your age and skill level is not nearly as important as attitude,” Webb says, as

demonstrated by the performance of a 70-year-old lady who completed 110 miles over two days on her first endurance outing. The King of Malaysia is also a program graduate.

In preparation for the long, fast, journey, I would be tutored in the mechanical skills necessary to compete safely, and the special equipment employed.

“Since endurance riders pride themselves as innovators, you’ll see different equipment than you may be used to. Items like plastic horseshoes, adjustable saddles, bio-thane bridles, and rump rugs are all common tools.”

“But how do we avoid abusing the animals?” I asked.

“Great emphasis is placed on maintaining the steed’s good health, as evidenced by continual monitoring of its pulse during a race. The last, and most important, task in a race is getting a completion certificate after you cross the finish line,” she says. “Riders must



present the horse for a final vet exam. Only if the horse passes is a rider considered to have completed.”

“That sounds exciting,” I thought, and a lot faster pace than the days I spent on pack trips into the backcountry in Yellowstone National Park. On

those trips, we covered lots of territory, but at a fairly leisurely pace, and didn’t see another soul.

Flight Leader Farm
Canutillo, Texas
(575) 882-3276,
www.flightleader.com



Horsepack in **Yellowstone**

Yellowstone trips come in several flavors, and typically last four to seven days. Most involve lashing up with an outfitter, as I did. His role is to develop an itinerary that meets the guests' expectations, and lead the expedition, which typically includes one pack animal for each horsebacker.

"But our first task is to match a rider's ability to one of the 60 horses in our string, to assure that experienced riders won't be bored, and children can safely enjoy the adventure," says Terry Search, the owner-outfitter of Yellowstone Mountain Guides. "A typical day ride is 6-15 miles, depending on guest preferences." With 16 hours of daylight during summer months, that translates to arrival in camp at the cocktail hour.

A base camp may be established, "So we can hang out in the same area for the duration of the trip and do day trips. Or we can move to a different campsite every night." These trips may combine

horseback riding with fly-fishing and photography. I've done both. A camera sitting on a chest pack is a must, so it's close at hand when wildlife appears or, believe it or not, when you arrive at landscape blanketed with colorful flowers. "One trip is into the backcountry along the Lamar River," Search says, naming a waterway filled to the gills with wild trout.

Menus are typical of a backcountry kitchen, as well. The staples are cowboy cuisine cooked over a campfire, supplemented by a cobbler cooked in a Dutch oven and served piping hot.

A typical response from a first-timer is





that the rider “just can’t get over how expansive—and beautiful—the country is,” says Search. “There are the fantastic views, the pristine rivers, and just the magnitude of the area. There are more than 1,000 miles of trail across more than 2 million acres. And, for what it is worth, the Greater Yellowstone area exceeds 15 million acres, because it takes in outlying areas like the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, the Bridger-Teton Wilderness, Gallatin National Forest, Grand Teton National Park, the Lee Metcalf Wilderness, and other wildernesses.

“It is so diverse, with all the thermal activity that is here and the world’s largest alpine lake—Lake Yellowstone.”

The end result, Search says, is that the experience leaves first-timers speculating about where they should go on their next trip to Yellowstone.

On my last sojourn into the park, I was serenaded to sleep by coyotes and wolves that sounded as though they were in the campsite.

Yellowstone Mountain Guides
West Yellowstone, Mont.
(406) 646-7230; www.yellowstone-guides.com



PHOTOS BY DONNIE SEXTON / TRAVEL MONTANA

Play Cowboys and Indians

The Custer Reenactment takes place in the vicinity of the actual battlefield.



Though I'm an admitted coward, especially when it comes to spilling my own blood, the "cowboys and Indians" game still appeals to me. Otherwise known as "Custer's Last Stand Reenactment at the Big Horn Battlefield," the event offers an opportunity to participate in a mock battle on a mounted steed while dressed in a cavalry uniform identical to that worn by Custer. Plus, I don't have to die.

As an alternative, I could participate as an Indian on the winner's side.

The three performances of the reenactment are the cornerstone of a week-long series of events which take place in Hardin, Mont., near the battlefield monument. In addition to the battles, the schedule includes tours of the bat-

PHOTOS BY KEITH HERRIN

tlefield, as well as the Little Big Horn Symposium (for history buffs) and, on Saturday, special events that include a parade, bed races, and a street dance.

To maximize the experience and prepare for battle, I may book attendance at the U.S. Cavalry School (not to be confused with the real U.S. Army).

“We offer a course for riders interested in participating in the reenactment,” says John Doran, chief instructor. “But, this is not a show-and-tell class—it is hands-on training. You become a Cavalry trooper.” That is, without having to enlist for four years.

During four days leading up to the main event, students learn the history of military life on the frontier, as well as a background in Native American culture. Once fitted in cavalry garb, they are drilled on basic and advanced horsemanship and are taught the fundamentals of a mounted skirmish and the use of sabers and pistols used during the battle.

Participants lodge in a tent encampment on the banks of the Little Bighorn

River.

Then, on the day of the reenactment, troops ride the same trails Custer’s men followed en route to the confrontation.

Unless, of course, I choose to participate on the winner’s side.

“All you’ll need is a pair of moccasins and a breech cloth, and you can ride with the Indians on one of our horses,” says Henry Real Bird of the Crow Tribe.

“All are tough choices. What are we going to do?” I asked my dog.

No answer. However, it occurred to me that I could become a full time vacationer. You see, there’s the Sankey Rodeo School, in Missouri....

U.S. Cavalry School

Twisp, Wash.

1-888-291-4097, (509) 997-1015;

www.uscavalryschool.com

Custer’s Last Stand Reenactment

Hardin, Mont.

1-888-450-3577, (406) 665-1672;

www.custerslaststand.org

The action is fast and furious at the Custer’s Last Stand Reenactment.



The battle still doesn’t end well for Custer.





More ways to live it up out West

Straddle a Bull

“Our Vision Quest Bull Riding Adventure Experience is designed for the rodeo fan who wants to experience what the sport is all about,” says Lyle Sankey, of Sankey Rodeo Schools. Despite involving bucking bulls and hard dirt, the activity does not require that one be an experienced rider to attend. “We have had both men and women of all ages, the oldest a man aged 64 and a lady aged 61. Most are simply fans of the sport.” The key: matching the livestock and training intensity to the age, physical condition, and ambitions of the students. Most instructors are former students and professional rodeo riders.

Sankey Rodeo Schools
Branson, Mo.
(417) 334-2513,
www.sankeyrodeo.com

Get Extreme

If you’re looking for a shorter-duration vacation with a competitive aspect, check the schedule at the Extreme Cowboy Association, the brainchild of Craig Cameron. “This is an on-horses event in an environment anyone who grew up on a ranch can appreciate, emulating what we as cowboys and ranchers do on the ranch,” Cameron says. “You know, water crossing, dragging logs, ground tying, going through rough terrain and shooting.” Plus, participation doesn’t require a loan from the Fed. “All that’s required is a rider who says, ‘I can do that,’ and is willing to show their skill. You can ride any kind of horse,

pony, or mule—it doesn’t matter. Our indoor event at Pomona (Calif.) was like a rock concert, with spectators screaming and hollering.”

Extreme Cowboy Association
Bluff Dale, Texas
(254) 595-2393;
www.extremecowboy
association.com

Kids Only

Two more: The Girl’s Horse camp at Prairie Sky Ranch, designed for girls aged 9–16, of all levels of experience. Mornings and afternoons are spent on horseback, evenings at the lodge, one night is spent on a campout, and the weekends with all participants entered in a horseshow. A similar program is offered at Western Pleasure Guest Ranch. Designed for kids age 8–18, the four-day stay is centered around hands-on experiences with horses. The children are responsible for care of their horse and equipment and are taught husbandry skills and equipment care. A student’s day begins with catching and saddling their horse.

Prairie Sky Guest and Game Ranch
Veblen, S.D.
(605) 738-2411,
info@prairieskyranch.com

Western Pleasure Guest Ranch
Sandpoint, Idaho
(208) 263-9066;
www.westernpleasureranch.com

Mountainous Escapes



The mountain states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah beckon with a bevy of adventurous outings.

> At the **Bar W Ranch** in Montana, “Cattle drives are structured a little differently than most others,” says ranch owner Dave Leichman. “On most, by the second day guests may be bored. So we now spend four days and three nights out on the plains gathering, sorting, branding, and working the cattle. We sleep in tipis. On some trips, we help the Blackfeet Indians gather their herd of horses, which involves some really fast riding.” (www.barwguestranch.com; 1-866-828-2900)

> If you think there’s more to life than horseback trail riding, the options at **Zion Ponderosa Ranch Resort** in Utah may whet your appetite. In addition to saddle riding on a 4,000-acre ranch that’s adjacent to Zion National Park, outdoor activities include ATV and Jeep tours and, if you’re up for a new challenge, mountaineering. Sightseeing at Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon is phenomenal—a photographer’s paradise. (www.zionponderosa.com; 1-800-293-5444)

>Your horses may be broken and trained, but your relationship and experiences with the animal may be enhanced by acquiring the skills of a horse trainer.

At the **Stanford Addison Ranch** near Lander, Wyo., ranch owner Addison, who disdains the use of the term “horse whisperer,” employs a non-forceful method of horse training that, as he describes it, “preserves the spirit of the horse.

“It builds respect with them and builds trust so that they want to listen to us because they know we won’t hurt them,” he says. Each participant has an opportunity to work with an untrained horse over a four-day session until it can be bridled, saddled, and ridden. Interestingly, Addison trains horses while confined to a wheelchair. Makes for a great vacation. (www.stanfordaddisonranch.com; (307) 332-3813)

> Though situated only 70 miles from the Denver airport, the **Aspen Canyon Ranch** feels like it’s in the middle of nowhere. Rocky Mountain horseback riding is geared to the abilities of the rider, who will meander through rivers and streams, climbing up to elevations that provide panoramic views of John Denver’s favorite state. The ranch also offers fishing in stocked ponds and on the Williams Fork River, as well as activities such as horseshoes, skeet shooting, and archery. Bonus: Fresh chocolate chip cookies are delivered daily to your cabin. (www.aspencanyon.com; 1-800-321-1357) —E.L.