

Travel Guide for Equestrians

Find your ideal riding vacation, and get the most out of your trip.

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Vacationing on horseback can change the way you experience your destination, putting a whole new perspective on the culture, landscape and activities. You can hike the mountains of Montana, or you can take a horseback pack trip through them. There's viewing the wildlife on a Safari in an off-terrain vehicle, and then there's galloping alongside the wildlife on a horse. For some equestrians, there's no other way to travel. However, the fact that you're enjoying it all from the back of a horse doesn't guarantee that it will be the ride of your life. To ensure your vacation lives up to all of your expectations, take the appropriate steps to prepare for it.

What's Your Destination?

Equestrian vacation destinations span the world, cater to a wide range of riding styles and skill levels, offer unique experiences, and give you the opportunity to interact with breeds of horses you normally may not have access to. So how do you find the right vacation for you? If any of your friends have ventured out on a horseback riding vacation, ask them for advice. And, of course, the Internet is a valuable resource.

"The advent of the Internet has made searching so much easier than it once was," says Russell True, president of the Dude Ranchers' Association. "If you're looking for a dude ranch, go to the Dude Ranchers' Association because those are all qualified ranches that have been checked out. Or, do a net search of what you're looking for, such as 'riding vacations in California,' or 'riding vacations in Ireland.'"

Bayard Fox, founder of Equitours, an equestrian vacation booking company that offers trips worldwide, agrees that the Internet can be useful but warns people to be cautious. "It's a wonderful source of information, but it's not always true. I think it's important to know how long people have been in business and whether the people who run the establishment own it or not. I always find owners are more reliable because they have a bigger stake in providing a good, safe holiday."

According to Fox, one of the biggest mistakes people make when booking an equestrian vacation is not going through a reliable tour company.

"Frankly, some tour companies don't know anything about the rides they sell," he says. "They've never been on the rides, and they don't know much about them, so that's something to watch. If the ride consultant you talk with doesn't know anything about the ride, be careful."

Important Considerations

The major factors you need to consider while searching for an equestrian vacation include how much and what type of riding you want to do, and most importantly, what your skill level is. On Equitours' Masai Mara safari in Kenya, guests must have the stamina to ride up to 35 miles a day while frequently cantering and galloping. "You can only take people who can handle some flat out gallops, be ready to race with the Zebras, and not be the last one in the group when the lions are chasing," says Fox.

"We've had to throw people in the Land Rover and not let them ride because they over-estimated their ability," he continues. "If you get somebody on a cantering and galloping ride and you have to forego the canters and gallops because they can't handle that safely, you're ruining the ride for everybody else."

True stresses the significance of being proactive about getting all the details of your trip. Talk to your booking agent about the riding, and be sure to inquire about the terrain, as this will be a determining factor in the skills and physical stamina you need.

"Imagine you're a beginner rider and just want to get out and have some positive experiences, and you end up at a place where they cater to experienced riders," says True. "Maybe there's a lot of riding at speed and some pretty challenging terrain, so now you're doing something you're not qualified to do, or you're left behind. Or maybe you're an experienced rider and you're stuck on rides that are not challenging or interesting."

Be honest about how well you ride because exaggerating your ability won't impress anyone and only serves to make everyone on the trip miserable, including yourself.

Follow Protocol

The purpose of a vacation is to let loose and have fun, leaving the worries and stress of reality at home. To do that, there are some formalities you need to take care of first. Accept the fact that you will need to sign a liability release form; horses and riding carry inherent health risks.

If you're traveling overseas, you will need a passport and possibly a visa for some areas. Be sure to ask your booking agent what kind of personal identification you will need for your trip, and keep in mind that some of these items can take several months to process. Some destinations may warrant the need for immunizations against certain illnesses as well.

Fox also strongly urges people to take out travelers insurance that will cover their costs if an emergency forces them to cancel their trip, or if they have an accident during their travels.

Packing List

Once you've booked your vacation, don't just sit back and wait; get your mind and body in gear! You'll most likely be riding above and beyond your normal routine, so buff up your riding schedule, take extra lessons and spend more time at the barn.

"The most important thing is to be in good physical shape to be safe and not get sore," says Fox. "There's no substitute for hours in the saddle and good instruction."

When it comes time to pack your bags, you may need to put some extra thought into what you want and need to bring. Inquire about the availability of laundry facilities because this will help you determine how much you need to pack.

Make sure your riding clothes are comfortable. Long hours in the saddle can cause your legs to become chafed, so Fox recommends chaps, or wearing nylons under your jeans. Don't forget to include outfits that are suitable for the times you're not on your horse.

"Most of the time, I've found that people bring three times as much stuff as they need," says Fox. "We put out suggestion lists for each ride. They all differ according to the climate and the conditions."

If it's going to be cold, Fox says it's best to dress in layers. Throw in some sunscreen and bug repellent if you're going somewhere hot and sunny, and if it's the rainy season, include a water-proof jacket (pants and boots that keep the wet out are a good to have as well). "One thing to watch carefully is not having rain coats or other gear that crinkle in the wind or when you move it because that spooks a lot of horses," advises Fox.

Save room for your helmet and appropriate riding footwear as well. "We strongly recommend boots that slip off and have a heel and a smooth sole," says True, who owns and operates White Stallion Ranch, a dude ranch operation in Arizona. "If you put your foot through the stirrup, your boot comes off and you're released from the horse. It's a serious safety issue."

Traveling on a Budget

For equestrians, money left over from life's routine expenses usually goes directly toward riding lessons, caring for a horse and paying for everything else an equestrian lifestyle demands, so it can be hard to fund an equestrian vacation. However, Fox and True say that there are always deals to be found.

"The shoulder seasons are sometimes the best time to be there," says True. "You'll still get good weather; you'll have fewer people; and you'll get a lower rate." He explains that shoulder season in Arizona is early fall and late spring, whereas peak season is during the winter. Summer is off-season due to the heat. "It's usually determined by weather and travel patterns," he says, adding that you should be willing to travel on short notice because many trips are discounted closer to their arrival date.

Have Fun!

To get the most out of your trip, True says you need to plan on staying for more than a couple of days. "Don't go for two or three days," he says. "You're not going to get the whole experience; you're going to leave wanting more. Give yourself five, six, seven days or longer. And have an open mind. You're going to learn more and have a better time."

Fox says it also helps to have an interest in the culture and history of your destination. "If you have an understanding of that culture, it enhances your holiday. One of the things that appeals to me about the business I'm in is that through

horses, people can achieve a wonderful level of international understanding."

By being thorough in your search and preparation for your ideal equestrian vacation, you'll be able to enjoy every moment of your trip. You will leave wanting more, but only because it did turn out to be the ride of a lifetime.

Go to www.duderanchers.com for information about guest ranches approved by the Dude Ranchers' Association, and visit www.ridingtours.com to learn about the vacations Equitours has to offer.

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