

SAND BLAST!

Postcard from a Beach Ride

Is galloping in the surf your idea of the perfect vacation? Two H&R regulars thought so, too, and decided to test their mettle at a ranch owned by Tevis Cup champion Lari Shea. Here's their "wish-you-were-here" report.



Anne and Nature's Tear fly along the water's edge.

ANNE: Maybe it came from watching all those Jennifer O'Neill commercials in the '60s, but my whole life I'd fantasized about galloping a horse along the beach. Of course, I'd also fantasized about having the physique of Ms. O'Neill—but at least the beach part was doable. Still, who knew I'd be in my early 40s before finally seizing an opportunity to fulfill that childhood dream? It happened while I was surfing the Web for ideas on a riding vacation to take with my horse-crazy 9-year-old, Amy. I discovered a site for Ricochet Ridge Ranch, a place just north of Mendocino, California (and about 250 miles north of San Francisco). There, ranch owner Lari Shea breeds, owns, and competes on world-class endurance horses—and conducts daily and weekly treks on the beach and through the nearby redwood forests. RRR seemed like just the ticket.

Amy and I were already booked to go (my nonriding husband and other daughter cheerfully declined) when I remembered that my esteemed colleague Jenny Meyer lives in California, and not too far from the coast. I zapped her an e-mail invitation.

JENNY: When I saw Anne's message, I thought: "Oh, how lovely, but...." (Always the but. My childhood nickname was "Yeah-But.") The usual commitments, all worthy, crowded my brain—writing deadlines, my husband's busy schedule, the fact of a 5-year-old daughter. Then another thought shouldered its way into my 40-and-then-something sensibilities: If not now, when? If not Mendocino (the name even sounds pretty), where? I checked with my husband, then zipped Anne a reply: Count us in!

WRITTEN BY ANNE LANG AND JENNIFER FORSBERG MEYER

ANNE: So there we found ourselves last August, about to discover whether our adventure would turn lifelong fantasies into golden reality—or play out like a wacky '90s version of Lucy and Ethel on a holiday. Either way, I knew it was gonna be great when Amy and I jetted off from the brutal Texas heat and landed in a crystal-cool paradise that never rose above 65 degrees. We met Jenny, her husband Hank, and their daughter Sophie at the historic Mendocino Hotel, where we all stayed (20 minutes down the coast from Fort Bragg, where RRR is located).

Hank opted to hold the fort with Sophie, who—despite being the capable owner/rider of a Mini—was too small to handle a full-sized horse on these types of rides. While they explored the beach near the hotel, Jenny, Amy, and I headed for our first 90-minute beach trek at RRR.

At the ranch, we were greeted by Delia Eschbach, our guide over the next 3 days. We soon learned that this personable and skilled horsewoman has been riding with Lari since childhood, and now works for her between semesters as a pre-vet student.

Lari, who was competing in Canada during our visit, had carefully chosen our horses based on our respective abilities. (Jenny and I both own Quarter Horses; Amy owns a Connemara pony.) Amy was introduced to a small gray Arabian named Faraj, while I got acquainted with the mild-mannered Nature's Tzar, a large gray Russian Orlov/Arabian cross. (For the full scoop on RRR's horses, see "From Russia With Love [And Long Legs]" on page 60.)

JENNY: I, meanwhile, was trying not to fall instantly in love with my mount—a 16.2-hand dark-gray Russian Orlov/Thoroughbred cross. While he lacked the refinement of the Arabian crosses, Nature's L'Chiam had a noble ruggedness that really appealed to me. And those feet and legs—to die for! Despite plenty of use, all the RRR horses have remarkably clean limbs and large, healthy hoofs.

Our mounts wore sturdy, workmanlike tack, including polyurethane-coated nylon web endurance bridles that converted to halters with the click of a snap. Our saddles sported wooly, full-coverage seat savers whose value became apparent the moment we sat on them—aaaaah. Large side pockets in the saddle pads easily accommodated all our camera gear, water bottles, and snacks.

In moments, our small party was ready to move out. (We'd booked a private ride; RRR also offers group rides—see "Booking A Dream" on page 62.) The beach was within sight, but between it and us was busy U.S. Highway 1. I wondered how—short of a bridge, tunnel, or helicopter transport—we were going to get safely across. Then Delia simply rode to the edge of the pavement and raised her arm, and the traffic came to an obliging stop. *Now this is the way to travel*, I thought, settling into L'Chiam's long, comfortable strides as we made our way across the road and onto a wooded path that led to the ocean front.

ANNE: We felt like hobbits winding our way through the dense foliage, then we emerged on the other side—and were greeted by the vast Pacific and a seamless blue sky. That didn't surprise us, of course, but what did was the beach sand, which was black at this particular spot. A few dozen sunbathers were scattered about, as were several loudly flapping, neon-colored beach umbrellas that would've given my horse back home a heart attack. The RRR horses, by contrast, paid no heed, nor were they fazed by screeching toddlers, swooping seagulls, careening bicyclists, or road traffic.



Perfect pairing: Amy and the feisty Faraj.

We were most delighted, though, by the pack of seals lackadaisically sunning themselves on huge, jagged rocks just past the surf line. These creatures barely flicked a whisker as we lined ourselves up like true tourists for a photo with them as a backdrop.

JENNY: When we resumed our ground-covering walk down the beach, Delia explained that we wouldn't be cantering until we reached a stretch where the sand is firmer and wouldn't risk pulling a tendon. (At every point during our ride, the comfort and safety of our horses were top concerns.)

Taking a deep breath, I thought of the approaching canter with a thrill of excitement—the way you might contemplate, say, a sky-dive into the Grand Canyon. *Get a grip*, I told myself, longing for the bravado of my younger days. As a child, I'd been the fearless, show-offy one, always angling to ride the boldest horse. As an adult, however, I'm more...cautious. Middle age, motherhood, and just knowing all the things that can go wrong have each made chinks in my armor.

Thus, by the time we arrived at the "canter place," my heart was doing double backflips, and my brain was in overdrive. *Should I? Can I? Will I?* it dithered, trying to calculate which was worse: falling off and getting trampled, or hanging back and dying of embarrassment. When the signal to go finally came, of course, all indecision became academic. We went, period, our horses springing forward as a unit, first at a bracing trot, then power shifting into a brisk hand-gallop.

Ten seconds into it—when I remembered to breathe—I discovered that not only had my fear evaporated, but I was also having the time of my life. *I can do this!* I thought exultantly, grinning like a goofy kid. (The expression "bugs in the teeth" actually crossed my mind.) Delia swiveled in her saddle, making sure each of us was comfortable and in control.

As we flew over the sand, occasionally splashing in the foamy tide, I realized this ride was exactly what I'd been needing. Whatever else they may be—scenic, relaxing, great exercise in fresh air—rides like the ones RRR provides are the perfect antidote to creeping middle-age timid-rider syndrome.

ANNE: My concerns on this maiden gallop, other than the salt-water on my contact lenses (*yeow!*), were for my 60-pound child on her 1,000-pound Arabian. Glancing at Amy as she whizzed past me in a gray blur, I caught the look of total ecstasy on her face—and the total control in her handling of Faraj. (Or was he handling her? No matter; they looked like a safe team.)

Relaxing, I gave in to my first gut instinct—which was to whoop



Look, Ma—no bridle! Amy on OZ Gabriel.

like an Indian. My second instinct was to rise up into what the hunter/jumper folks call two-point position, lifting my bottom out of the saddle and maintaining contact only with my legs. I soon realized, however, that these horses' gaits are so smooth, it's actually more comfortable to sit deep and go with the motion—even at warp speed. (What further amazed me about RRR horses was that although we were galloping mostly in a pack, these animals never laid an ear back, never kicked out at one another, never even battled for the lead. They also maneuvered their way expertly through the "traffic lanes"—much as racehorses do, I imagine—so I soon learned to let Tzar choose his own path between horses.)

When we eased down to a walk minutes later, we were all laughing and gasping with exhilaration. And the horses? Let's just say these top-shape athletes caught their breath much quicker than we did. I reached down to pat Tzar gratefully, although what I really wanted to do was to collapse on his neck in a big hug. I wondered: Can anything be better than this?

JENNY: After a quick inventory of our gear (all still there, incredibly), we prepared to move off again. L'Chiam and I resumed a "discussion" we'd been having about the length of his reins. He wanted them pitched away for comfort and freedom of movement; I preferred them a bit shorter to assure myself of control. His obliging downshift after our mad dash, however, was softening my resolve. We finally came to a gentleman's agreement: I'd leave drapes in the reins if he'd forego tossing his head. It worked beautifully.

The clarity of communication between us was startling, especially given the short time we'd been together. I mentioned this to Delia, and she recounted the time an earnest beginner on one of the group rides asked if the horses "spoke English," so impressed was she with the way they obeyed commands—especially from the ride leader. In fact, Delia added, riders often grow so enamored of their mounts that they try to buy them and take them home. One fellow, who became fixated on a horse that wasn't for sale at any price, refused to give up, finally leaving a signed, blank check at the ranch—"in case you ever change your mind." (The horse he fancied is still at RRR.)

Hearing all this, I glanced down at L'Chiam's long, shapely neck, wondering idly if he could be bought. Might be fun to own a Cadillac trail horse!

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE (AND LONG LEGS)

Nothing has more to do with your enjoyment of a horseback holiday than the quality of the horseflesh. At Ricochet Ridge Ranch, the mounts are what I came to think of as "Cadillac trail horses"—custom-bred or selected to be a joy on long, vigorous rides. Though you'll find a handful of stock-type breeds at this northern California facility—Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, and the like—the majority of horses available to vacationers are the product of owner Lari Shea's Arabian-based breeding program to produce world-class endurance mounts. (Shea herself has won the 100-mile Tevis Cup and several other major endurance races.)

In addition to purebred Arabians and crosses, RRR boasts a number of Russian Orlovs and Orlov crosses. (The three mounts assigned to our party were a purebred Arabian, an Arabian-Orlov cross, and an Orlov-Thoroughbred cross.) RRR's Orlov horses are mostly descendants of Shea's now-deceased Russian Orlov stallion, Nature's Ballet, a son of Natourchik ("Nature Lover"), the USSR's grand champion in 1959.

The Russian Orlov, also known as the Orlov Trotter, was developed in the 18th century by Count Alexis Grigorievitch Orlov at his stud outside Moscow. The count crossed his gray Arabian stallion Smetanka on Danish and Dutch mares to produce elegant, long-legged carriage horses also suitable for racing. Orlovs first came to America in 1959 as gifts of state from Nikita Khrushchev to industrialist Cyrus Eaton.

"During the height of the cold war," Shea explains, "Eaton worked behind the scenes to initiate U.S. grain sales to the Soviet Union, which helped to keep Russian peasants from starving. In appreciation, Khrushchev sent Eaton three stallions—including Natourchik—a few mares, some racing equipment, a driver, a trainer, and a veterinarian. The horses stayed permanently, but the humans eventually had to return to the USSR."

Natourchik's son Nature's Ballet competed in the Great American Horse Race from New York to California in commemoration of the U.S. bicentennial in 1976. He also completed the Tevis Cup five times out of five attempts—"which might still be a record for a stallion," says Shea. Crossing Orlovs on Arabians, she adds, produces horses with the spirit and endurance of the desert horse, but with an Orlov's large frame, big bones, long stride, and quiet disposition. "They're ideal for endurance competition," she says.

Not to mention vacation treks.

—JFM

ANNE: After a few more lively hand-gallops, we'd covered several miles of beach, most of it virtually deserted after that first stretch of black sand. We soaked up the natural beauty of the area, observing many of the sea's offerings: glistening wads of kelp, abandoned crabshells, occasional jellyfish (we steered clear of those), and a wealth of sand dollars.

We were never hot, although I did end up with a slightly toasted face that first day (silly me to forget the sunscreen). Still, the siren song of the waves made a dip seem tempting. "No way," said Delia, citing the icy water and fierce riptides that have claimed more than their share of unsuspecting swimmers. "Uh, fetlock-deep is fine, really," we agreed, leg yielding our mounts a bit farther inland.

We returned to our hotel that evening giddy, invigorated, and champing at the bit for another ride. The next day, we enjoyed a 4-hour trek that took us to the north end of the beach and up into the redwood-covered hills. The beach portion was a pleasurable repeat of the day before; we then veered off the sand and walked a short distance inland to the road, where a truck and horse trailer



Posing with seals in the background (from left): Jenny Meyer, Amy Lang, Anne Lang.

awaited to transport us across a half-mile-long bridge to the base of a huge private ranch owned by Lari and her fiancé. (Delia explained that with larger-sized groups, the leader stops traffic while everyone rides horseback across the bridge, but that with small groups, it's easier to use the trailer. Eyeing the vast expanse of elevated roadway, we hopped happily into the truck.)

Remounting at the ranch gate, we shed our jackets in the suddenly warm air—a contrast to the cooler winds of the beach. Meanwhile, the relative silence was deafening, with echoes of crashing surf still reverberating in our heads. As we headed up the hill, that echo was replaced by the soothing songs of native birds, the faint buzz of insects, the creak of saddle leather, and the ever-more-distant hum of highway traffic. In nearby pastures, small herds of yearlings and weanlings—RRR's youngest equine family members—cavorted in the California sunshine.

JENNY: Mostly we walked as we wound our way up the hillside, enjoying the spectacular scenery while Delia pointed out the local flora—including one enormous redwood believed to be more than 800 years old. We actually felt dizzy as we craned our necks to peer reverently at its uppermost branches.

We came across several piles of bear scat (“From a youngster,” Delia assured us), although on this particular day, there were no actual live-critter encounters of any kind.

A couple of the clearer, gentler slopes begged for a gallop, and gallop we did. The horses bounded uphill joyfully, and I felt as if I were 12 again, in a Black Stallion racing scene come to life.

That's the beauty of the RRR experience: On horses so bold, fit, responsive, and sure-footed, you can chuck your inhibitions and just go. At the top, Delia reminded us how to check pulse and respiration rates (“horsemanship ed” is a standard part of the rides), and we were once again amazed at how quickly the horses' hearts and lungs returned to normal functioning. (I, on the other hand, thought my own heart might never be “normal” again.)

ANNE: Coming down off the hill that day, we were awed by the sight of the ocean, now seemingly far off in the distance. At one point, Amy, by now having proved her horsemanship skills to Delia, was given the opportunity to hop aboard Delia's mount, OZ

BOOKING A DREAM

Note: All prices are subject to change; call for current rates.

Name: Ricochet Ridge Ranch.

Location: 2 miles north of Fort Bragg, near Highway 1, on the northern California coast.

Horseback rides: Group rides on the beach are available 7 days a week, beginning at 10 A.M. The cost is \$35 for 2 hours (which includes a brief orientation and mount-up time). The ranch can accommodate children as young as 6. Private rides by reservation cost \$55 per person for 2 hours; \$75 for 3 hours; and \$100 for 4 hours. All-day private rides are \$195 per person.

Package vacations: Complete Redwood Coast riding vacations, including accommodations in top local lodges, cost \$1,795 for a full week of tours and activities; shorter packages by special arrangement. In addition, Ricochet Ridge Ranch offers trips to Australia, Kenya, and other international locations. Inquire for additional details.

Contact: Ricochet Ridge Ranch, 24201 N. Highway One, Dept. HR, Fort Bragg, CA 95437; (707) 964-7669; FAX (707) 964-9669; e-mail larishea@horse-vacation.com; www.horse-vacation.com.

Gabriel, a purebred Arabian who's one of Lari's top endurance horses. This was a new thrill for my fearless daughter, because Gabe was wearing only a stiff, circular neck loop—no bridle, hackamore, or headgear of any kind. Amy's grin about split her face as she steered the amiable gelding down the zigzagging path, using only the gentle pressure of her legs.

The next day, the five of us—including Jenny's husband and daughter—enjoyed sightseeing and shopping around charming Mendocino. Jenny later swapped saddle time for more family time, but Amy and I couldn't resist taking just one more ride with Delia. This one was again on the beach, but timed to coincide with the lovely sunset at the end of a 2-hour ride.

We discovered a changed world down at the ocean, where the tide was high—obligating us to ride in deeper sand up closer to the dunes. The atmosphere was charged with a wild, primal restlessness, as if the now almost threatening-looking waves and whistling winds were channeling through our horses, who were particularly frisky and eager to high-tail it. We gladly gave in to their inclinations, glorying in some of the longest, fastest gallops of the whole trip.

Later, in the twilight back at RRR, we bid a fond and reluctant farewell to Delia and our wonderful mounts. When Amy burst into tears the minute we climbed into the car, I knew this vacation had been a smashing success. Heck, I felt like crying myself, we'd had so much fun.

Returning home to our own beloved horses helped ease the transition back to reality. In the familiar environs of our stable's tack room, the memory of our exotic trek seemed like a dream. Then, unpacking our gear, we found saltwater stains on our chaps and fine sand in our boots—reassuring proof that we'd made *that* dream, anyway, come true. ♦

Freelancer Anne Lang is a Texas-based reporter for People magazine. She and her family live in Austin, where she owns and shows the Quarter Horse Tazzio. H&R consulting editor Jennifer Forsberg Meyer owns a Quarter Horse, Shogun Smoke, and resides with her family in Shingle Springs, California.