

Expense Report

HI talks to horse owners across the nation to compare horsekeeping expenses.

By Audrey Pavia

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Audrey Pavia supports two horses in Southern California. It's something most of us would rather not think about: how much money we spend on our horses every month. After all, if we start adding up those numbers, shock and guilt are bound to follow. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that we can afford to keep ourselves surrounded by equines, we do need to face reality when it comes to cost—and figure out just how much this passion of ours affects our wallets.

The amount of money horse people spend on their equine companions tends to vary depending on which part of the country they are located, whether they live in an urban or rural area, and whether they board their horses. The cost differences are big in some categories and virtually nonexistent in others, making for an intriguing look at what horse owners around the United States are paying.

Hay & Feed

The one thing all horse owners spend money on regardless of locale and discipline is feed. Hay and pasture are the staple of every healthy horse's diet, often supplemented with a commercially prepared feed.

The price of hay varies considerably based on the type of hay you buy, how much you buy at once, what time of year you buy it and the area of the country you are located. Horse owners in rural areas tend to pay a lot less for hay than those in more urban communities.

"I buy my hay at different prices at different times," says Sydnee Miller, a horse owner who lives on three acres in Gilbert, Ariz. "I have a large storage area for hay and can get 40 bales delivered for \$7 a bale in August. I can get first cutting alfalfa delivered for \$6 a bale. I can further reduce my price by buying 88 bales. Our bales here are three-string 110-pound bales."

Conversely, alfalfa sold by the bale in suburban Southern California, which is about 350 miles away, is nearly \$18 for a 130-pound bale, plus possible delivery fees if the horse owner does not have the means to pick up his or her own hay.

In the Pacific Northwest, Daralynn Ebbeson of Washington State pays \$700 for seven tons of alfalfa. This amounts to approximately \$5.50 per 100-pound bale.

Hay costs in the West appear to contrast significantly from those in the Midwest, where land is plentiful and hay is a popular crop.

"I buy 100 bales of timothy hay per year at \$2.75 [per 45-50 pound bale]," says Christine Eickleberry in Columbus, Ind., who does distance riding with her two horses. "My husband and I go get it ourselves with our pickup and put it in our barn loft."

Trainer Jennifer Merrick-Brooks, who lives in Brighton, Mich., pays approximately \$4 per 50-pound bale of timothy/alfalfa or clover mix, depending on the year's growth.

Costs in Southern horse country seem comparable to what Midwestern horse owners are paying. Sarah Evers in Lexington, Ky., reports that although prices vary by the hay dealer, she is paying about \$4 to \$4.50 per 50- to 60-pound bale of alfalfa-grass mix.

Supplemental feeds, or concentrates, such as senior diets and complete diets are another expense that many horse owners around the United States incur. Because these feeds are often packaged and commercially prepared, their prices vary only slightly from one region of the country to another. The average cost of supplemental feed for horse owners we polled for this article is about \$10 to \$30 per month, per horse, depending on the horse's needs.

Board

The cost of board varies somewhat, depending on where you are located, although surprisingly the geographic region of the country is not that much of a factor. It's a horse owner's proximity to urban areas that determines how much will be spent per month on board.

Alison de Lavis, whose daughter is a member of United States Pony Club, lives in Wilton, Conn., a community close to Hartford and commutable to New York City. The cost of living in this part of Connecticut is high, and horse ownership is a real luxury, Allison says. "Full livery in this area can cost from \$1,200 to \$2,500 [per horse per month]. We are lucky to have a spot at a stable where the families pitch in to do chores. We pay for a morning mucker six days a week. Lunchtime turnout, evening feed and weekend chores are all done in rotation by the horse owners, making our monthly boarding, hay and feed fees around \$400 to \$500 per month."

In Merrick, N.Y., a suburb of New York City on Long Island, horse owner Bonnie Newitt has had to pay higher board in order to keep her show gelding closer to where she lives—which means closer to Manhattan.

"From 1990 to 2004, I boarded in a nearby county, 30 miles from my home," she says. "The board, including feed, stall cleaning, full turnout, blanket changing and fly spraying as needed was \$425 per month. The stable closed in midsummer 2004, and I moved him closer to my home to a more exclusive hunter/jumper barn. The amenities are all the same as above, except the board is \$700 per month."

Board costs seem to range around \$400 per month for most areas of the country based on the horse owners we spoke to, with the exception of some stables in large metropolitan areas, which are higher. Although most big city boarding facilities charge the kinds of fees Bonnie is paying, some boarding stables in big cities are relatively reasonable. For example, Kensington Stables in Brooklyn, N.Y., charges \$460 for full board, which entails an 8 by 8 foot box stall, twice daily stall cleaning, three flakes of timothy per day, and commercial feed morning and night. Additional care such as daily grooming or turnout is \$100 a month more.

Health Care

Routine vet care is fairly similar in cost throughout the country, although does vary somewhat from rural regions to more urban areas.

Whether in the country or the big city, barn call fees are a fact of life. The vets we talked to charge around \$35 to \$45 to

come to the horse owner's property or boarding facility, as long as it's within a reasonable distance of 30 miles or so. Many vets will not travel beyond a certain number of miles to see clients, while others are willing to make the drive but charge as much as four times their normal barn call fees for long trips. Patti Stalley in Riverton, Wyo., says her vet charges \$50 to \$75 plus mileage to make a barn call.

Routine veterinary services such as floating teeth and vaccinations seem to vary from vet to vet, rather than by region. Great Basin Equine in Northwestern Nevada charges \$77 to float teeth, with sedation. One horse owner in the Rio Grande region of Texas and another in Washington both pay \$140 to have their horses' teeth floated, while another owner in Connecticut pays \$100 for the same service.

In Kansas City, one veterinarian charges \$120 for spring inoculations. Christine Eickleberry in Indiana says it costs her \$250 for her yearly vaccines, while Katie Graham in Northern California pays \$178 for tetanus, sleeping sickness, influenza, rhino, West Nile, and Potomac horse fever injections every spring.

With readily available over-the-counter dewormers on the market, these days horse owners do their own deworming every few months, or daily, depending on the type of dewormer they are using and their horses' requirements.

Paste deworming costs generally run anywhere from \$5 to \$15 every few months per horse, each time. Horse owners often purchase these products through mail order catalogs or the Internet to get the best prices, or from their local feed store.

Shoeing

The cost of shoeing is one area that does seem to be affected by region. Shoers in urban and suburban areas tend to charge significantly more for their work than shoers in rural areas.

"Shoeing is my major expense," says Christine Eickleberry in Indiana. "I have both my horses done every six to eight weeks, with my older horse just trimmed, and my other horse shod from mid-February through December. My farrier charges between \$80 to \$100 for a set of shoes, depending on whether I get full pads or not."

Shoeing in more populated areas tends to vary between \$110 to \$135, while rural shoers are charging around \$75 to \$80 for a full set of regular shoes. Corrective shoeing, on the other hand, is expensive no matter where you have it done. Bonnie Newitt on Long Island is paying \$175 for a set of corrective shoes on her horse.

Ray Carrasco, a farrier in Wellington, Nev., charges his clients extra for corrective shoeing. "I charge depending on how long it takes me to do the job," he says.

Trims are noticeably cheaper than shoes, and run most horse owners between \$20 and \$50, regardless of where they live.

Training

Money spent on training and lessons is money well spent, as most horse owners know. The amount charged by trainers and instructors varies widely depending on the trainers' discipline, type of training and credentials.

Last year, Daralynn Ebbeson in Washington spent \$800 for 60 days of training for one of her horses. When she wants lessons, she pays \$20 per hour.

In Lexington, Ky., Sarah Evers spends between \$20 to \$30 per hour for private lessons. She also plans to put her horse in 30 days of full training. "I expect to pay around \$500 for this, which includes board," she says. "I've seen this cost as low as \$250 and as high as \$1,000 around here."

In her part of Wyoming, Patti Stalley reports that group lessons run anywhere from \$10 to \$30 per hour, \$50 for private. She says that training is \$650 to \$850 per month, depending if cattle are used for the training.

Some horse owners opt to participate in training clinics instead of or in addition to one-on-one lessons or training. "I've attended barrel racing clinics here that cost about \$350 to \$400 for a weekend," says Debra Knapp in Nevada.

Sydnee Miller of Arizona says she attends clinics both locally and out of state. "I ride with Ray Hunt and have for many years," she says. "I consider those fees 'college tuition.' All clinicians run about the same: \$300 to \$500."

Other Necessities

Horse owners also spend money on a variety of other items and services on a regular basis, including the following:

Trailer. Many horse owners we spoke to have their own trailers, for which they paid anywhere from \$1,500 for a used two-horse trailer to \$50,000 for a large, brand-new gooseneck with living quarters. Horse owners who don't have their own rig pay trailering fees. One dollar a mile is not an uncommon fee to pay for some horse owners, while others, such as Bonnie Newitt, pay \$50 to \$125 roundtrip to go 20 miles.

Julie Thomas in Richardson, Texas, uses her four-horse trailer to make extra money by providing services to horse owners who don't have their own trailer. "I charge \$45 for each horse for hauling [up to an hour away]," she says.

Sheryl Levin in Waupin, Wisc., notes that when it comes to trailering costs, fuel is the biggest issue, although she does spend money on maintenance. "My trailer is a two-horse straight load that I purchased about four years ago for \$5,000," she says. "My basic yearly expenses include storage over the winter months, and repacking bearings and such. This year we had to put in a new floor. So on an average, without fuel, trailer upkeep is about \$50 per month."

Tack. As most horse owners have discovered, buying tack requires a large initial outlay. Fortunately, tack tends to last a very long time, and so is not a frequent expense.

"We have acquired a lot of tack over the years," says John Wurzler in Mason, Mich. "We have 12 different saddles [for three horses]: one dressage, one flat, one eventing for each horse, plus western and barrel racing saddles. The cost of the gear is in the thousands. Last year, we acquired two new saddles, the total cost of which was \$2,500. Our tack expenditure on an average monthly basis is \$208."

Distance rider Sheryl Levin rides hard and goes through saddles much more quickly than most horse owners. "I run in Abetta Endurance Saddles and biothane tack," she says. "Normally the life span of my saddles is around five years, and my biothane tack is pretty much a given for 10 years of wear. The biggest expense for tack that I have is cinches and saddle pads. I probably spend roughly less than \$10 per month on average. I get most of my tack from eBay."

Supplements. Many horse owners give their horses a dietary supplement of some kind. Everything from joint supplements to hoof and coat supplements to probiotics find their way into a horse's feed. The cost of these items adds up for horse owners, especially those with multiple horses.

“When it comes to supplements, my cheapest horse costs me \$20 per month, while my most expensive horse is \$80 per month,” says Laura Hale of Indianapolis, Ind.

The average cost for most horses runs anywhere from \$20 to \$40 per month per horse for dietary supplements, although high maintenance horses that are on several different supplements can cost their owners well over \$100 a month.

Most horse owners who feed supplements to their horses are savvy about shopping around and finding good prices for these products. Mail order catalogs and the Internet often prove to have the best deals, although you have to factor in shipping.

No matter how you slice it, horse ownership is an expensive game. It helps to know that wherever you live in the United States, or how many horses you have under your care, plenty of other horse lovers are out there spending a lot of money, just like you. Although money may be tough all over, the enjoyment we get from our horses is priceless.

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