

PLAY



Guests of Hunewill Ranch in Bridgeport Valley go on trail ride through the eastern Sierra. **WILL CARNAHAN — HUNEWILL RANCH**

SADDLE UP, Cowgirls!

Move over, dudes. These ranches offer restorative retreats that cater to women.



Women at the WILDWONDER Women's Retreat participate in a meditation session at Alisal Ranch in Solvang, the Danish-themed town in the Santa Ynez Valley. **PHOTO BY SHARAEK KOLBERG**

By Sharael Kolberg
CORRESPONDENT

Perched high atop a dappled-colored horse at Alisal Ranch, I stroked the equine's coarse hair in an effort to bond before sauntering off to an authentic cowboy breakfast. I was with a group of like-minded women in search of a wellness weekend — but we chose to trade our spa robes for cowgirl hats and forgo mani-pedis for dusty trail rides. This was not a typical "dude ranch" experience. It seamlessly blended nurturing self-care, enriching workshops, nourishing meals, and fostering friendships.

These days, at least half a dozen California ranches are offering such immersive getaways with an added bonus: a taste of the American West. With a surprising range of settings — from heritage cattle ranches in the Sierra foothills to luxury guest ranches



A rescued wild mustang named Ghost nudges a woman attending the For the Love of Horses fall retreat in Creston in Central California's Wine Country.

PATRICIA GRIFFIN-SOFFEL — SWEETBEAU HORSES

in Wine Country — urban and suburban women can challenge themselves to ride horses, shoot air-guns, rope cattle or try square-dancing and learn new skills from female master artisans. In the process, they get

to reconnect with nature, and themselves, in meaningful ways.

"A women's retreat in a ranch setting is the perfect place to experience a women's retreat because it blends the grounding rhythm of ranch life, nature and animals with deeply thoughtful, women-led experiences," said Nicole Cline, who attended the WILDWONDER Retreat at Alisal Ranch. "Each time I've gone I've left feeling completely supported, inspired and re-energized with the confidence to try something new or push myself outside of my typical comfort zone."

Here are a few places across the Golden State that are hosting Western-themed women's retreats that offer a restorative ranch escape for the perfect "cowgirl-cation," whether you're traveling solo, with your mom or daughter, or with a group of besties.

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The List: Magazine's coolest motels in America include spots in California

Hotel. Motel. Holiday Inn? Of the options famously offered by hip-hop group The Sugarhill Gang, motels are often the cheapest. They also poke a soft spot in the heart of nostalgia-lovers. Some might look down upon them, but a road trip wouldn't be complete without these bastions of terrible coffee and neon splendor.

Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the first motor hotel in the world — the Milestone Mo-Tel in San Luis Obispo. To mark the occasion, Vogue has published a selection of "11 Best in the U.S. to Visit Now."

Motels are enjoying a boost, the magazine asserts, thanks to COVID steering people away from planes and toward car travel: "Their cheerful, pastel-hued mid-century designs and vintage aesthetics also speak to an increasing longing for simplicity and authenticity — motels remind us of a time when travel felt less polished and more

spontaneous, filled with possibilities." Here are some spots that magazine staffers named the coolest ones to visit in 2026.

VOGUE'S BEST MOTELS IN THE U.S. TO VISIT NOW

- 1 **Austin Motel:** Austin
- 2 **Skyview Los Alamos:** Los Alamos, Calif.
- 3 **Silver Sands Motel & Beach Bungalows:** Greenport, N.Y.
- 4 **The Dive Motel:** Nashville, Tenn.
- 5 **The Vagabond Hotel:** Miami
- 6 **Hotel Lucine:** Galveston, Texas
- 7 **The Longleaf Hotel:** Raleigh, N.C.
- 8 **The Starlight Motor Inn:** Charleston, S.C.
- 9 **The Ace Hotel & Swim Club:** Palm Springs
- 10 **Rhode's Motor Lodge:** Boone, N.C.

Source: vogue.com/article/best-motels-in-the-us



Retro Blue Swallow Motel on Route 66 in Tucumcari, N.M., was established in 1939. Its rooms are outfitted with vintage touches. **GETTY IMAGES**

Yearlong battle with Expedia for refund on canceled flight



Christopher Elliott
TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Q: My daughters and I were set to fly to Cambodia from Eugene, Ore., via Seattle. The first leg was on Alaska Airlines, with a connection to EVA Air in Seattle. The Alaska flight was the first leg of our trip to Cambodia.

Hours before departure, Alaska canceled our flight because of a crew shortage. No rebooking options existed, so we drove five hours to Seattle, missing a day of our vacation.

I booked through Expedia, so I contacted the online travel agency first. What followed was months of maddening runarounds: Expedia's chatbots bounced me to agents who claimed Alaska marked us as "no-shows" (absurd, since Alaska's own email confirmed the cancellation!). Agents insisted Expedia couldn't refund us and

told me to pestle Alaska or EVA Air. EVA replied, "Contact Expedia," while Alaska said, "Expedia holds your funds."

I escalated my case to Expedia's "Premium Traveler Care" department, only to hear, "We no longer have access to your tickets."

I've saved every email and chat log, which proves Expedia's indifference. Why did Expedia, the middleman I paid, refuse to process a refund even after Alaska admitted fault? How many hoops must a customer jump through? Can you help me get my money back?

— Laura Hughart, Cottage Grove, Ore.

A: Expedia should have refunded you immediately. You paid Expedia — not Alaska or EVA. Expedia's terms of service are noncommittal when it comes to airline refunds. It says any refunds will be transferred back to you by the party that took your original payment — in other words, your airline. It adds, "We do not have visibility of a Travel Provider's

refund process."

But the Department of Transportation (DOT) is clear about who's responsible. Its regulations mandate automatic refunds for cancellations, regardless of cause — no loopholes for "staffing issues." I think the DOT might hold Expedia responsible, especially if it charged your credit card.

Expedia played a shell game with your money, wasted your time with useless chatbots and ignored paper trails. Come on.

You wisely documented every interaction, saved Alaska's cancellation confirmation and persistently escalated your request.

Still, I have three tips for next time: First, demand refunds in writing within 30 days — companies stonewall, hoping you'll quit.

Second, when frontline reps shrug, skip the chat roulette and email Expedia's executives. I publish their contacts on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org, for this exact purpose. Finally, you can

contact the DOT when an airline or online agency won't refund you. Typically, that will get a quick response.

By the way, I wanted to commend you on your choice of a vacation destination.

Cambodia is rich in culture and history and one of my favorite places. I hope it was worth the five-hour drive to Seattle to make your flight.

I contacted Expedia on your behalf and separately, you also reached out to EVA's executives, which controlled your ticket.

Finally, almost a year after your flight cancellation, you received your \$500 refund from EVA. While I'm glad EVA finally did the right thing, it should have not taken a year or an advocacy team to fix this mess.

Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers solve their problems. Email him at chris@elliott.org or get help by contacting him on his site.

Wish You Were Here



While on their Iceland vacation in July, San Jose residents Mike and Lori Tierney took a scenic zodiac boat tour at Fjallsarlon glacial lake. **COURTESY OF MIKE TIERNEY**

Looking to escape? Here's a recent trip local readers took to Iceland. Check out their highlights, then find more reader travel inspiration at www.mercurynews.com/tag/wish-you-were-here/.

ICELAND: Mike and Lori Tierney of San Jose spent 15 days in July exploring Iceland's natural beauty and culture. Driving along the Ring Road that circles the island offers views of waterfalls, glaciers, basalt rock formations and lava tubes.

A favorite side trip was a ferry ride to Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands). "We walked through the small town and around the island, across the lava fields and up the volcano and also visited large puffin colonies along the coastal cliffs," Mike says.

TRAVEL TIPS: Don't miss the museums, the Tierneys say: The Eldheimer Volcano Museum in the Westman

Islands, the Herring Museum on the Troll Peninsula, the folk museum at Glaumbaer (a traditional turf farmhouse), Eirikstadir (the birthplace of Leif Erikson) and the Icelandic Settlement Center in Borgarnes.

They offer road-trip advice, too. "Download apps that give road rankings and conditions, and don't try to drive on unpaved road in a regular car," Mike says. Pay strict attention to speed limits (cameras are watching) and parking fees — or risk receiving expensive tickets.

Join the fun! Send a photo of yourself on your latest adventures — local, domestic or international — to lzavoral@bayareanewsgroup.com. Tell us where you are, who everyone is and where they're from, and share a travel tip or two.

COWGIRLS

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RANKIN RANCH, CALIENTE MARCH 8-19

Head to the Tehachapi Mountains this spring for a Crafty Getaway at Rankin Ranch, a 31,000-acre cattle ranch dating back to 1863. Guests will experience true Western hospitality at this family-run establishment. The retreat includes horseback rides twice a day, hardy ranch meals in fresh mountain air and free time to explore the grounds through hiking, swimming, fishing or bike riding. After the sun goes down, enjoy the company of the small group of women while square dancing, playing horseshoes or relaxing by a fire under a starlit sky. Choose from a private or shared mountain cabin. The ranch also offers ladies a chance to bond over common hobbies during their scrapbooking and quilting retreats.

WOMEN RISING WILD, JULIAN JUNE 16-19

For a unique outdoor experience with other women, the Cowgirl Wild retreat in the mountains of San Diego County is a mix of hiking, horses, wolves, music and meditation. The retreat starts with a meet-and-greet in the charming mountain town of Julian. The animal-centric experience features therapeutic horseback riding, a tour of the California Wolf Center, wildlife viewing and a volunteering opportunity at Villa Chardonnay ranch animal rescue. Guests will immerse themselves in nature through activities such as forest bathing, drumming, participating in a sound bath and practicing archery. They will also engage in earthdance, which Women Rising Wild visionary Melissa Lynn Reed describes as, "moving mindfully and rhythmically, barefoot on the earth, while interacting with and expressing nature's elements of fire, water, air, forest, flowers, animals." Organic meals are included, and guests can choose to spend the night in a guest room at the lodge or opt for tent camping.

HUNEWILL RANCH, BRIDGEPORT VALLEY SEPT. 17-21

Join the ladies-only High Sierra Cowgirl Vacation at Hunewill Ranch for an all-inclusive horseback retreat at the base of the High Sierra, for all riding abilities. Experience what life is like on a real working cattle ranch. Spend days bonding with your horse — and other women — as you explore the stunning terrain and learn ranching skills like roping and moving cattle. Evenings include delicious cowgirl



Women attending the For the Love of Horses fall retreat enjoy a meal at Sweetbeau Horses, a rescue ranch for wild mustangs in Creston in Central California's Wine Country.

PATRICIA GRIFFIN-SOFFEL — SWEETBEAU HORSES



Sharael Kolberg decorates a cowboy hat at a workshop at the Lovely Bird during a WILDWONDER Women's Retreat at Alisal Ranch in Solvang in the Santa Ynez Valley.

COURTESY OF SHARAEK KOLBERG



During the High Sierra Cowgirl Vacation in late September, women can learn how to rope and move cattle at Hunewill Ranch in Bridgeport Valley in the eastern Sierra. **PHOTO BY WILL CARNAHAN FOR HUNEWILL RANCH**



Melissa Lynn Reed, the visionary for Women Rising Wild, interacts with a North American gray wolf named Zeab, who was rescued from Hollywood. **PHOTO BY MARISSA SHAVER FOR WOMEN RISING WILD**



Allie Bruhl, a wrangler at Rankin Ranch, leads guests on a trail ride. Attendees of the women-only Crafty Getaway in March ride horses twice a day at the cattle ranch in the Tehachapi Mountains. **COURTESY OF RANKIN RANCH**

cookouts and lively campfires featuring a talent show, sing-alongs and s'mores. After an exhilarating day on the ranch, lay your head to rest in a cozy country cabin.

ALISAL RANCH, SOLVANG SEPT. 27-30

The WILDWONDER women's retreat at Alisal Ranch in Santa Ynez Valley merges the Wild West with immersive activities, seasonal California cuisine and relaxing time in nature. Here, attendees can ride horses through picturesque fields, try challenging activities like axe throwing and air-gun shooting, connect with other women from around the world and learn from women "makers" who are at the top of their fields — chefs, wellness experts, artisans. The luxury ranch, situated on 10,500 acres, also features a relaxing spa, pool, tennis courts, lake, barnyard animals, hiking trails and delicious ranch-style cookouts. Sleep soundly in luxury Western-themed guest rooms, cottages and houses with private patios and wood-burning fireplaces.

CASARI RANCH, SANTA ROSA OCT. 23-25

Casari Ranch in Sonoma County is the perfect backdrop for the transformational Freedom Cowgirl Retreat. Start your day with intention and gratitude, utilize the natural environment and healing time with horses to slow down and be present, and dare to dream in a supportive gender-neutral community. Whether you're looking to let go, regain focus, increase creativity or set new goals, this time and place is a safe space to share and grow. Nourishing, organic meals keep guests fueled throughout their time on the ranch. A variety of offsite accommodations are available.

SWEETBEAU HORSES, CRESTON, OCTOBER

The name says it all in the For the Love of Horses retreat taking place this fall in Central California Wine Country. This is for women who are enamored with horses and are seeking a restorative interaction with these majestic creatures. The Sweetbeau Horses ranch employs rescued wild mustangs to help women embrace their empowerment, revive their creativity and make space for stillness. Sleep over in the Bunk House for an authentic Western experience that includes "The Duke" saloon.

The goal is that attendees leave the journey with a newfound sense of confidence, self-love and independence, as well as long-lasting friendships created through transformative conversations and experiences.