



100 YEARS OF

HOSPITALITY WITH HEART

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE DUDE RANCHERS' ASSOCIATION



The Dude Ranchers'
Association links vacationers
and the last true Western
experience, the dude ranch,
and has done so for 100 years.



A tingle of excitement rushes through each vacationer when they step foot on a plane or out of the car — it's the first step to adventure. When that step lands them on one of the 90 ranches that make up the Dude Ranchers' Association membership, it's more than one tingle; it's a full-body immersion into a century-old tradition centered around horses, heritage and hospitality.

"Dude ranchers care about the land, the people, the horses, and want to make that connection," Dude Ranchers' Association Executive Director Bryce Albright says. "They provide a sense of belonging, and that is special in today's world."

Since 1926, when 18 ranchers came together to form the Dude Ranchers' Association, the West has opened its doors to visitors from all states and countries, inviting them to experience the sweeping vistas, dusty corrals and treasures found on the remote trails. Today, the experience offered isn't much different, though the food may be more Michelin-star than campfire at many ranches. With the association's 100th anniversary occurring in 2026, it is easy to see why a dude ranch still appeals to "city slickers" and experienced horsemen and horsewomen alike.

"There is magic in feeling welcomed and loved," Albright says. "Our founding principles are very important, and we continue to focus on the six H's: horses, hats, hospitality, heritage, honesty and heart. It is a sense of community that is not found in today's world when you go on vacation."

HERITAGE

From the DRA's current headquarters in Cody, Wyoming, the association's staff and board of directors oversee the 90

member ranches spread from Oregon to Arizona, California to Colorado, and states in between. It's a much larger organization than even the founders envisioned in 1926, but it still holds the same ideals in high regard.

The dude ranch concept of inviting people to pay to experience cowboy life came from the Eaton brothers. Originally from North Dakota, they sold the ranch after the cattle market fall of 1886 and moved to Wolf, Wyoming. Eatons' Ranch is a founding member and still a member of the DRA.

"The first ranch was officially started in the 1880s, reborn in the early 1900s and is still in operation today by the same family, which is pretty incredible," Albright says. "It was a genius concept on the part of the Eaton brothers. They covered the cost of feeding and housing them, then really had people paying to work."

While the work is replaced with more fun-filled activities these days, horseback riding, fishing and hiking are still trademarks of member ranches' activities. This was part of the original founding, and conceptually, the dude ranch has not changed much in 100 years.

"The consistency is really the beauty of it, if you think about it," Albright says. "An official group of ranchers came together to create this organization in the 1920s. In September 1926, a group of ranchers, some folks who were part of the Northern Pacific Railway and a few government officials came together in Bozeman, Montana, and that is when the Dude Ranchers' Association was formed."

"They had five objectives," Albright continues. "The first was to establish cooperation between the ranchers and railway officials, which was the primary means of how guests got out West. They wanted to talk about transportation and the proper care of guests. Since the beginning, the care and quality of care

guests receive are at the top of the list, first and foremost. It speaks volumes to see that the importance has translated through the years, through generations and world events. The technology and how we communicate have changed, but dude ranches put the guest and how they feel first, from how they go to the ranch and what they do at the ranch."

Cooperation between ranchers and railway officials helped bring people from the east to the West. Advertisement posters showcased the vast lands available. The term "dude" was even defined in ads, with "dudes" being men from the east, "dudines" being women from the east and "dudettes" being children.

"By the second year, there were over 40 member ranches," Albright explains. "Something I believe is incredible is the resiliency of dude ranches. They went through the Roaring '20s, and within the first 10 years of the association, they made it through the Great Depression, the World Wars, the crash of the stock market in 2008 and 2009 and every major global event since then. I think that goes back to their care for the guests. Guests wanted to go back to a place they knew where there would be normalcy."

From 1932 to 1996, The Dude Rancher magazine showcased the land, the experience and the ranches, offering visitors the opportunity to take part in the cowboy lifestyle. The magazine organized properties into three types of ranches that are still somewhat relevant today: the working ranch, where riding is primarily emphasized; the dude ranch, where riding is emphasized; and the resort ranch, where riding is available.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, a nature-based vacation provided the perfect escape. While most dude ranches push a week-long vacation, and many are seasonal, focusing on summer activities,



PREVIOUS PAGE: Since the inception of the Dude Ranchers' Association 100 years ago, the focus on horses, authenticity and traditional Western activities has been the main theme, no matter where the ranch is located. **(THIS PAGE) CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Elkhorn Ranch in Arizona, a member of the Dude Ranchers' Association, offers trail rides in the Sonoran Desert's Baboquivari Mountains. | The historical barn at Eatons' Ranch, Wolf, Wyoming. | Extraordinary views accompany trail rides, which can range from slow and steady to moving herds of cattle. | Lost Creek Ranch, near Grand Teton National Park. | A historic photograph from Paradise Guest Ranch.



vacationers can find a ranch member to accommodate any season and nearly any timeframe. The main goal? Open the doors to the West.

"From the romance of the West to the cowboy way of life, that has brought back the popularity of the dude ranch industry," Albright says. "People still dream of going West, riding through the fields and pushing cattle, sitting around the campfire and hearing a cowboy recite poetry. What people only see or think about

in movies, you see and live it in a dude ranch. It's so nostalgic that 100 years ago, that is what people were dreaming about, and that is what they are still dreaming about. It is the same idea, and the pull to this way of life. Dude ranches have maintained that integrity over the years and are still providing adventure vacations that allow for a real connection."

That connection led first-time dude ranch vacationers, the Prince family, to turn their eyes to guest ranch owner-

ship after their introduction to the experience in 1992. Today, Christine and Dickey Prince run Cherokee Park Ranch in Livermore, Colorado.

"It was a vacation like we had never done. My husband was raised on a dairy farm, and he said he wanted to do this and raise our children," Prince says. "We surprised our children on Christmas Day by buying Cherokee Park Ranch. We lived out of town, but not 15 miles down a dirt road out of town. Some people look at a

Set in a small mountain valley near Yellowstone National Park, Nine Quarter Circle Ranch offers horseback riding for riders of all abilities.



cliff, [some] peak over the edge and some people swan dive off. We dove. Three decades later, we are still doing it and love it.”

HOSPITALITY

Catering to clients happens in every industry, but the hospitality offered at a dude ranch often ranks among the best in many visitors’ opinions. That derives from the collective DRA member mindset

that member Bob Foster, of the Lost Valley Ranch, once told Prince: “If it touches their body, it should matter to you.”

When Prince and her husband purchased the Cherokee Park Ranch in 1996, she says the learning curve was steep. However, membership in the DRA at both the state and national levels helped her navigate the hospitality world.

“I was a good, old-fashioned housewife that had four children and ran a household,” Prince says. “I knew nothing

about dude ranching. I would call other ranchers four or five times a week and ask what to do about this and what about that. That’s what I love about this industry. We all want to help. I say, when people need help, we rush forward. I don’t know any other industry like that; I don’t see Pepsi running to the rescue of Coca-Cola. The learning curve was crazy!”

Her fellow ranchers were as invaluable as the annual DRA Convention, which brought together ranchers and vendors. Is-

sues all ranches faced were discussed and problems solved, Prince says, because of the group's mentality to keep ranches alive.

"We wouldn't be here without the DRA," Prince says. "They feed us business. Websites came into being right after we bought the ranch, but we still get referrals. We have conventions and meetings to sit, suck up knowledge from people for several days. Those meetings and the state and national Dude Ranchers' Association were totally invaluable to me."

Aside from upgrading the sheets, which Prince has done, visiting other ranches in the DRA's self-regulating inspection process has also been a way for all ranch owners to see what is offered and how operations are managed at other properties.

For Justin Howe, A Bar A Ranch

co-manager with his wife, Lissa, and president of the Gates Family Ranches, the continuity of not only the dude ranch industry but the ranching lifestyle is a major draw. Howe's parents managed the A Bar A in Encampment, Wyoming, for 25 years before he and Lissa began their tenure two decades ago.

"If there are any industries that lean into tradition, it is guest ranches and the cattle industry," Howe says. "When I look at the old stories from the '20s, when guest ranching was first organized, if that image was in color, you would think it happened yesterday. I think that is what people come to us for. The guest ranch is still a place where people can gather without the trappings of modern connectivity and instead connect with friends and family.

"Many of our guests have been coming for generations," Howe continues. "In fact, this year, we will have our first family that has spent their 100th season with us; they're from New York and Connecticut. They are coming because of that connectivity to an old past and keeping it current. They are still enjoying good meals, playing cards and going on horseback rides and hikes."

HORSES

Riders aren't regulated to head-to-tail rides on the A Bar A. It is encouraged that they ride out, explore the landscape and enjoy the more than 100,000 contiguous acres that encompass the Gates Family Ranches. Guests have access to the more than 120

STILL GOING STRONG

The following 26 ranches have been members of the Dude Ranchers' Association or have been taking guests as a dude ranch for a century. This includes founding ranches, denoted with an asterisk.

ARIZONA

Circle Z Ranch; Patagonia
Kay El Bar Guest Ranch; Wickenburg
Rancho De La Osa; Sasabe
Sprucedale Guest Ranch; Alpine

COLORADO

4UR Ranch; Creede
Bar Lazy J Guest Ranch; Parshall
Cherokee Park Ranch; Livermore
C Lazy U Ranch; Granby
Rainbow Trout Rancho; Antonito
Sylvan Dale Ranch; Loveland

MONTANA

Elkhorn Ranch*; Gallatin Gateway
Mountain Sky Guest Ranch*; Emigrant
Nine Quarter Circle Ranch; Gallatin Gateway

WYOMING

A Bar A Ranch*; Encampment
Absaroka Ranch; Dubois
Blackwater Creek Lodge & Guest Ranch; Cody
CM Ranch*; Dubois
Crossed Sabres Ranch; Cody
Darwin Ranch; Jackson
Eatons' Ranch*; Wolf
The Hideout Lodge & Guest Ranch*; Shell
Medicine Bow Lodge & Guest Ranch; Saratoga
Paradise Guest Ranch; Buffalo
Rimrock Ranch; Cody
Shoshone Lodge & Guest Ranch; Cody
Triangle X Ranch; Moose



TOP LEFT: The A Bar A herd running in for the day with two of the ranch's women wranglers, Kenna Howe on the right and Clara Richards on the left. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Horse herds for dude ranches vary from those leased for the season to ranches that breed and raise their own. Photographed is the TA Ranch, a new member since 2024.



horses the ranch has raised or purchased over the years. In addition to guest horses, the ranch owns 50 more horses that are part of the cowboy's herd, managing the 2,500-head cow-calf operation.

It's a glimpse into Western life, raising America's food and conservation when visitors come to the ranch.

"Horses are not only a heritage component but also how we get the work done," Howe explains. "In our landscape, there is no way to get our work done without horses. They have been and always will be part of this landscape. There is something about being on horseback that puts you in touch with the land that no other form of

transportation can, and it is also the tool you need to do the job.

"The same applies to our guests," Howe says. "When they are out on the trail, they are getting to experience the landscape in a similar way. We don't do head-to-tail riding; our guests can go out without wranglers and get to know the land similarly to our cowboys. Horses are essential to that."

According to Albright, horseback activities are still the primary draw to dude ranches. Prince says the DRA advises 1½ horses per guest. However, at Cherokee Park Ranch, Prince admits she is well over that amount. Like the A Bar A, they have raised and purchased horses.

"We are over that limit because we offer walking, trotting and lope rides," Prince says. "But my goal is for the guest at the end of the summer to have the same quality horse as the guest who comes at the beginning of the summer. The only way to do that is to have a lot of horses. I always say I sleep well because I am going to put you on a horse that I raised myself or handpicked to buy.

"They all have a history with us," Prince continues. "We are horse people, so the horses are a focus for us. The other side of it is, what is the West if not for horses? Every kid wants to be a cowboy. The horses are the heart of the business."

Whether you want a hands-on vacation where horseback riding and fixing fence are the focus, or a resort-style vacation that offers a spa, fine dining and horse opportunities like sleigh rides, the DRA can accommodate. The luxury of a dude ranch vacation, Albright says, is the ability to tailor it to your needs and wants.

"People in the Western industry can sometimes be off-putting to outsiders, but dude ranchers are the opposite," Albright says. "They open the doors. It is so important to keep the Western way of life alive, and to do so, we must bring more people into it. So many of us love this way of life and have built our livelihoods around it, and we are grateful that people want to come and experience a small part of this life. Anyone is welcome at dude ranches." 🐾

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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