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Only HIBERNATING

Winter riding adventures aren't on permanent hiatus, so let these anecdotes inspire daydreams of being back in the saddle.

By L.A. Sokolowski



Horses play a starring role in many vacation memories. So when racing photographer Tod Marks lamented the empty grandstands of the summer meet in Saratoga Springs, New York, it resonated in horse and tourism worlds alike: "People are what transform a sport and tourism mecca into a scrapbook of family memories that links generations. The lack of that beating heart of humanity was palpable and haunting."

What's a horse lover to do in such trying travel times? Keep riding forward and thinking ahead. Because just thinking about a vacation, science is proving, is almost as good as being there.

Amit Kumar, assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, has been publishing scholarly papers since 2007, but it has been his 2014 abstract, *Waiting for Merlot: Anticipatory Consumption of Experiential and Material Purchases*, with Thomas Gilovich and Matthew A. Killingsworth, that has become one of the most referenced (as recently as the May 2020 *National Geographic*)

by the travel industry to suggest that the planning and anticipation surrounding a vacation is almost as beneficial as the getaway itself.

The three concluded that waiting for an experience tends to be more pleasurable and exciting than waiting to receive a material good; and that money spent on *doing* tends to provide more enduring happiness than money spent on *having*.

A Spring 2018 survey by the market research group Ipsos Affluent Intelligence echoed a similar demand for more authentic, unique and immersive travel among affluent influencers—particularly Millennials and Gen-Xers. Signaling a shift from "going places" to "collecting experiences," IAI identified six key traveler types: Wellness Seekers, Ac-

tive Challengers, Sightseers, Cruisers, Historians and Gourmands.

Since co-authoring *Merlot*, Matthew, now a senior fellow studying the nature of happiness at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, has observed, "Future-mindedness can be a source of joy if we know good things are coming, and travel is an especially good thing to have to look forward to."

As these following anecdotes offer, more resort and ranch getaways are offering experiential adventures over static souvenir collecting, and horseback riding checks off more than a few wish-list boxes among traveler types. Whether its focus is active challenge, a search for wellness, historic sightseeing or an appetite for great campfire cooking, winter horseback adventures haven't gone away. They've just been hibernating and waiting, ready to help you dream away.

Just Let Go

If ripping along a snowy obstacle course on skis and holding a 40-ft rope tethered to a galloping horse, sounds like something you could (literally) get behind, talk to Jackie Kecskes, the equestrian manager whose creative winter ideas keep bringing guests back for more at The Resort at Paws Up in Greenough, Montana. "It'll be great," she'll reassure you.

"If I'm bored, my guests will be bored," Jackie said. "So we are always asking, how can we love our horses more and get our guests to love them more, too? Because who wouldn't want to come back from vacation saying they were pulled behind a horse over an obstacle course on snow?"

Jackie starts all the resort horses and has introduced several to skijoring, the adrenaline-pumping winter sport where a person on skis or a snowboard is pulled behind a horse. One such experience became a life-changer for a draft mare called Duchess, who came to Jackie as a soured 5-year-old after an early start in dressage and jumping. Sold to a vaulting gym, her days were spent indoors, longeing in circles.

"She was aggressive. She tried to grab my leg with her teeth when I rode her," Jackie said. "We had to put her faith back in humans."

Using natural horsemanship, Jackie softened Duchess, but the mare had never been outdoors, worn shoes or shown much enthusiasm for work until a heavy snowstorm hit the resort.





“We had more guests than horses for skjoring,” Jackie said. “I looked at Duchess and said, ‘You’re pretty quiet now, let’s see how you rope and draw a barrel.’”

After a morning’s crash course in pulling, the mare seemed ready and Jackie felt she was up to the challenge, especially with the veteran horsewoman at the reins. But how would the gentle giant react?

“We told our guest that it was her first time so, if anything happens ... just let go of the rope! We’d ride it out and try again,” Jackie laughed.

The one who let go—of her resistance—was Duchess.

“It was like a light went off and she said, ‘OK, I got this! There’s a great big world I can play in!’ She pulled two skiers that day and hasn’t stopped loving her job since,” Jackie said. “And go figure, she loves snowmobiles; no spook at all.”

Wrangler Love Language

In 1919, the family-owned C Lazy U outside of Denver became one of the first dude ranches in Colorado and today has earned the Young Presidents’ Organization award for Best of the Best Family Event; in 2020, it received four World’s Best Awards from *Travel + Leisure*.

Back in the 1920s, when the railroad was expanding, it struck a marketing partnership with a struggling cattle industry to attract passengers from back East to come westward to find a rejuvenating home away from home on a ranch.

“Social interaction and lifelong connections

between guests and staff became as important as riding,” said Brady Johnson, director of sales and marketing at C Lazy U.

Today’s ranch vacations also nourish and entertain, and wranglers take practical joking as serious entertainment.

“Our wranglers love pranks more than any group on the property,” Brady said.

One ritual ripe for hijinks dates back to an early ranching hack of putting cowbells on horses to find them in the pre-dawn darkness. While stumbling from bed to barn to collect their own tack and horse first, unsuspecting wranglers might find saddlebags weighed with rocks.

“This prank is discovered immediately,” Brady said. “Other ‘sneaky stowaways’ reveal themselves later, like pancakes from a staff breakfast discovered midday when they reach into their saddlebag to fetch something or to layer up!

“These pranks are all good fun, of course. Messing with each other is a wrangler love language. And guests get a kick out of watching the antics throughout their stay!”

Best Laid Plans

“Winter whites” took on a whole new meaning for upstate New Yorker Stacey Adams, when the Active Riding Trips founder took a group into northern Yosemite National Park as part of a September horseback riding vacation.

A seasoned traveler who has never offered a trip she hasn’t ridden herself, she knew they would be riding at roughly 3,000-foot elevation. In addition

to some long sleeved shirts, a vest, and a mid-weight jacket, Stacey threw in a white turtleneck, in case it got chilly at night by the campfire.

Everyone was excited and looking forward to the five days ahead, camping and riding into territory so deep into the wild that it would take more than half a day’s pack up the mountain to get there.

“Just like the pioneers,” she joked. “Well, be careful what you ask for.”

They embarked on a perfect September day, with temperatures in the 70s and sunshine overhead. As they trekked up into the mountains, the temperature dropped. By the next morning, Stacey was glad for her jacket before embarking on a half-day ride where the natural vistas had the group “babbling like the stream that ran through camp.”

The next day, with their guides murmuring about not liking the weather, the crew blithely grabbed more coffee and enjoyed camp life before the clouds blew away.

“Ah, the best laid plans of neophyte campers,” she winked. Mother Nature chose instead to color coordinate her forest—with snow, and lots of it—to Stacey’s white turtleneck.

“This was not, ‘Oh look it’s so magical’ snow, but the ‘Holy cow, I’m not moving’ type!” she said.

Setting up a tarp as a windbreak to protect the campfire, the now real-life pioneers stayed huddled there all day, waiting out the storm by telling stories and joking about surviving in the elements.

“How hearty and intrepid we felt,” Stacey recalled. “But thank goodness for our guides who kept us well fed and entertained.”

"Riding has never been more popular and our herd has never been larger."



The next morning, a blanket of fresh snow—much whiter than her now-smoke- and soot-filled turtleneck—tempted Stacey to stay in her sleeping bag. But with a few friends wanting to get on the trail and explore, Stacey tagged along too.

What makes a great vacation if not the experience? Stacey still remembers riding that day through untouched whiteness, deep in the wild middle of nowhere.

"The woods had good footing and gorgeous views. Snow was like powder on the branches. We went out that day and the next—yes, still in that poor, grungy turtleneck—and had glorious riding and exploring," she said.

Equally unforgettable was the return to the real world, which she likened to "coming out of a Twilight Zone episode." Or Gilligan's Island, as the fateful storm turned a group of vacationers into lasting friends.

"We still call ourselves 'The Survivors,'" Stacey laughed. "Because for city or suburban folks, camping like this was way over anything we had experienced. Now that's adventure!"

Easy Riders

"Riding has never been more popular and our herd has never been larger," said Steve Turk about the Highland, New York, resort his parents opened in 1958 that is now rated by *TripAdvisor* as the No.1 All-Inclusive Family Resort in the United States. With a herd of nearly 120 horses, Rocking Horse Ranch Resort is the largest year-round guest ranch op-

eration in America.

He also unabashedly calls it "Home to the Greatest Herd in the World," with dozens of colorful two-toned coats among them.

"When they're clean and neat, the color really pops," Rocking Horse Barn Foreman T.J. Araga said. "But what we invest in most in our horses is personality, disposition and soundness."

Personality plus is why one colorful cross, Indiana, is a favorite.

"She smiles on command. Just raise your hand," T.J. said about "The Beggar," a big charmer with a nose for treats—not a pocket is safe within her friendly vicinity.

"Apples, carrots, mints—she's not picky," Steve said. "She's an easy ride and kid-friendly, like straight out of a Disney movie."

He and the parents of children with special needs know guest horses like Indiana make a difference.

"We use Paints with our special riders, and Indiana is a favorite. We've had kids that we

were told would never hold their reins, and three months later they are riding on their own," Steve said. "It's a good feeling to see parents' faces when they watch their kid come that far."

"Horses always want to make you happy," T.J. tells young riders. "They want to run from problems, not pick fights. Kids figure out pretty quickly that horses aren't mean. They're just big."

"We've been seeing more 5- and 6-year-olds who want to ride and they're not intimidated. I had one little guy, not more than 4, run up and insist he wanted a trail ride in the woods!"

The horses of Rocking Horse are ready for adventure around every corner. Or out of the sky. Sleights, skiers and snowboarders dominate winter programs, but skydiving is also popular.

"We've had parachutes miss their mark and land in our pastures," T.J. laughed. "Horses and vacationers stay ready for anything!"

Dream a Little Dream

Aspiring for a winter riding getaway? Start dreaming here:

Active Riding Trips, Stanfordsville, New York
Horseback trips to 17 countries, including the United States.
activeridingtrips.com, (800) 973-3221

C Lazy U Ranch, Granby, Colorado
"Best dude ranch to visit in winter." DudeRanch.com
clazyu.com, (970) 887-3344

Rocking Horse Ranch, Highland, New York
"#1 All-Inclusive Family Resort in US." TripAdvisor.com
rockinghorseranch.com, (800) 647-2624

The Resort at Paws Up, Greenough, Montana
2020 Best Award of Excellence. [Wine Spectator](http://WineSpectator.com)
2018 [Travel & Leisure](http://Travel&Leisure.com) World's Best "Top 10 Resorts in the American West." pawsup.com, (877) 580-6343