

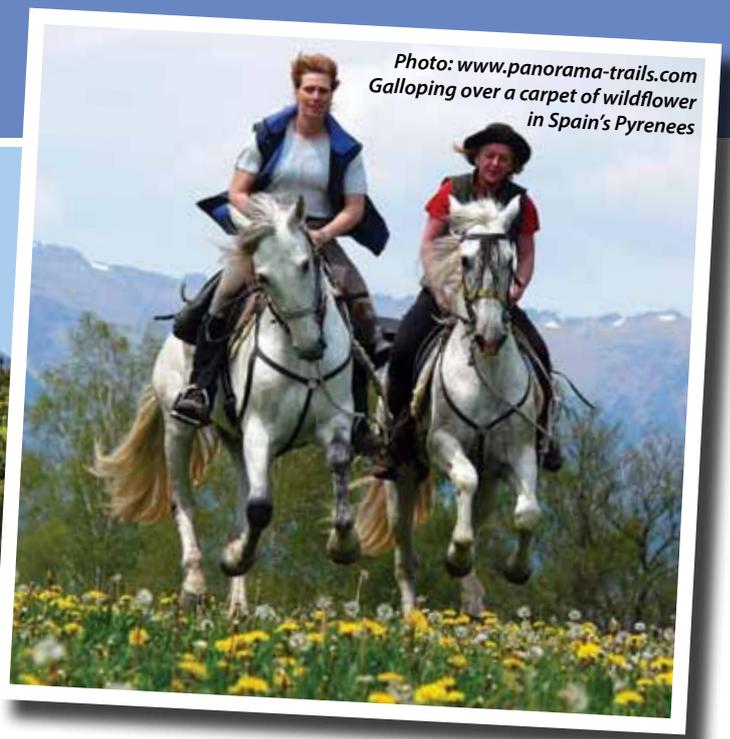


THIS could be you, on top of the world. Galloping over a carpet of wildflowers on an alpine meadow or forging through snowdrifts where the air is so crisp it crackles. Climb hair-raising trails up dramatic peaks where condors nest, break into an exhilarating gallop through a cloud of butterflies or splash through clear, teeth-achingly cold mountain streams. Trek with pack yaks in Tibet and discover the country before it disappears. Then, after a glorious mountain ride, bathe in natural hot springs in remote Mongolia or in the heart of New Zealand's Southern Alps.

Photo: www.theridingcompany.com
Riding out from a dude ranch in Austria's Tyrolean mountains



Photo: www.panorama-trails.com
Galloping over a carpet of wildflower in Spain's Pyrenees



The World's Best Mountain Rides



Photo: www.panorama-trails.com
Enjoying an exhilarating gallop across a high plateau in Spain's Pyrenees



Photo: www.theridingcompany.com
In deep Tyrolean snow, these horses wear special winter shoes with spikes and hoof grips



Photo: www.panorama-trails.com
A lone rider high in the Pyrenees

Follow in the steps of Spanish herdsmen who drive cattle along the romantically named El Camino Real (less romantically translated as the Royal Road or King's Highway). Ride through the soft, round hills that are such a startling contrast to the wild and bizarre rock formations of the Garrotxa Mountains. Panorama Trail's aptly-named Trail of Bandits traces the footsteps of 17th Century Spain's infamous bandolero Joan Sala Serrallonga who roamed the mountains of Guilleries and Garrotxa and disappeared into vast, pathless areas of woodland that offered him good places to hide from the law. Under Catalan blue skies, ride other trails through breathtakingly beautiful canyons, up table mountains and volcanoes and beside rivers, lakes and waterfalls. With Unicorn Trails, experience how people actually travelled in 19th Century Spain in an almost forgotten region of Andalusia called the Alpujarra Mountains. Try to keep your eyes open as you ride impossibly steep donkey trails that lead from one whitewashed village clinging to a precipitous mountain slope to the next tiny village on an even more terrifying incline.

In the Austrian Alps, The Riding Company offers treks on Haflinger ponies through the High Tauern National Park, on the centuries-old Gold Route. For a family holiday, try an Austrian dude ranch, perched on a high pass in the spectacular Tyrolean mountains. To provide traction in deep snow, your mounts – Criollos, Quarter Horses and Paints – wear special winter shoes with spikes and hoof grips. The hotel/dude ranch has a western saloon bar with live music, an 'Indian Spirits' spa, indoor swimming pool, its own ski school and ski hire shop and has access to the largest ski area in the famous Zillertal Arena.

The Riding Company has a new trail that National Geographic Traveller declares is one of the Top 50 Tours of a Lifetime. The seven-day/six-night Machu Picchu Luxury Lodge-to-Lodge Trail Ride takes you to the legendary Lost City of the Incas, where you can stay in luxury lodges instead of camping and where you will barely encounter another soul. You ride fit and intelligent Uruguayan Quarter Horses up over the 4600-metre Salkantay Pass, through the agricultural plains of the Sacred Valley (still carved with pre-Inca terracing) to high alpine pastures where condors circle overhead. From glaciers at the mountain pass you descend through the humid Cloud Forest on the other side of the Andes where vegetation soon turns tropical. The final day is a hike up to Machu Picchu itself.



Ancient trails between Italy and France were used by the Romans, Napoleon and his armies and Hannibal, who crossed with his elephants in 218 BC. See what they saw as you trek at altitudes of 1400 metres in the valleys and up to 2800 metres on the higher passes between Piedmont in Italy and the Hautes-Alps in France. The 4200-metre peaks and glaciers of the Ecrins National Park in France and the 3800-metre mountains on the Piedmont side tower over you as you ride through wide, long valleys flanked by pine and larch forests, over vast open plateaux dotted with lakes, and high mountain prairies with dwarf vegetation that resembles the Arctic tundra.

Photo: www.theridingcompany.com
The riding in the Austrian Alps is so good and the air so clear it makes you want to yodel

Bulgaria is one of Europe's best-kept secrets. Its pleasant climate, varied cuisine, good wine and famous hospitality are matched by a long tradition of horsemanship and superb trails for fit riders. The landscape is unspoilt and accessible with carefully planned routes through the breathtaking Rhodope Mountains. Nearby, Poland's Tatra Mountains have long been a famous skiing destination. Unspoilt forests, alpine scenery and lovely summer weather make for fairytale riding on the local Malopolskie horses that are related to the Polish Arabian.

Once each month, Unicorn Trails offers experienced and adventurous riders the opportunity to explore, without a guide, a one-hundred-mile trail through the undiscovered and mountainous interior of the island of Crete. Riders are kitted out with maps and route descriptions and the trail, which is clearly marked, takes you through endless olive groves, picturesque and friendly villages where most residents speak English, and past traditional, all-important, tavernas.

For something completely different, good strong horses will take you along part of the legendary Silk Route between Europe and China. The Kungei Alatau Range rises high on the borders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, crossing Kashkator Pass to Karakor Base Camp at 3300 metres in the high central Asian plateau. Camp in comfort under bright starlit skies, ride across wide open spaces with no borders and interact with nomadic people who live with their herds as they have done for centuries. Or ride across the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains in North Africa on a magnificent

team of fit and responsive Arab x Barb stallions, starting at the desert oasis of Skoura and ending up on the plains of Marrakech. The contrasting landscapes within the Atlas Mountains often remind visitors of Colorado, with high plateaux, deep gorges and box canyons, and peaks splintered by erosion.

North America's Rocky Mountains contains many dude ranches in its millions of acres of wilderness and forest. Rocky Mountain Ranch is a family-run ranch with around a hundred Quarter Horse types that are western trained. The riding programme includes team penning and there is a fully supervised children's programme, fly fishing in stocked ponds and rivers, white-water rafting, guided hiking and 4WD back country drives. Sunrise Ranch, high in the Rocky Mountains, is only an hour's drive from Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park. This ranch is remote, well located and offers some of the most spectacular scenery in the Rockies.

The Appalachian Mountains are in the heart of the very traditional French-speaking part of Canada. Quebec Ranch serves gastronomic cuisine and owns sure-footed, gentle Appaloosas and Quarter Horses for point-to-point trails with lodging at inns, home stays and tepees. The distinct seasons of the Appalachian Mountains include sunny and green summers and blazing autumn colours.

Much further south, high in the Andean Cordillera and tucked into lush valleys surrounded by snow-capped volcanic peaks is a handful of gracious haciendas. Ecuador's stunning scenery, colourful culture, friendly people and temperate climate combine to make it one of the most rewarding trekking destinations in South America. Follow a stunning route along ancient Inca trails at elevations between 2700 and 4700 metres where huge herds of guanacos (lamas) roam freely and the Andean condor nests.

Photo: Miles Holden
Lord of the Rings country at
Glenorchy in New Zealand

The ride winds past ruins and through ever-changing views of the towering mountains including the Avenue of Volcanoes, some of the highest snow-capped volcanoes in the world.

Ladakh in India is sometimes also known as little Tibet due to its location at the heart of the magnificent Himalayan Mountains. This camping expedition with pack horses starts with a few days in Leh and the Indus Valley to allow riders to acclimatise to the high altitude. You then ride into the magnificent Himalayas themselves, emerging on the Rupshu Plateau. Riders need to be adventurous and fit, although technical ability is not a prerequisite as the pace is at a walk, mainly due to the terrain and altitude. This is an opportunity to visit remote monasteries and enjoy the rugged contrasts of the Himalayas.

Another adventurous wilderness ride takes you to a remote Mongolian province, riding through open steppes, forested valleys, mountains and desert. The ride takes you into Tarvagatai Uul National Park in the Arkhangai Mountains where you can visit sacred mountain lakes and bathe in natural hot springs. At the end of each day you are met by a support vehicle carrying food and equipment, and you stay in temporary campsites each night, cooking over an open fire. Mongolian horses are hardy and full of character and a highlight of this trip is the chance to experience the legendary hospitality of local nomadic families.

Closer to home lies Paradise Station near Glenorchy, gateway to New Zealand's Mount Aspiring National Park. A place of



stunning beauty, Paradise Station was one of the locations for Peter Jackson's famous *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and a later movie, *The Lovely Bones*. More recently *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and Hugh Jackman's *Wolverine* were also filmed here. Follow the trail of Saruman's army as it departed Isengard and enjoy breathtaking views of The Misty Mountains, Wizards Vale and the mighty Mithra.

Home at last to our own stunning mountains – the Snowy Mountains, Blue Mountains and Cradle Mountain – that offer some of the best riding, most interesting wildlife and stunning scenery in the world. And it's all in our own back yard. 🐾



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