

Palm Springs

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SADDLE UP

Exploring the high desert on horseback is the perfect way to beat the summer heat

By BEKAH WRIGHT

Special Advertising Sections Writer

Many people are drawn to the Palm Springs area for outlet shopping. Others go for the golf. I went in search of the Old West.

About 20 miles northeast of Palm Springs, I found Coyote Ridge Stable, where four friendly dogs ushered me in and a white pig named Jenny Craig glanced up to greet me. What interested me the most, though, were the horses.

Saddling several of the 16 equines that live on the property were ranch co-owners Sue Lund and Sally Ellis. I was impressed to learn that many of the horses are members of the Morongo Basin Mounted Search and Rescue, part of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Volunteer Forces.

Soon five more riders joined our happy throng: two Floridians looking to become cowboys for a day; a mother and her 10-year-old daughter sharing a bonding experience; and a woman vowing to try everything life has to offer. We were led to a mounting block and introduced to our horses.

"I haven't been on a horse in a while," I confessed to my horse, Sweet Sonny Love.

The gelding's snort confirmed that he was already aware of this fact.

Beyond being told about our individual horse's idiosyncrasies, we were given instructions on how to move forward, stop and turn.

"The horses are positive and want to go," Lund said, "so there's no need to kick them a lot."

Our group headed out on the two-hour Coyote Creek ride (for all levels of ability) through the high desert. Sonny, who was on autopilot, nudged the mare in front of us along.

Shortly after we hit the trail, Lund, who was leading the pack, dismounted. She had spotted a Rosy boa constrictor in the brush. A former biology major, Lund scooped up the snake and gave us a mini lesson on the species.

"Rosy boas are docile and nonpoisonous," Lund said. "Their color is a form of camouflage that helps them blend into their surroundings."

Our ride, which started at 2 p.m., continued through the canyons of the San Bernardino

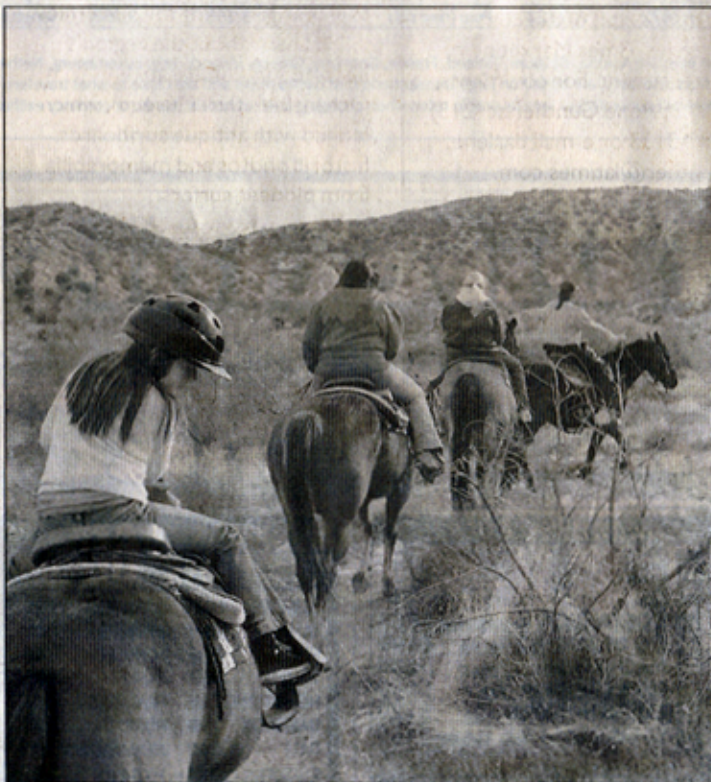


PHOTO BY BEKAH WRIGHT

Breathtaking vistas and cooler temperatures greet even the most mildly adventurous at Coyote Ridge Stable in Morongo Valley.

Mountains, offering views of Mount San Jacinto and Mount San Geronio. At an elevation of 3,200 feet, the high desert was a blessed 20 degrees cooler than the low desert.

Sitting high in the saddle on the back of a horse, I took in unique views of the desert. I watched as red-tailed hawks soared above and kept an eye out for kestrels and golden eagles. We spotted desert spiny lizards, antelope ground squirrels, roadrunners and cottontail and Jack rabbits among the creosote bushes.

The flats of the Mojave Desert were dotted with butter-colored Wallace's woolly daisies, yuccas and Joshua trees. Whenever we happened upon choice vegetation, my horse would stop. I imagined that he was trying to educate me about the desert — not merely taking a snack break.

Our group wound down hills and slid deftly through brush. A stream flowed peacefully nearby, giving notice of an upcoming pond. Some of the horses stopped for a drink. Sonny circled the water, apparently not fond of

getting his feet wet.

As our ride drew to an end, a brilliant pink sunset streaked the sky.

Back at the barn, the Floridians asked for a horseshoe to remember their day on horseback. The 10-year-old was all smiles.

Reactions like these are what

led Ellis and Lund to open the doors of Coyote Ridge Stable more than 15 years ago. The trail rides, which are by reservation only, are offered year-round, although the time of day varies depending on the season.

Coyote Ridge Stable offers several rides that range from \$65 to \$215. Other rides open to all levels include the Lizard Rock expedition, a two-hour privately guided ride along the same trail as the Coyote Creek ride and the Quail Canyon desert trek, which lasts an hour and 15 minutes and bypasses the water elements of the creek ride.

When the moon is full, riders can enjoy the romantic 1½-hour Moonlight Ride, where the Coyote Creek Trail is transformed into another world by the moonlight.

Another option is to make a weekend of it, combining several rides with a stay at Roy's Bunkhouse just around the corner from the stable.

As for my day in the saddle, I was able to find my inner cowgirl — thanks to Sweet Sonny Love.

For more information on rides and directions to Coyote Ridge Stable or Roy's Bunkhouse, visit www.coyoteridgestable.com or call (760) 363-3380.

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This page was edited and designed by the Special Sections staff of the Los Angeles Times Advertising Department. For questions or comments, contact Josh Jenisch at 213.237.3150 or email josh.jenisch@la-times.com.