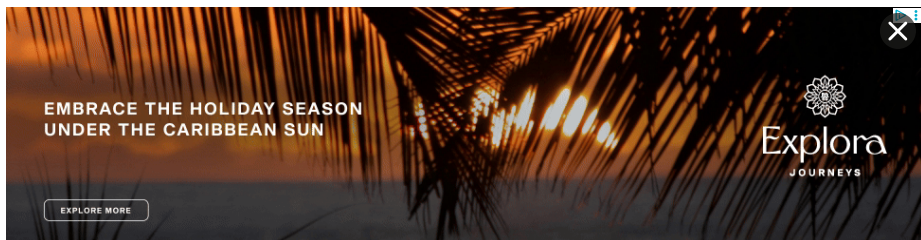


4 Colorado ranches for old-fashioned getaways

From horseback riding to hiking, fishing, or rafting, experience unforgettable adventures



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By **GIGI RAGLAND**

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Colorado hosts a bevy of historic (century-old) guest ranch properties from the mountains to the valleys.

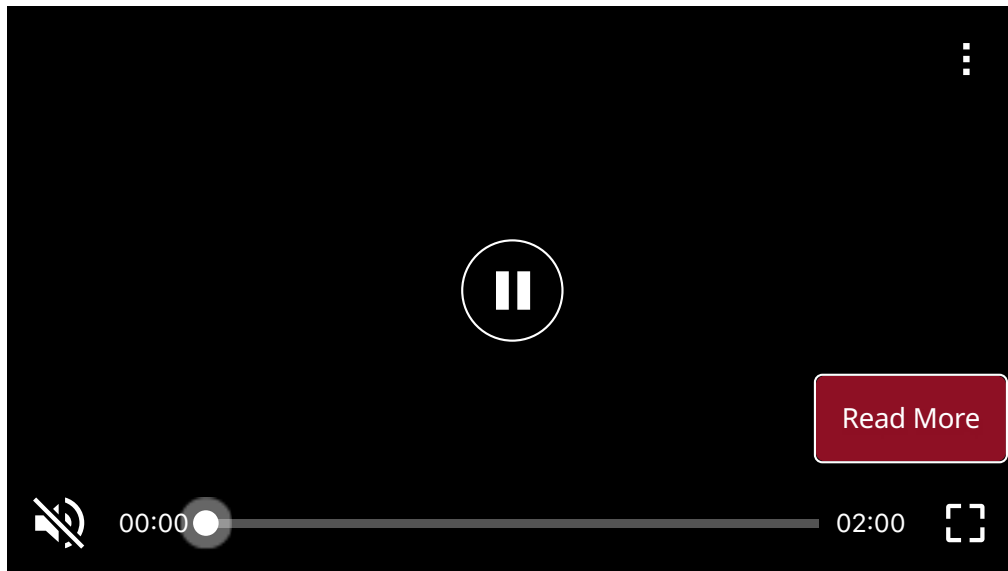
A guest ranch vacation is one of the best ways to enjoy Colorado's incredible wilderness and natural wonders. With over 3.5 million acres of federally protected wilderness contained within 41 separate wilderness areas, four national parks, and 42 state parks, there's an abundance of stunning terrain to experience by horseback—or two legs.

Many of these ranch properties started in the late 1800s as cattle ranches, providing hungry miners and a growing population with beef. As tourism expanded in the state, some of these historic ranches transitioned to dude ranches, offering guests a taste of the Western lifestyle.

Sure, dude ranches have existed in Colorado for a century or more.

Discover four unique properties located in stunning areas of the state with fascinating origins: two traditional dude ranches and two under-the-radar guest ranch gems.

If the “cabin” walls could talk, what stories they could tell.



Cherokee Park Ranch

Livermore

You can get away from it all at this dude ranch. In 1886, Cherokee Park Ranch was a stagecoach stop for folks journeying from Laramie to Denver.

The last 15 miles of the drive from Fort Collins is on a dirt road, a remnant of the route once traveled by stagecoach or horseback during the 1880s.

“Makes you realize just how remote the ranch is after winding up and down the canyons with no stop signs, street lights and most importantly NO concrete,” says Christine Prince, one of the members of the family-owned guest ranch.

Set within the scenic slopes of the Rawah Wilderness, near Rocky Mountain National Park, the historic ranch overflows with old-fashioned western charm.

The owners take great care in maintaining the ranch’s historical integrity, carefully preserving the structures and memorabilia of the era.



Cherokee Park Ranch in the Rawah Wilderness near Rocky Mountain National Park embodies western charm. (Photo provided by Cherokee Ranch)

Inside the 120-year-old main log lodge and throughout the log cabins, you'll see an array of western-style furnishings and antiques that date back to the ranch's early days. Enjoy a collection of old-fashioned buggies, sleighs, and wagons displayed around the property.

It might be hard to leave the front porch swing of your cabin that overlooks the Cache La Poudre River, but there's plenty of horseback riding to do at this top-rated dude ranch.

The ranch maintains its herd of about 130 quarter horses. Besides the variety of rides for all ability levels in the Colorado high country, there's a chance to wrangle cattle and learn team roping; polish skills at the indoor arena, ride out to a secluded river spot to do some fishing, and participate in the Friday night rodeo. Non-riders can hike, fish, or go river-rafting.

Later, meet up with the rest of the crew for hayrides, marshmallow roasts under the stars, or square dance and "boot n' scoot" to live music in the evenings.

The Kids Program hosts fun activities specifically geared for children from 2 to 12 years old, like horseshoe painting, gold panning, critter petting, scavenger hunts, and horseback riding.

Book an all-inclusive summer-to-fall week-long ranch vacation from Saturday to Friday.

Canyon of the Ancients Guest Ranch

Cortez

Located in the heart of Mesa Verde Country, the historic guest ranch is at the edge of Canyon of the Ancients National Monument, hence its name.

Nestled within verdant McElmo Canyon, the property is surrounded by Ancestral Puebloan archeology sites and cliff dwellings, with Sleeping Ute Mountain looming in the distance.

From the ranch, it's less than an hour's drive along the Southwest Colorado Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway to either Mesa Verde National Park, Four Corners Monument, Canyon of the Ancients, or Hovenweep National Monument and Sand Canyon.

Once an open cattle ranch in the late 1880s, the vast spread belonged to Elden Zwicker, a legendary local cowboy. A few of the original buildings remain. The old stone house where the Zwicker family lived, the cowboy log cabin and the pioneer house.



The historic ranch in Mesa Verde Country, near Canyon of the Ancients National Monument, is surrounded by Ancestral Puebloan sites and offers access to attractions like Mesa Verde National Park. (Photo provided by Canyon of the Ancients Guest Ranch)

When ranch owners Garry and Ming Adams bought the property, they restored and renovated the remaining buildings to preserve the western heritage.

“An award-winning documentary, ‘American Cowboy,’ was filmed 28 years ago about Elden and his family’s ranching lifestyle. It is a timeless piece that witness how ranchers worked so hard on their land. We put it at each guesthouse so guests can have a chance to see and understand the history,” said Ming Adams.

The boutique collection of ranch rentals includes five cabins and guest houses with kitchens decorated in a fusion of Western and Native American decor, as well as their newest addition, the dwellings at Sky Village. They also include two guesthouses designed by the couple, the Sky Kiva and Star Tower, inspired by 800-year-old structures located at nearby Hovenweep National Monument.

Onsite guests can experience a blend of the Old West and Ancient Puebloan culture.

When not touring the nearby sites, guests can roam the grounds, visit the animals (dogs, cats, the incredible non-edible heritage pet sheep group, pet cows and chickens), go on an archeology tour of the property's small ruin site with Indigenous rock art, or pitch in with farm chores with Garry and Ming, who enjoy meeting and talking with guests.

A two-night minimum is standard for rentals.

Rainbow Trout Ranch

Antonito

The southern Rockies location of this dude ranch will make you feel like you just loped onto an old-fashioned western movie set. Over a century ago great cattle drives passed through trails leading north and even outlaws like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid roamed the range. This ranch is a cowboy and fisherman's paradise in the middle of the San Juan Mountains within the Rio Grande River Valley.

In the early 1900s, the ranch started as a private fishing club for sportsmen. For over a hundred years, countless fly-fishermen have caught many rainbow trout in the Conejos River that flows through the property.

When the main lodge was built in 1920, it was considered the largest log building of the time. A century later, the historic 18,000-square-foot wooden lodge remains a focal point of the ranch.

For over 30 years, the family-owned ranch has been a labor of love for the Van Berkums.



Rainbow Trout Ranch, located in the southern Rockies, has a rich history tied to cattle drives and outlaws. Founded in the early 1900s as a private fishing club, it is renowned for rainbow trout fishing in the Conejos River. (Photo provided by Rainbow Trout Ranch)

“It is truly family-owned and operated. Between us, we cover all aspects of the operations, although we hire a fabulous staff to help in the summer and fall,” says Jane Berkum.

Generations of the family interact with guests daily, from helping out with the horses to joining folks at meals.

Whether it's a half-day or all-day ride with cascading waterfalls and Continental Divide views, there's a horseback ride for kids and adults from beginner to advanced. Plus, a chance to show off your skills in the weekly rodeo.

There's plenty of onsite activities too, plus a heated swimming pool.

Considered one of the top fly-fishing ranches in the country, guests can participate in the exclusive fly-fishing guiding and teaching programs offered.

"We focus on an education based program so that our guests can become well informed about river and fish health, and best practices to promote them," Berkum says.

Plan an old-fashioned steam train ride aboard "America's Longest and Highest Narrow Gauge to round out your western vacation."

The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad runs between Antonito and Chama, New Mexico. Upon arrival, make arrangements with the ranch.

Arapaho Valley Ranch

Granby

It's hard to imagine that underneath Lake Granby and Shadow Mountain water reservoirs, there was once an old town and a community of ranches scattered across pastureland.

In the 1880s, after mining, locals turned to ranching, eventually converting to dude and guest ranch operations as tourism began to grow in the area.

After the Colorado Big-Thompson project created the reservoirs, only one guest ranch remained, saved by relocating to higher ground near Arapaho National Forest.



Arapaho Valley Ranch is located near Lake Granby, Colorado. (Photo provided by Arapaho Valley Ranch)

Perched on the South Fork of the Colorado River, the 40-acre spread showcases some of the original buildings of the era, such as the main lodge, which features the smallest and one of the oldest bars in the state.

Hayden Hughes, ranch manager of Arapaho Valley Ranch (AVR) suggests “a great way to immerse yourself in the history of the ranch is to claim a seat at the Red Dog Saloon, and sip on a drink while taking in the rustic setting of a building that is more than a century old.”

In 2023, the ranch underwent upgrades to its facilities and infrastructure. Guests can choose from kitted-out glamping tents, tipis, and wood cabins, including a few historic choices, to camping and RV sites offering views of the Colorado River.

Plus, this year, there is a selection of yurts.

The Granby location is a midway point for exploring Rocky Mountain National Park and Winter Park playgrounds.

But there are plenty of activities to enjoy on site. These include biking the surrounding trails, canoeing or paddle boarding Little Indian Lake or nearby Monarch Lake, fishing for rainbow trout, or hiking the many trails. If you’re after horseback riding, kayaking, or rafting, the host can recommend operators nearby.

There’s a tradition of musical evenings at the ranch, from guest songfests and guitar-picking to live music. This summer, the ranch will host two music weekend getaways with western and bluegrass bands.

Check their calendar for more information. Daily rentals, open year-round.

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