

Savvy traveller: where to star in your own western

Inspired by Brokeback Mountain? Nick Trend offers a guide to the best ranch holidays. Telegraph

Published: 12:01AM GMT 04 Mar 2006

What are ranch holidays?

These are stays on cattle ranches - traditionally run by expert horsemen, who drive their stock to and from the summer pastures. In recent decades ranches have also developed a sophisticated tourist industry, offering guests a feel for ranch life and an opportunity to ride in the wide open spaces and mountains of the west. The style of the ranches varies hugely, however - see below. (Note that, while the stock in Brokeback Mountain are sheep, nearly all guest-ranches keep cattle.)

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Where should I go?

Though Brokeback Mountain was set in the American Rockies, it was filmed in Alberta, Canada. Some ranch-holiday specialists, such as American Round-up, offer Alberta - but most people head for the United States. The most popular places for summer holidays are in Colorado (you can fly direct to Denver from the UK), Wyoming and Montana (no direct flights) and, to a lesser extent, Idaho and Oregon.

Do I have to be able to ride?

No. Most operators can point you to a ranch that caters for beginners, or, for one that is appropriate to your skills. Most ranches offer more than just riding: activities such as fishing, hiking, white-water rafting, swimming and tennis are often available.

How much will it cost?

Anything from about £700 to £2,000 a head per week, plus the cost of flights from the UK (which could be £400). I give a closer indication of cost alongside the types of ranch listed below. Prices at most ranches include all meals, riding and activities, sales tax and tips (the

smaller ranches collect their own tips). Check whether airport transfer charges are included or must be paid locally.

How do I choose a ranch?

There are several types, outlined below. Do use the expertise of a tour operator who knows the ranches well: a good one will be able to steer you towards the best choice for your requirements - many ranches don't fit neatly into any single category.

Working ranches

As the name implies, these raise livestock and farm as their primary business, but they also take guests (perhaps eight to 25 at a time) who want to experience the traditional day-to-day activities of the ranch. You can take part in cattle drives, brand and rope steers, and so on, although you won't be working in a formal sense, just getting the feel of it. These holidays are for more experienced riders and offer fairly basic accommodation (typically in log cabins), some nights in tents or under the stars, and simple, wholesome food. They tend to appeal to couples and singles rather than families. £700-£800 per week.

Guest ranches

Here the emphasis is on the guests rather than the livestock, though they still operate as cattle farms. Riding is the primary activity: you will normally go off on guided day trails, perhaps with the option of an overnight stay out in the mountains, but there will usually be other outdoor activities, too. These ranches sleep between 20 and 50 guests; accommodation is more comfortable than on a working ranch. They appeal to horsey families, as well as singles and groups. £700-£1,000 per week.

Dude ranches

These are even more geared towards the holiday market, catering for perhaps 100 guests, with good standards of accommodation (around three-star plus), more members of staff and lots of entertainment such as Western dances, rodeos, whitewater rafting, children's clubs and so on. Riding is still the most popular reason to visit, but you would have enough to do if you didn't want to jump on a horse every morning. A good family option. £900-£1,200 per week.

Luxury ranches

Sometimes referred to as resort ranches, these include the very best dude ranches, and offer accommodation, excellent service and sophisticated cuisine. You may be able to play golf or tennis as well as take part in more traditional ranch activities. £1,500-£2,000 per week.

Where do I book?

American Round-up (01798 865946, www.americanroundup.com) has a big choice: 65 ranches of all types.