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## Ranching in Alberta's Cowboy Trail

By Shelley Cameron-McCarron

Wrangling with modern-day cowboys makes for an experience of a lifetime.

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*This story was originally titled "Horse Ranch in Alberta" in the May 2009 issue. [Subscribe to Canadian Living today](#) and never miss an issue!*

As dawn breaks over the Canadian Rockies, I stagger eagerly outside to see wranglers in wide-brimmed hats ride into the sunrise. Dust is flying and the thundering hooves of galloping horses pound across the meadow. When I arrived at Alberta's Anchor D ranch two days ago, I was terrified – a tenderfoot in cowboy country, hoping merely to get into the saddle. Now I can't get enough of watching the herd, talking to modern-day cowboys and hanging around this working ranch 45 minutes southwest of [Calgary](#).

When I kissed my husband and three young kids goodbye before leaving Nova Scotia for a four-day ranch stay, it was with more trepidation than excitement. Three times riding in 30 years does not a horsewoman make. But my welcome here was warm. Owners Jan and Dewy Matthews came out to the driveway smiling, to lead me into their house.

The next morning, after swapping stories over a stick-to-your-ribs good breakfast, I'm a typical tourist. I can't stop taking pictures of horses in the corral as they prance and jockey for position in the pecking order. I skipped the trail ride, though. Too scared.

On the second day, I relent. Head wrangler Shona Duff leads my horse onto the John Ware Trail, past where Brad Pitt rode out in the movie *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, and into the foothills of the Rockies. I seem dizzyingly high up. Shona counts my gasps before I settle into a majestic two-hour ride through ranch land, past farm gates, through small streams and meadows. The raw open beauty stuns me.

Over my four days at the ranch, I learn to "catch up" a horse, to groom and to saddle. Surprisingly, I can fling a saddle. (Who said six years of carrying toddlers wouldn't pay off?) And you should see me work the cinches.

In a family atmosphere reminiscent of ranches long ago, I also break bread with wranglers from Scotland, Mexico and New Zealand. One night I meet Toronto lawyer Michael Panacci, in from the seven-day Base Camp Ride. His cheeks flush in happiness as he recounts seeing a bear, big-horned sheep, mountain lakes and playing cutthroat card games. "It's one of the best vacations of my life," he declares.

For him and me both. The intimate, honest glimpse into ranching life will stay with me forever.

**Good to know:**

- Hollywood films shot in Alberta, such as *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, have upped the interest in ranch stays and holidays; they can now be had at 34 Alberta ranches with amenities ranging from bed-and-breakfast-style to bare bones backcountry. Alberta Highway 22 is known as the Cowboy Trail – a 700-kilometre-long stretch that runs along the Rocky Mountains of southwest Alberta. There are about 20 working ranches along the trail that offer various vacation options.
- Anchor D celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Learn more at [anchord.com](http://anchord.com).

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