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'Nature-based tourism': riders at Circe Z Ranch

UNITED STATES

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Stay at a dude ranch and save a dying breed

As Arizona's historic cattle-ranching properties dwindle, **Jacqui Agate** rides a new trail linking eight of them in a bid to guarantee their future

One hundred horses and a lone donkey clattered from the corral. Behind them, cottonwood trees burned egg-yolk yellow and the mountains blurred to silhouettes. Hooves drummed and dust scattered.

I had been promised a spectacle - and this was it. Each day before dusk at Circle Z Ranch near Patagonia (a town in Santa Cruz County, Arizona), the herd runs towards the night pasture in a thundering sunset stampede. It is a highlight of the daily schedule at this ranch built more than a century ago - one of eight historic properties on the newly designated Arizona Dude Ranch Heritage Trail.

The "dude ranch", or "guest ranch", grew as a concept in the late 1800s, as wealthy folk from the eastern United States and Europe were lured to the great expanses of the American West, from Wyoming to Colorado and Arizona. Savvy ranchers who made a hard, dusty living running cattle soon realised they could earn extra cash by hosting affluent travellers. And so the guest ranch was born.



Rein check: Jacqui Agate rides Picante

Fast-forward more than a century and sprawling dude ranches remain stitched into the titanic landscapes of the West. So the new trail - an initiative by the State of Arizona that links up the oldest of these precious properties - serves to safeguard the last vestiges of Western history.

"We get busier and busier every year," said Diana Nash, co-owner of Circle Z Ranch, as we

relaxed in the snug cantina warmed by an open fire. I was spending a few nights here, based in the spacious Lucia's Suite with its pillowy king bed and views down to the corral. Circle Z has been in the Nash family since 1976 and, founded in 1926, is the oldest continuously operating guest ranch in the state. "Dude ranches offer a way to share this lifestyle of riding horses, of being out in open spaces," Nash explained. "This is the original form of nature-based tourism."

The new trail also showcases the breadth of Arizona's terrain. Sprucedale Guest Ranch is the furthest northeast of the properties on the trail, knitted among skinny pine trees close to the New Mexico border. Towards the centre of the state, in Mesa, Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch is characterised by its namesake lake and the serpentine Salt River. Then there is western Rancho de Los Caballeros, which is sewn into cactus-studded plains that could have been plucked straight from a crackling cowboy flick.

Circle Z bumps up against the Sonoita Creek State Natural Area and the Coronado National Forest with its 200 miles of trails extending into the wilderness. They vault over lazy Sonoita Creek itself and snake into mountains dotted with mesquite trees, all within kissing distance of the Mexican border. Nash explained that the land holds archaeological relics from indigenous cultures, such as the Sobaipuri and Papago, who once lived here. The waters are also an oasis for migratory birds and the region is the northernmost home of species such as the coati, a racoon-like creature common in South America.



Saguaros 'flex their arms towards a powder-blue sky'

But even more than the wild animals, the beloved horses (and Tony, the adopted donkey) are the lifeblood of this property. Days here centre around the herd, much as they have from the ranch's earliest beginnings. They unfold with lengthy trail rides and end with family-style dinners and campfire sing-alongs (wrangler Kelly

moonlights as a musician).

Yet the real beauty of today's Circle Z Ranch is that it has changed so little over time. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel each year;• wrangler Alice called out behind her, as she guided me up a rugged mountain track the following day. I was riding Picante, a gentle, cinnamon-coloured horse who carefully picked her way along the trail. "We already have it figured *out*:'

The trail's finale proved Alice's point. As we rode, the ground bowed dramatically, revealing heart-in-mouth panoramas of man-made Patagonia Lake. Picante let out a thick whoosh of breath, as if she too were admiring the view.

But while dude ranches have plenty of natural and historic value, keeping them in existence has not been an easy ride. "Arizona once had 338 dude ranches;• said Russell True, president of White Stallion Ranch - located 80 miles north of Circle Z in the cactus-studded backcountry of southern Arizona. "Of those 338 ranches, 127 were within a one-hour circle of *Tucson*:•

When his parents bought the ranch in 1965, there were still 24 of those 127 properties left. "Now there are two;' True added, poignantly. "I've watched them shrink;' He primarily blames the "explosive growth" of urban areas and the soaring price of land. The latter, he explained, is in part due to the Covid pandemic, which saw rural land snapped up at an alarming rate as people poured out of the cities.



Home on the range: Rancho de los Caballeros

"You can't run a dude ranch and have nowhere to ride," he said. "A dude ranch isn't about riding around an arena."

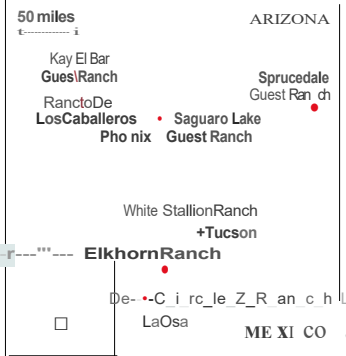
Happily, at White Stallion, land is bountiful. The ranch spreads over some 3,000 acres and brushes up against the border of Saguaro National Park, which is used for the property's riding programmes. Trails zigzag among skyscraping saguaro cacti, which grow only within the Sonoran Desert.

After checking into a thoughtfully presented suite decked with wooden beams and Western-themed art, I sat with True on the patio, next to an adobe structure built around the turn of the century. The land here was homesteaded from 1936 and guest rooms were constructed in 1945, after the ranch had been bought by a wealthy Chicago liquor-store magnate.

Back then, White Stallion added to the rich jigsaw of Arizona dude ranches already described by True. He hopes the trail will put his and other historic properties back on the map. "These ranches are an important part of our heritage," he insisted. "The new trail is a way to talk about that."

For a dude ranch to qualify for inclusion on the trail, it must have been operational for at least 25 years, be spread over 1,000 contiguous acres, and offer activities such as horse riding or working cattle-ranch experiences ("horses, hats, hospitality, heritage, honesty and heart" are the six linchpins of dude ranching, according to True).

But while this heritage is vital, he recognises the value of diversifying the activities available at White Stallion Ranch. "Some people just want to go fast down the trail; other people want to ride out leisurely and come upon a tray of wine and cheese," he said, chuckling.



These wine and cheese rides (not to mention the beer and cheetos rides) are a big hit with the guests, who can also

enjoy outdoor pursuits such as rock climbing, jeep rides or an evening at the ranch's private movie theatre. One afternoon, I switched saddles and zipped into the desert on a fat bike, whizzing past curious

longhorn cattle and teetering cacti in the shadow of the mighty Panther and Safford Peaks.

At the upmarket Rancho de los Caballeros - around an hour northwest of Phoenix, in Wickenburg - the activities are equally varied. I arrived just after sunset and settled into a rustic-chic casita complete with a roaring fire and a giant hot tub. Dinner was at the ranch's swish Main Dining Room, where my vegetarian request was accommodated with aubergine steak, buttery mash and sticky-sweet brussels sprouts. The days that followed unfolded in a whirl of archery, trapshooting and evenings by the roaring lobby fire - the ranch's most recent hire was a "Director of Fun".

Essentials

Jacqui Agate was a guest of the Arizona Office of Tourism (visitarizona.com).

Circle Z Ranch (001520 394 2525; circlez.com) has double rooms from £1,269 per person for a short stay from

"The modern dude ranch has evolved into something more multifaceted," general manager George McGann told me one afternoon. Rancho de los Caballeros opened in 1948 and was run by the same family for 74 years before recently coming under new ownership.

"We are more of a resort now," McGann explained. "We have

Sunday to Thursday, or from £2,221 per person for a week-long holiday. Prices include meals, horse riding and all scheduled activities, plus tax and gratuity.

White Stallion Ranch (001 520 297 0252; whitestallion.com) has double rooms from £316 per night, including meals and horse riding.

Rancho de los Caballeros (001928 684 5484; ranchodeloscaballeros.com) has double rooms from £248 including breakfast.

Fly direct from London Heathrow to Phoenix, Arizona, with British Airways (britishairways.com), which has returns from £548.

the golf course, we have the spa. You would never have found a spa in an old dude ranch. The horses are still our main attraction - people want to come here and put on their cowboy boots and hats - but we have a lot of diversity in our attractions. I think that's what most people are looking for today".

Later, I struck out into the Sonoran Desert for a final ride with wrangler Shelby Norris. As we rode, she regaled me with one of the many legends surrounding the town's founder, Henry Wickenburg - he purportedly launched a rock at a circling vulture and found fortune when the rock shattered to reveal veins of gold.

Norris also identified abundant desert flora along the way: willowy palo verde and scalpel-sharp teddy-bear cholla, named so because of its deceptively fuzzy appearance. There were

more saguaros too, their giant arms flexing towards a powder-blue sky. As we rode, I was reminded of the real, pulsing heart of any dude ranch: America's wild West, woven with legends, and the chance to explore it on horseback.



Rancher Theodore Roosevelt as a volunteer soldier in 1896

A brief history of ranch tourism

The historic roots of the dude ranch are hazy, but many people believe the concept emerged in 1879 with Eatons' Ranch (then Custer Trail Ranch), in North Wyoming, still in operation today. Brothers Howard, Willis and Alden Eaton, originally from Pittsburgh, had initially bought a ranch in the Dakota territories where 26th president and conservationist Theodore Roosevelt had also owned a cattle-ranching property.

Having sold up and moved to Wyoming, the Eatons sent letters

to friends and family back home, outlining the vastness and wild beauty of the region in which their ranch was set. Eventually their well-heeled East Coast friends travelled west to visit them, sometimes staying for months on end.

Finally, recognising the cost the Eatons were incurring as hosts, one guest insisted on paying for bed and board during their stay. After some pushback, the brothers agreed and the seeds of an industry were sown. In the following decades, guest ranches proliferated across the region but their number has since dwindled.