



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONA DISTENFELD

Texas' northern landscape is raring to go for experienced and amateur equestrians alike.

Jason the burro is a patient teacher to the young horses at Roger Daly Ranch (right). A ride at the Wildcatter Ranch (top) includes beautiful places to stop and enjoy the scenery.

Horse-lovers' Haven



Indulge every equine whim just a short gallop away from Oklahoma in northern Texas. Shop for tack and horse-themed souvenirs, ride in downtown Grapevine or along miles of trails in open country, visit breeding and training farms, buy the horse of your dreams, and watch horses and their cowboys compete in rodeos.

STABLE GROUNDS

Just outside of Graham, Texas, the Wildcatter Ranch welcomes visitors with great steaks, spacious rooms with fireplaces and luxury bedding, and

well-behaved riding horses that make exploring trails a pleasure.

Though the lodge might make you feel more like you're in northern Arizona than Texas, the abundance of history in the surrounding area is purely the stuff of Lone Star legends. Names such as Goodnight and Loving come up in local tales, and the open country and dark nighttime skies make imagining the days when cattle, outlaws and wildcatter oilmen called this land home easy.

Sit on the back porch of any of the 16 rooms and listen to the quiet, or take advantage of the Wildcatter's many activities. Shoot skeet or practice archery, enjoy the hot tub and pool, canoe on the creek or fish on Possum Kingdom Lake. The ranch also offers seasonal hunting and a monthly series of classes such as campfire and Dutch-oven cooking, nature photography, leather tooling, wine tasting and more.

The Wildcatter also boasts some of the best horseback riding in Texas, whether for beginners or old hands. Head wrangler Chad May uses natural horsemanship training techniques to ensure his herd is happy and healthy, and that makes for better riding. Take a group trail ride, design a private ride or take a lesson in the arena. Miles of trails on the ranch's 4,000 acres provide scenic options for every skill level.

HORSE POWER

If you're interested in breeding, training, buying or just watching horses at play, Denton County, just north of Fort Worth, is the place to be. The area's 300 horse farms and ranches are home to some of the world's top trainers and breeders, as well as champion horses—especially in and around Pilot Point. The area offers the largest concentration of horses in the world outside of Lexington, Ky.

While Kentucky focuses only on Thoroughbreds, Denton County is packed with the best of the best, no matter what the preferred breed and discipline. Spend several days driving the area to watch horses and admire beautiful homes and barns from the road. Call ahead to drive into or tour many of the working farms and ranches; a few have signs inviting drop-in visitors, too.

Fort Worth is famous for its celebration of rodeos and world-class equine events. Whether at the Sid Richardson Museum or the Stockyards National Historic District, the city is virtually unmatched for

opportunities to enjoy and admire horses. In addition to the National Cutting Horse Association and the American Paint Horse Association, the Cowtown Coliseum in the Stockyards National Historic District hosts top equine events every month, including national horse shows and world-championship competitions. While in the district, shop for tack and Western wear, cheer on the bull riders at Billy Bob's or watch the daily longhorn cattle drive.

Planning Your Trip

Visit a nearby AAA office for *TourBook* guides, maps and advice, or visit AAA.com. Pick up a self-guided driving tour map from the Denton or Fort Worth convention and visitors bureaus or at www.horsecountrytour.com. The map provides descriptions of some of the major ranches open to visitors, as well as other horse-related activities from

Pilot Point to Fort Worth.

- **Austin Ranch at the Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center:** (817) 481-8444; www.hiltondfwlakesec.com
- **Cowtown Coliseum:** (888) 269-8696; www.cowtowncoliseum.com
- **Denton Convention & Visitors Bureau:** (888) 381-1818; www.discoverdenton.com
- **Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau:** (800) 433-5747; www.fortworth.com
- **Wildcatter Ranch:** (888) 462-9277; www.wildcatterranch.com



North Texas' horse country offers visitors opportunities to get up close and personal with horses of all sizes.

CITY SLICKERS

If you've come to Texas to shop, dine and taste wine, you don't have to forgo the state's horse connection. Take guided rides in downtown Fort Worth or in a wooded oasis minutes from main roads.

In Grapevine, the Austin Ranch at the Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center offers guided trail rides through the scenic woodlands next to the hotel. Head wrangler Crystal Wills, who was raised in a rodeo family, is one of the few women wranglers in the country. She picked every horse in the Austin Ranch herd and will match guests up with just the right one. Stop by just to ride or make a weekend of it with one of the Hilton's special Horseback Riding Adventure packages.

■ *Rona Distenfeld is a freelance writer who lives, writes and rides in Austin, Texas.*

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