

Selecting the Right Riding Vacation

How much riding are you up for? Find out before you go.

By Cynthia McFarland

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A riding vacation can supply memories for a lifetime. To ensure those memories leave you with smiles instead of regrets, explore your options and ask the right questions before choosing a trip.

If you want to take a cattle drive, are you in shape to spend much of the day riding? A working ranch can provide a true glimpse of cowboy life, but do you really want to experience the not-so-glamorous tasks of branding and vaccinating calves? Pack trips offer thrilling vistas, but mountain trails can be nerve-racking if you're scared of heights.

Once you've narrowed down your vacation choices, contact several past guests. Ranches should gladly provide names of former guests you can call or e-mail. Ask their honest opinion of the trip, horses and riding conditions. This step can save you money and frustration, so don't skip it!

Be realistic about your riding abilities. If you consider yourself an advanced rider, you must be able to safely ride and control your horse at a gallop. Also consider the type of riding you've done--have you ridden out in the open or over rugged terrain? "Most people are pretty honest, but we do get the person who says they've ridden their whole life, but they mean arena riding, which is different than what we do here," says Bonnie St. Clair, who handles reservations at Grapevine Canyon Ranch (www.grapevinecanyonranch.com) in Pearce, Ariz.

A 10,000-acre working cattle and guest ranch, Grapevine Canyon has 80 horses and accepts only 30 guests at a time. Guests can ride up to six or seven hours each day. "Rides are divided according to abilities," says Bonnie. "The more you know, the more you can do."

Many ranches require that you ride in an arena first to prove you can handle your horse before trail riding or working cattle. Let the ranch choose a horse based on your abilities. "Explain what you want so the wranglers can pick the right horse for you. Then, after you ride, let them know if you're happy or unhappy with that horse," advises Bonnie. "Sometimes there are personality conflicts between horse and rider. We let people change horses if they want to test their abilities or ride something different."

Questions to ask the ranch or outfitter: What is the maximum number of guests? How many horses do you have?
How many people are typically on each ride? Are rides divided into slow-and faster-paced or by rider ability?
How much time can I ride each day? Are lessons or instructional rides offered? If we are working cattle, how
much time is spent on the ground? Will we be riding on steep trails? (Important if you're afraid of heights!)

Further Reading
Travel Guide for Equestrians

The author is a freelance writer based in Florida who spends her vacations in the saddle.