

Amazing Amarillo

Not your typical tourist destination...but terrific for a taste of the Old West

By Karen Briggs

Nine out of ten cowboys agree: if you want to see the REAL Texas, steer clear of Houston. Detour around Dallas, and avoid Austin. Head, instead, to Amarillo, the beating heart of the Texas Panhandle where the values of the Old West still survive.

Amarillo today is a modern city of just under 200,000 souls... every single one of whom seems to live in cowboy boots. The Western sensibility is a way of life in this authentic Texas town, and horses are absolutely inescapable. Not that you'd want to escape. If you're looking for a place to immerse yourself in the Cowboy Way, Amarillo can offer you places to ride, horses to see, performances and shows to thrill over, saddles to drool over, and a deep sense of Western history.

How the West Was Won

The Texas Panhandle has been attracting visitors from around the world since the 16th century. Francisco Coronado, the first European to see the vast open spaces of the American Southwest, crossed the high plains in 1541, nearly 80 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. He was followed by cattlemen and sheep herders looking for fresh grazing grounds and a place to start a new life. Most famous among them was Charles Goodnight, inventor of the chuck wagon and

Bronze sculptures of famous racing and performance Quarter Horses greet the visitor to the American Quarter Horse Association Heritage Center and Museum in Amarillo, Texas. Pictured is *Dash for Cash*, arguably the greatest sire of racing Quarter Horses.



Photo: Karen Briggs

Photo: Karen Briggs

Facing Page, Top: The colourful "Spanish skirts" of the Palo Duro Canyon walls were formed as erosion exposed layers of multi-coloured mudstone. The canyon is second only to the Grand Canyon in size and depth, and the floor of the canyon is considered to have a different climate than the top.

the basis of a character in Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* series.

By 1786, El Camino Real (the King's Highway), a major exploration and trade route reaching from Santa Fe, New Mexico to San Antonio, Texas crossed right through what is now Amarillo and brought a fascinating and volatile mix of peoples to the area. That included, of course, Native Americans, whose superlative horsemanship played a pivotal role in the settlement history of the Panhandle. Though the first aboriginal peoples encountered by the Spanish in the 1500s were pedestrian, buffalo-hunting nomads now identified as the ancestors of the Apache, they were invaded and eventually displaced by the Comanche, who had honed the art of mounted warfare to a lethal arrow's tip by the 1700s. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Comanche, and their Kiowa allies, dominated the entire Great Plains region and became formidable agents of commerce — which sometimes involved stolen livestock.

Up until about 1865, the southern Plains Indians remained undisturbed in the Texas Panhandle, but that all changed when professional buffalo hunters migrated to the area in the early 1870s — despite a treaty signed in 1867 which supposedly gave the Native Americans exclusive hunting rights south of the Arkansas River. The legendary Quanah Parker, last great chief of the Comanche, led an attack on the buffalo hunters' trading post at Adobe Walls, sparking the American government to lead a climactic campaign against the tribes, now known as the Red River War. In the end, nearly two years of constant harassment from the American cavalry wore the Comanche down until, near starvation, they were finally herded onto reservations. Today, Quanah Parker's courage and war savvy are honoured with a

bronze sculpture in Palo Duro Canyon State Park.

When the oil boom hit Texas just after World War I, it exploded across the Texas Panhandle. The lure of "black gold" made vast fortunes for a few lucky individuals and fueled the economy for decades. Since World War II, however, the area's economy has been bolstered by eco-ranching — which utilizes methods true to the day-to-day working ranches of the 1800s — and tourism. For those hankering to experience the Old West — or its modern version — Amarillo has become a major destination. In recent years, the city of Amarillo has become the home of the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) World Finals, the World Championship Ranch Rodeo, the United States Team Penning Association National Finals, the Amarillo Showcase of Championship Roping and the National Finals of Steer Roping, and the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) Senior Select Show, to name only a few. Just about any time of year you visit, you're likely to be able to attend a horse show or rodeo event of some kind in Amarillo.

Home of the American Quarter Horse

Should you need any more convincing that Amarillo is a horsey Mecca, look no further than the American Quarter Horse Association, which has called the city home since 1948. Few equine breed associations can boast the sheer numbers of registered animals of the AQHA, nor the budget — and the American Quarter Horse Association Heritage Center and Museum, which opened in 1991, demonstrates that amply. Outside the 3250 square metre (35,000 square foot) building, larger-than-life bronze sculptures of famous racing and performance Quarter Horses dominate the landscape, while inside, a two-storey-tall mural by artist Robert Lapsley, of Quarter Horses at work and play, greets you in a grand entranceway.

There are two floors of interactive exhibits in the museum, including a Heritage Gallery which introduces visitors to horses in general and the origins of the American Quarter Horse, a Performance Gallery which

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Riders in the canyon keep watch for the many species of wildlife that call the canyon home, including roadrunners, Texas horned lizards and western diamondback rattlesnakes.

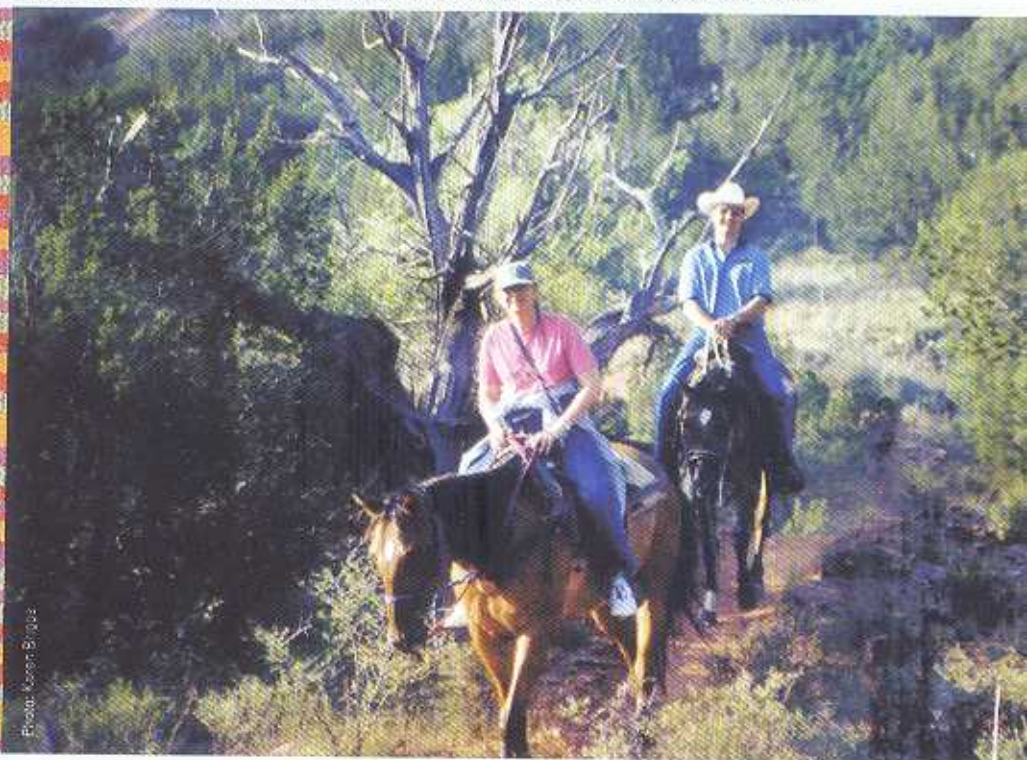




Photo: Karen Briggs

The rugged beauty of the Palo Duro Canyon can be explored on horseback along 30 km of trails within the 7700-hectare state park.

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showcases modern-day AQHA activities, an extensive reference library, two video mini-theatres, and a hall of fame, where nearly 200 Quarter Horses and their human supporters have been inducted. There's even an attached arena where visitors who have never had the opportunity to be face-to-face with a Quarter Horse can watch them in demonstrations of their many talents, from reining to jumping.

The AQHA Heritage Center and Museum is currently undergoing renovations but will re-open, with great fanfare no doubt, early in

2007. Meanwhile, its expansive gift shop, Quarter Horse Outfitters, will still be available to enthusiasts at a shopping centre in downtown Amarillo!

Riding the Canyon

If absorbing the story of the American Quarter Horse gives you a hankering to get on one and do a bit of your own exploring of the Old West, head just southeast of Amarillo to one of Texas's best-kept secrets, Palo Duro Canyon State Park. As you drive, you'll notice that the Panhandle isn't just big, it's seriously FLAT. So flat, in fact, that there's an old leg-

end that goes something like this:

"It was one of those days when God was creating the earth. He was working on Texas as darkness fell at the end of the day, and He had to quit.

"He gave the Great Plains of west Texas a smoothing stroke and said to Himself, 'In the morning I'll come back and make it pretty like the rest of the world, with lakes and streams and mountains and trees.'

"But the next morning when He returned, it had hardened like concrete overnight. As He thought about having to tear it all down and make it over, He had a happy thought: 'I know what I'll do,' He said. 'I'll just make some people who like it this way.'

"And that is how it came about that the people who live in the Panhandle like it this way."

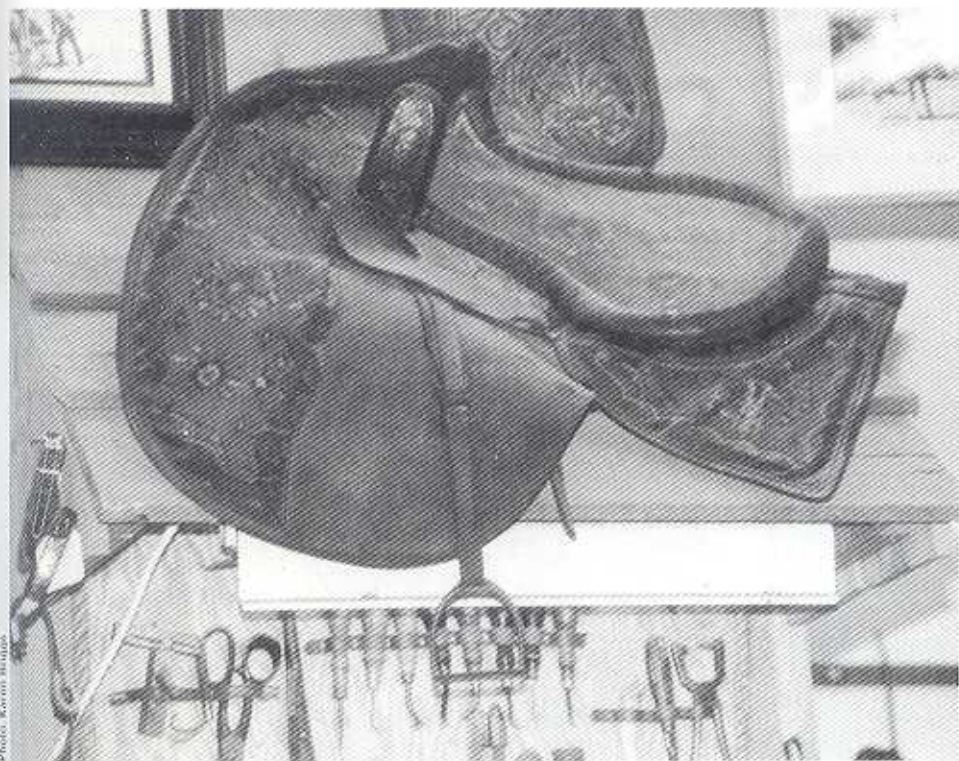
**Horses are as
welcome in
Palo Duro Canyon
today as they were
300 years ago.**

But the landscape, dotted with nodding oil wells and the occasional playa (a shallow seasonal lake), takes a sudden turn as you approach the dramatic landscape of the Palo Duro (Spanish for "hardwood") Canyon, second only to the Grand Canyon in terms of size and depth, and in many ways just as theatrical. As you enter the park, you'll descend 365 metres (1200 feet) into a land of rugged beauty, where mesquite and juniper trees, yuccas and prickly pear cacti accent the imposing red and yellow walls of the canyon and the spectacularly striped rock formations known as "Spanish skirts," formed as erosion exposed layers of bright red clay, white gypsum, and yellow, gray and lavender mudstone. The change is so complete that the floor of the canyon is actually considered to have a different climate than the top.

For those of us who know there's no better way to explore a landscape than from the saddle, the good news is that horses are as welcome in Palo Duro Canyon today as they were 300 years ago. All told, the canyon is nearly 200 km long, and the state park encompasses some 7700 hectares (19,000 acres) of that, with more than 30 km of trails.



Richard Oliver of the Oliver Saddle Shop is a fourth-generation saddler who builds custom-made saddles and leather goods for real working cowboys and rodeo competitors.



some of which are designated exclusively for equestrian use and will let you see parts of the canyon few other visitors get to enjoy. Others are multi-purpose trails you share with hikers and mountain bikers, and a few, including the last leg of the trail to the canyon's best-known geological formation, the 30-metre-tall lighthouse which towers above the canyon rim, are too steep or sandy for horses and are best negotiated on foot. Horses are given the right-of-way in the park

wherever the trails are multi-use.

At Palo Duro Canyon, you can arrange an hour-long, half-day, or all-day ride at the aptly named Old West Stables, a narrated mule-drawn wagon tour, even a chuckwagon breakfast. Or you can bring your own horses, and camp in a special campground designated for horses on the canyon floor, with pipe corrals and ample space for trailer parking. There are

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also restored pioneer cabins on the rim of the canyon, just outside the park, available for rent. (Visit www.palodurocanyon.com for more information and to make reservations.) In the summer months, it's best to head out in the early morning or close to sunset, when your horses will enjoy a break from the heat and you'll have the best chance of spotting wildlife — white-tailed and mule deer, wild turkeys, jackrabbits, bobcats, coyotes, red-tailed hawks, roadrunners, woodpeckers, Texas horned lizards, barbary sheep, and even cougars are among the many critters who live in the park. Keep an eye out, as well, for western diamondback rattlesnakes, which are plentiful.

Park rangers also recommend you resist the temptation to explore the many caves you may discover on the trails, intriguing as they might be. Not only are they unstable and prone to cave-ins, they're a favourite resting place for the rattlers and some 13 different species of bats.

When the sun goes down, treat yourself to a history lesson that won't have you nodding off. In the centre of Palo Duro Canyon State Park is a unique outdoor amphitheatre, where since 1966 the musical, *Texas!* has presented the history of the Panhandle in song and story. Lively and stirring, *Texas!* wouldn't be the history of Texas if not for the inclusion of a number of horses in the cast. The finale, which features six riders, bearing the Six Flags of Texas, galloping full-tilt along the top of a 200-metre



Photo: Karen Briggs

"The average cowboy in these parts will wear out a saddle paper-thin in about five to seven years," says Richard Oliver of the Oliver Saddle Shop in Amarillo, Texas, which has served horsemen since 1917.

interprets the science and culture of the region, from paleontology (the dry climate has contributed to the Panhandle being a treasure trove of fossils) to a history of the oil and petroleum industry.

Of particular interest to horsepeople will be the exhibits about the aboriginal peoples native to the region — there are even a few rare Comanche riding and pack saddles on display — and artifacts from the earliest ranching days, including saddles and carriages more than 150 years old. The cruel history of the Red River War is also spun out in detail here (brace yourself for the unpleasant truth that the final defeat of the Comanche was due to the American cavalry rounding up and killing over 1000 of the Comanche horses). The Panhandle-Plains

cliff, with only the moon — and fireworks! — to guide them, is enough to set any Western heart a-thumping.

Texas! runs from June through August each year and the ticket price includes an authentic Western barbecue dinner before the show.

More History Lessons

Once your thirst for knowledge has been whetted, find out more about the history of the Amarillo area by visiting the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, the largest and most comprehensive history museum in the state. Founded in 1933 in the town of Canyon, Texas, 20 km south of Amarillo, and recently renovated to restore its original Art Deco look, this fascinating place

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Photo: Karen Singer

The Cadillac Ranch offers visitors "America's Most Unique Bumper Crop": ten 1950s and 60s Cadillacs buried in an open field at the same angle as the Cheops Pyramid in Egypt, which have been spray painted with graffiti by tourists.

Historical Museum's collection of Western art and artifacts is considered one of the Southwest's finest.

Then, for artifacts you can take home with you, head back into Amarillo and check out the section of the old coast-to-coast American highway known as Route 66, which passes through the middle of town. Between Georgia and Western Streets, 6th Avenue (as it's called within the city limits) offers a quirky array of nostalgic antique and souvenir shops, arts and crafts, and little cafés. If Western-themed kitsch is your passion, this is definitely the place to go!

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The final defeat of the Comanche was due to the American cavalry rounding up and killing over 1000 of the Comanche horses.

Local Custom

Finally, do some serious shopping by visiting the Oliver Saddle Shop at 3016 Plains Blvd. Richard Oliver is a fourth-generation saddler who now operates the business started in 1917, and caters to the same customers — real working cowboys and rodeo competitors. "Professional cowboys need a custom saddle," Oliver says. "The average cowboy in these parts will wear out a saddle paper-thin in about five to seven years. But for the average pleasure rider one of our saddles will last a lifetime."

Every saddle is custom-made at Oliver Saddle Shop with antique equipment, as are headstalls and reins, saddle bags, breast collars, hobbles, even cell phone cases, photo albums, belts, spur straps, date

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minders, tissue box covers and Western-themed trash cans. At a base price of about \$2800 US, you can dress up your saddle with your choice of dozens of kinds of patterns and designs. Says Oliver, "We hand-tool everything, it's all done by hand here. I learned from

my father, who learned from his. From the time I can remember, I was at a bench working on something."

Every saddle

made at Oliver's is catalogued and given a unique tracing number so it can be matched to records kept in the store. Whether your desire is cutting, roping, reining, barrel-racing, or long-distance trail riding, the shop can make a custom saddle for you. And Oliver's also works with a number of custom bit and spur makers in Amarillo, who supply them with custom hardware and buckles for a particularly personalized touch.

Other Oddities

Not strictly horse-related, but worth a visit anyway, are a few of Amarillo's other attractions. If old-time country singing and conspicuous consumption are your passions, check out the Big Texan Steak House. The claim to fame here is an absolutely obscene 72-ounce steak, which is free if you can choke it down within an hour. Never mind that it's enough protein to feed several third world countries for a year... there are also steaks of less offensive proportions available with lots of fixin's, and on Tuesday nights you can gnaw on your gristle while being entertained by the best local Opry in

town. The Big Texan also features a small menagerie of reptiles — ask to get up close and personal with the resident rattlesnake.

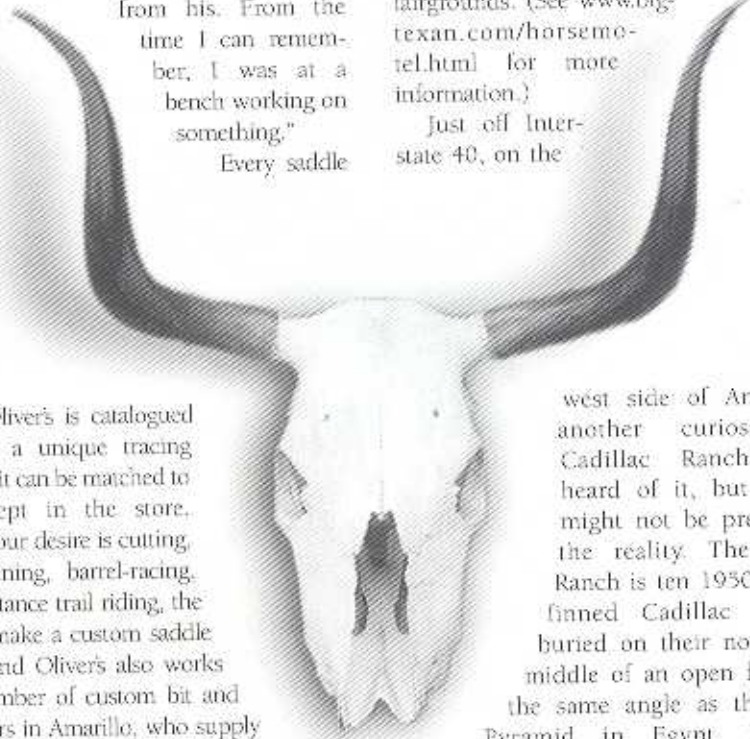
The Big Texan also recently opened a "horse hotel," with twenty 12' x 12' stalls available as well as a round pen and dirt turn-out pens, just steps from your own hotel room and only three miles from the Amarillo fairgrounds. (See www.big-texan.com/horsehotel.html for more information.)

Just off Interstate 40, on the

west side of Amarillo, is another curiosity: the Cadillac Ranch. You've heard of it, but you still might not be prepared for the reality. The Cadillac Ranch is ten 1950s and 60s finned Cadillac carcasses, buried on their noses in the middle of an open field — at the same angle as the Cheops Pyramid in Egypt. Billed as "America's Most Unique Bumper

Crop," it's the peculiar vision of artist and helium millionaire Stanley Marsh 3 (he apparently feels 'III' is too pretentious), who parked the Caddies there in 1974. Since then, tourists have added their own unique touch to the sculpture (or eyesore, depending on your perspective), by spray painting it with a thousand different layers' worth of graffiti.

Marsh, now in his 60s, remains one of Amarillo's most eccentric citizens, and has a number of other questionable art installations around town. Ask the locals to point them out to you. That's typical of Amarillo — it's not your typical tourist destination!



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