



Product Spotlight: Equine Vacations

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A full-color catalogue of exotic destinations where you can gallop a horse through the surf, trot through fields of lavender, or Paso up a mountainside to catch your first glimpse of Macchu Pichu...it's fantasy-inducing. There's virtually no horse person who doesn't have a secret yearning to experience a distant land from horseback. What better way to get off the beaten track, escape the tourists, and immerse oneself in another culture?

It's no wonder that thousands of horse people each year decide to fulfill their fantasies by booking equestrian vacations, and that dozens of horsey holiday outfitters exist solely to make these dreams come true.

But since dream fulfillment doesn't come cheap, it's a good idea to come back down to earth for a moment before you hand over your credit card and make sure you're buying into the right fantasy for you. Here are some tips on what to look for.

What's Available?

The range and variety of equestrian vacations now available is truly staggering. Perhaps you just have a hankering to escape the city for a few days and try your hand at rounding up cattle in Wyoming. Or perhaps you've always dreamed of galloping across the high veldt in South Africa, leaving wildebeest and giraffes in your dust. Maybe you want to get a taste of piaffe and passage aboard a Portuguese Lusitano. Or it could be that you hear the call of the hounds and the horn and want to pelt over some five-foot stone walls aboard a fearless Irish hunter. Or perhaps you want to brush up on your endurance riding skills under the tutelage of a Tevis Cup winner.

Whatever your taste, whatever your destination, from the Rockies to Morocco, there's a company that can get you there, put you on a horse, and give you the experience of a lifetime. So many, in fact, that you might have considerable trouble narrowing it down to just one trip! To help sort it all out, ask yourself:

- What is your riding skill and your fitness level? Are you looking for an extreme experience or are your muscles and joints happier at a slower pace on less-demanding terrain? Are you comfortable riding in company and confident you can control a strange horse outside of a ring, or would you prefer a more controlled environment and an instructional atmosphere?
- Do you want riding or driving to be the sole focus of your vacation, or would you prefer a variety of activities that perhaps includes horses for just a day or two?
- Do you like to "rough it," or is a five-star chateau with 1,500-thread Egyptian cotton sheets the only way to travel? Depending on the trip and the destination, accommodations and dining might be anything from rustic to regal. If breaking a nail is a personal disaster, signing up for anything that houses you in a tent and advises you to bring your own toilet paper might be a mistake.
- Do you want to improve your riding or acquire a new skill? "Boot camp" instructional vacations mean you'll work hard, but their intensity is something you generally can't get at home. You'll return with sore muscles, a head full of knowledge, and a newfound sense of confidence you'll transfer to your riding at home.

Karen Lancaster, who 18 years ago founded Cross Country International (CCI), an agency specializing in riding holidays in 14



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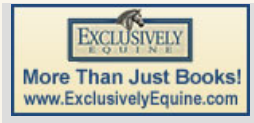
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countries around the world, says, "An equestrian vacation is something that people dream about, but sometimes they can't bring themselves to take that first step. If you take the plunge, you'll find the experience is life-changing. After all, it's what you love most in life--to be around horses!"

Although CCI vacations can be researched online, you'll still hear from one of their representatives on the phone before you surrender your credit card number.

"We call each client," says Lancaster. "Making sure their expectations are more than met is a process of finding out what their interests and skill levels are. Most of our trail riding vacations require that you can walk, trot, and canter with confidence outside of an arena. If you can do that, you can enjoy almost all of our destinations. But describing yourself as an "intermediate" rider, for example, doesn't tell us enough about you, so we follow up to get more specifics, so we can recommend the best experience for you."

Likewise, Nigel Harvey of England's Ride World Wide equestrian vacations says, "Each of our clients completes a booking form, which has a section inquiring about riding ability. Then we discuss their skill level further before booking to make sure they are going on a ride that is correct for them. People are usually very honest about their skill level--these are expensive holidays and there is no point saying you are a good rider if you can't cope!"

What to Expect

Julie Heintzman of Tryon, N.C., fulfilled one of her lifelong fantasies a few years ago by galloping on an Irish beach during a trekking vacation. But an unexpected opportunity to stay at a riding resort in Pattaya, Thailand, proved just as delightful, she says. "It was a place called Horseshoe Point Resort, with the stables and indoor arenas built right into the hotel complex so that you could watch people ride from the window in your room. It was amazing."

The resort offered various packages of dressage or jumping instruction, or supervised trail rides through jungles and pineapple plantations, and Heintzman decided to mix and match during her stay. A preliminary lesson with a local instructor was too basic for her taste, she says, but subsequent lessons with the facility's head instructor, who had trained with the legendary dressage rider/instructor Nuno Oliveira, were more her speed and allowed her to practice some high-school movements on a Lipizzan schoolmaster.

The only snag, she reports, is that the management was somewhat disorganized and the language barrier meant she wasn't always able to make herself understood as well as she would have liked. She booked the trip independently; agencies that specialize in riding holidays set situations up so this will not be a problem. And while the horses were well cared for, she found some of the tack less so.

"I had a stirrup leather snap on me during one trail ride," she recalls. "It wasn't a big deal for me as I ride without stirrups all the time, but it might have been for a more novice rider."

Those minor stumbling blocks were more than made up for, Heintzman says, by what she experienced in Thailand, including riding an elephant. Relaxing Thai massages, for about \$6 an hour, were also "fantastic after a long day's ride," she says. While she was traveling alone, Heintzman says she felt quite safe, although the resort provided an escort when she ventured into downtown Pattaya.

It's common for women to travel alone on equestrian vacations, Lancaster says. To address that trend her agency offers tours for women only, or for singles only. Those who fear being on their own in a strange land can find camaraderie in a group of like-minded horse people. Another trend is mother/daughter trips, where female family members can bond without worrying about bored husbands and fathers!

Many people, however, seek a vacation to please everyone. So what does one do when one has a non-riding spouse in tow? Lancaster says to look for an equestrian vacation company offering trips with activities for family members who don't ride--from golf and fly-fishing to wine-tasting or cooking lessons. The demand for these split-personality vacations is so strong that Cross Country International offers a division specializing in walking tours, many of which coincide with the riding tours. "You can set off on one trail on horseback in the morning while your spouse sets off on a hiking trail. You can meet up at the end of the day, or even at lunchtime, and compare your experiences," Lancaster says.

Another solution is an all-in-one resort, such as Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic. Polo enthusiast Hallie McEvoy found the gated resort offered plenty for her husband to do while she practiced her stick-and-ball skills on the polo pitch. "There was golf, tennis, skeet shooting, all sorts of water sports, and seven different pools as well as the beach," she recalls.

McEvoy notes that whenever you're traveling in a foreign country, you should be prepared to go with the flow. "The standards of horse care might not be what you're used to, but that doesn't mean they're wrong," she says. "Keep an open mind and you might learn something. You're going to encounter horses who aren't trained the way you're used to, tack that's different...be prepared to enjoy those differences."

Health and Welfare

One of the primary concerns of any compassionate horse person is that the horses are well cared for and fit for the job. This is where an equestrian vacation specialist can be a real asset. Reputable companies will have checked out each outfitter with whom they book tours by visiting regularly and riding along with their clients.

"Quality control is essential, and we recognize that things can change rapidly," says Lancaster. "But any outfitter who isn't



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maintaining his horses in a responsible way isn't going to have my business for long. If clients have concerns about the welfare of the horses and the quality of the tack, we encourage them to call or e-mail the outfitter directly before booking and ask questions. We also refer new clients to clients who've taken that trip recently. People are always happy to share their experiences."

In addition, Lancaster suggests clients check with the local tourist board and visit a website called Trip Advisor (www.tripadvisor.com), where travelers post reviews of their vacations. A bad outfitter will be revealed quickly, she says.

Safety is another concern where horses are involved, which is why Lancaster requires her outfitters and guides to be certified as trail guides in their native country, carry liability insurance, and take a basic first-aid course. Where appropriate, she prefers that instructors be certified by the British Horse Society.

Because nothing spoils a vacation like a concussion or a broken arm, McEvoy advises, "Do not assume that your tack is going to be in pristine condition--check it every single day, and don't hesitate to point out anything that needs fixing."

In addition, protect yourself by bringing your own correctly fitting riding helmet. Don't expect the outfitter to have a good-quality helmet in your size. Solid footwear with a low heel is a must; many riders find paddock boots and half-chaps are a more compact and comfortable option than tall boots. Other equipment might vary depending on the type of vacation; ask the booking agent for a list of things you should bring.

In **Happy Trails**, veteran horseman and author Les Sellnow uses his firsthand knowledge of training and riding the trail horse to prepare every horse enthusiast for this fast-growing American recreational activity.

Life is Short

"If you define yourself as a rider, then do this for yourself," says Lancaster. "Do it on your own, with your family, or with a bunch of friends from the barn. (An equestrian vacation) is such an amazing experience. It will stay with you forever."

With 35% of her clients booking another trip within a year of the first, it's clear that thousands of horse people agree.



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