



Three Bars Guest and Cattle Ranch, in British Columbia's Rocky Mountains, is a family-friendly place where "everyone meets for meals." *THREE BARS GUEST AND CATTLE RANCH*

HOTEL INTEL

RIDIN' THE RANGE: A HOLIDAY FOR URBAN COWBOYS

You don't need to be an expert equestrian to enjoy a getaway on a dude ranch



ROCHELLE LASH

Ridin' the range. Bonding with a doe-eyed horse. Chowling down 'round a campfire. And soothing your riding aches with a massage. It's a dream vacation for a wannabe cowpoke.

Dude ranches are popular because the Wild West is eternally captivating and showbiz has fired up that popularity to the max. HBO touched a nerve with the sci-fi series Westworld, but mid-20th-century TV was the motherlode, airing Wagon Train, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Bonanza and Rawhide starring a young Clint Eastwood. On the Hollywood screen, nothing beats the 1991 dramedy City Slickers, featuring Billy Crystal learning about ropin', ridin' and life from Jack Palance, the wise, weathered trail boss.

But the cowboy life is open to all. If you are tempted to don boots, spurs and a Stetson, there's a home on the range for almost every weekend wrangler, from greenhorns to experienced equestrians.

I sought out Gene Kilgore for advice. He's an expert on dude ranches and an author who has visited hundreds of vacation spots, and covered thousands of kilometres of ground on horseback.

"The secret is that you don't have to be an accomplished equestrian, so anyone who loves the outdoors" should try a ranch vacation, Kilgore said. "Vacation ranches are really proud of their activities and their novice horsemanship programs, so they welcome all visitors, from beginners to experts."

Horse getaways vary widely, even though they're almost all called dude ranches. Here are Kilgore's picks for two different experiences, a family-centric destination in Western Canada and a top rustic-but-refined resort in the U.S.:

Best for kids: Three Bars Guest and Cattle Ranch sprawls amid meadows where elk and deer roam, at the foot of the snow-capped Rocky Mountains of B.C.

Three Bars is a classic for families, with kid-friendly fun such as panning for gold and evening campfires. Horseback riding is No. 1, but sporty options include an indoor pool, hiking, mountain biking, rafting, fly-fishing and ATV rides.

"Whatever activity you or your children choose individually, there always is togetherness because everyone meets for meals," says Tyler Beckley, who runs the ranch with his family.

At Three Bars, a total of about 50 guests bunk down in deluxe log cabins of various sizes. The newest Black Series is a set of modern suites with glass walls overlooking the scenic wilderness of the Kootenay Rockies.

In the region, you can boost your cowpoke quotient with visits to the Calgary Stampede in July or the Cranbrook Pro Rodeo in August.

Ultra luxury: If you're a tenderfoot, the Lodge and Spa at Brush Creek Ranch in Wyoming is a supremely comfortable option. Here you'll indulge in luxurious spa life, elite sports, gourmet Rocky Mountain

cuisine and Champagne. Oh yes, and horseback riding, too.

Brush Creek has been endorsed by Forbes and has been voted the top resort of any style in the continental U.S. by readers of Travel + Leisure. Rating a ranch higher than an oceanfront vacation spot or a posh golf getaway is saying a lot for Brush Creek's sky-high standards and service.

Tucked into a valley of the majestic Sierra Madre Mountains, Brush Creek is a scenic spread ringed by towering pines.

It can accommodate up to 120 guests in various rustic-elegant lodgings decorated with a refined Western look.

The dining room serves such delicacies as elk, bison osso bucco, or akaushi beef (a Japanese breed raised on the ranch), with side dishes like black truffle purée and blue cheese roesti. For casual nights, Brush Creek holds barbecues at an old-time chuckwagon, with live bluegrass music. Cocktails, beer and wine are included in your visit.

Brush Creek's extensive spa offers facials, massages in teepees and outdoor yoga in splendid surroundings. Sports include riding, fly-fishing, shooting sports and hiking on 100 km of trails.

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IF YOU GO

Gene Kilgore's roundup of dude ranch vacations: genekilgore.com or top50ranches.com. Prices are approximate and fluctuate.

Three Bars Cattle and Guest Ranch: 877-426-5230, [250-426-5230, threebarsranch.com](http://250-426-5230.threebarsranch.com); Cranbrook, B.C.; \$360-\$530, depending on date, per adult, per day, with riding; \$331-\$465, for ages 6-12, with riding; all-inclusive with meals, activities. May to October.

The Lodge & Spa at Brush Creek Ranch, Saratoga, WY.: 307-327-5284, thelodgeandspa.com; May to October; \$800-\$1,500 U.S. p.p., per night, all-inclusive luxury accommodations, food/drinks, most activities, spa access, but not treatments.

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