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L E T H B R I D G E

Living

A SLICE OF THE COUNTRY LIFE 33

Want to experience life on the range?
How about a guest ranch vacation?

Bridge County Raceway 27

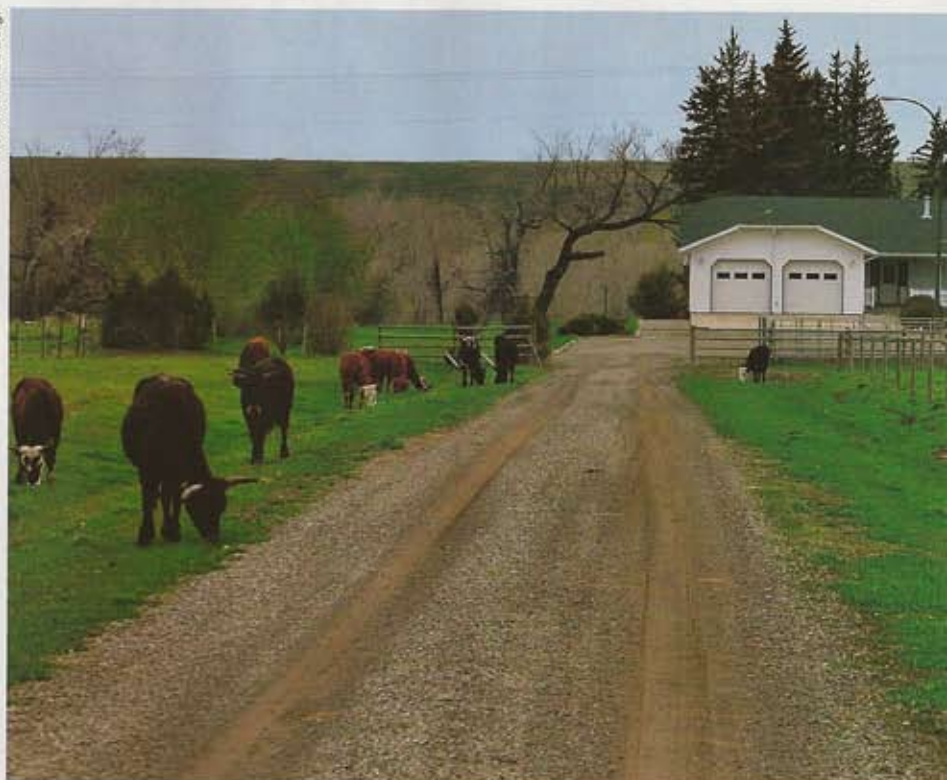
Home to one of Western Canada's largest and fastest dirt tracks.

Southern Alberta Soaring 41

The Southern Alberta Gliding Association

-getting its members off the ground and into the air.

Photo: Amanda Berg



Bent Creek Western Vacations can be found along the shores of the Oldman River.

The greenhorns, dudes, or tenderfoots as they are also known, are the inexperienced cowboys craving the opportunity to ride the open range, dirty their boots with foothill soil, and taste Alberta beef.

AS THE SNOW STARTS TO MELT in the Canadian Rockies, the greenhorns descend on Southern Alberta's historic guest ranches to experience a slice of ranching life. They migrate from all corners of the globe: Europe, Asia, Australia, and parts of Canada. The greenhorns, dudes, or tenderfoots as they are also known, are the inexperienced cowboys craving the opportunity to ride the open range, dirty their boots with foothill soil, and taste Alberta beef.

Guest or dude ranches have been a part of cowboy culture in Canada and the United States since the Wild West was tamed in the mid-1800s. As the lifestyle of the rancher settled to tending cattle and training horses, urban folk were welcomed to enjoy the countryside and ride along on the cattle drives. Whether the ranch was a rustic working ranch or a luxury-laced western experience, these ranches have always spotted the foothills of Alberta and British Columbia.

Bent Creek Western Vacations, Sierra West Cabins & Ranch Vacations, and Lucasia Ranch Vacations are three such examples of modern-day bona fide cowboy getaways in Southern Alberta. Each guest ranch caters to similar types of visitors, but offers unique experiences. Returning guests prove on each trip that these parcels of western paradise are worth coming back to time and again.

Heading west on Highway 3, the tenderfoot can find Bent Creek Western Vacations along the shores of the Oldman River, between Lethbridge and Fort Macleod, on Meadowlark Road. The gravel lane winds down a coulee to the open pasture where 16 horses and a small herd of steers govern a quarter section of pure Southern Alberta countryside. Gerry and Kathy Karchuk have called Bent Creek home for just over a decade, welcoming guests to ride and learn better horsemanship in their riding ring.

Seeking a genuinely Canadian experience and prepared to embrace a western lifestyle, guests, Kathy says, come from all over to learn all they can about our country. "Our guests are also looking to become better riders and learn Gerry's horsemanship techniques," she adds. "We're not a nose-to-tail trail riding ranch; we're here to provide a unique riding experience where rider and horse connect on another level. Often, our guests learn more about themselves while learning the ropes on their horse."



Gerry's teaching philosophy is lightness: lightness of touch and spirit to achieve an effective connection with the horses. A retired high school computer technology teacher, Gerry traded a mouse and keyboard for reins and a saddle as his teaching tools. "I want the horse to be my partner, not my slave," Gerry says. "To develop that partnership takes a tremendous amount of time and trust." It's this philosophy that builds confidence in both animal and rider, and the foundation of Gerry's riding clinics. Bent Creek's clinics attract both local and foreign riders throughout the spring and summer months. "Our clinics offer something unique to our visitors," says Kathy. "It's been amazing to see our students develop each time they come here. It can be quite emotional for them."

From June to September, the Karchuk's homestead greets guests ready for some relaxation riding, and "rodeoing." "We'll put on a Bent Creek-style rodeo in our ring, and the guests just love it," says Gerry. With a few steers in the ring, the ranch comes alive with games like cow hockey and other activities all the guests can participate in. The evenings are filled with laughter and song on the bank of the river, a time to compare riding notes, tell stories and relax those sore muscles. Guests return to the sprawling ranch house and tuck themselves into one of four immaculate western-themed rooms, ready to rise with the sun and start another day of fun.

As the greenhorn continues westward, Sierra West Cabins & Ranch Vacations welcomes guests to its open-sky oasis at the base of the Rocky Mountains, along Highway 22. Randy and Ginny Donahue have called Lonesome Pine Ranch home since Randy settled on its rugged plains in 1979. Sierra West was constructed one log at a time to accommodate guests and provide a genuine outback experience while visiting the ranch. "We have guests all year-round," Ginny says. "They join us for our cattle drives, and in the winter, [they] bring their families for a western-style Christmas."

Unique to Sierra West is the town-front replica, complete with saloon, cantina and three bunkhouses. "The Longhorn Saloon was the first building we constructed as a gathering space where all our guests could meet under one roof and escape the elements," Ginny says. "We started building the saloon in the fall of 2008, and by June 2009, the town was complete."

The land adjacent "Cowtown" is often used to facilitate corporate events, weddings, and other

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Sierra West's "Cowtown."

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large gatherings. It comes complete with modern conveniences including flush toilets, showers, and storage facilities. Hosting large events is something the Donahues don’t shy away from. “The Ride to Conquer Cancer ended at our ranch, and this place was filled with over 3,500 people. We fed 2,500 people beef-on-a-bun and beans, and it was a great event. It really changed our perspective on how to handle that type of crowd—it was much easier than we anticipated,” says Randy.

A rodeo ring on the property’s south end has hosted many roping and riding events such as the Canadian All Girls Rodeo. Spectators gather on the hillside surrounding the ring to enjoy traditional rodeo-style horsemanship. “We’ve hosted a Peddlers’ Market, several weddings, and many movie crews over the years,” Ginny mentions. It was the cattle drive at Sierra West projected on the screens at the 2010 Olympics closing ceremonies.

Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the ranch are several cabins, each with its own character and personality. “The Sundowner was built in 1999. Two trappers helped us construct the log walls and the rest was finished soon after,” Randy says. “It’s a comfortable, secluded getaway designed so people could feel they had their own space,” Ginny adds. Other accommodation includes the Antiker Cabin, originally built as Ginny’s antique retail outlet from 2001 to 2005, now a cozy retreat for family or friends, and the original homestead, a pioneer cabin built in 1905. “We relocated the Homesteader to give guests that added privacy,” Ginny says.

“If every pillow was full, we could accommodate 32 guests in our cabins and rooms,” Ginny calculates. “This is a gorgeous life, and we are so proud to share our beautiful ranch with so many people looking to join us on our cattle drives, participate in the rodeos or put their feet up and enjoy the great outdoors.”

As the tenderfoot continues northward, into the heart of the porcupine hills they’ll come to Lucasia Ranch Vacations, a 4,000-acre haven of pastoral ranchland off Lyndon Creek Road. Judy and Wayne Lucas invite their guests each spring and summer to join them as they move their cattle into the forestry reserve, and to ride in the surrounding hills. “We’ve owned this land for 37 years, and 16 years ago, decided the time was right to welcome guests,” Judy says. “This is a working family ranch, and our guests are submerged into our country life while they’re here. The family farm has become something of a dinosaur, and our guests experience the way ranching was and in some cases, especially around here, has always been. From our branding to our cattle drives, we are preserving our western heritage by being good stewards of the land and sustaining the grass and water for the future.”




Photo: Amanda Berg

Lucasia Ranch hosts up to eight guests at a time through the spring and summer.

From the pioneer cabin, built in 1895, to the hundred-year-old barn, the sights, smells, and sounds at Lucasia harken back to a bygone era. "We host up to eight guests at a time throughout the spring and summer," Judy says. "Our main home has two bedrooms for guests, but for a uniquely historic experience, the pioneer log cabin has been renovated, complete with a queen and double bed, and a half-bath." The Lucases also constructed a spacious guest

cabin three years ago, complete with a full kitchen and two big bedrooms to accommodate a large family or two couples. The picture window towers above the countryside, capturing a stunning view of the valley below.

From gathering eggs in the chicken coop, to helping Judy tend her vegetable gardens, from riding in the valley with Wayne, to sitting around the firepit in the evenings, guests experience a slice of country life unique to this corner of the world at Lucasia.

The Karchuks, Donahues and Lucases are doing more than welcoming guests into their homes; they are preserving a part of Southern Alberta heritage and educating the world about our agriculture and land. Their bags packed, their muscles sore, their hearts full, the greenhorns take home the memories of a historic slice of country life and a better appreciation of the beauty of our region. 

Guest ranch vacations at a glance:

Photo: Amanda Berg



Bent Creek Western Vacations

Located on Highway 3, between Lethbridge and Fort Macleod on Meadowlark Rd. Move cattle, lend a hand doctoring calves, participate in a cattle drive, explore old native hunting grounds and enjoy horseback riding.

Phone: 403-553-3974

Web: www.bentcreek.ca

Photo: Amanda Berg



Lucasia Ranch Vacations

Located on Lyndon Creek Rd., west of Claresholm on Highway 520.

Experience the pioneer lifestyle by sleeping in a refurbished 1900s log cabin by night and participating in cattle drives by day. Other activities include branding days, seasonal roundups, regular checks on cattle and horses, and learning the basics of roping.

Phone: 1-877-477-2624

Web: www.lucasiaranch.com



Sierra West Cabins & Ranch Vacations

Located 18 km north of Lundbreck on Highway 22.

Sleep in Cowtown, a modern-day replica of a one-street frontier town. There's also plenty of horseback riding, roping, gymkhana events, cattle drives and much more.

Phone: 403-628-2431

Web: www.sierrawestcabins.com

For a complete list of guest ranch vacations in Alberta visit:
www.albertacountryvacation.com