



**FAMILY
TRAVEL
ASSOCIATION**

Changing Lives Through Travel

Dude Ranch Guide



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INTRODUCTION

Dude Ranches hold a unique charm for vacationers, with their powerful connections to the great outdoors and America's Western history. While ranches still hold at their core a promise of connection to the land, to horses and the rancher's life, they also today offer a wide array of experiences that might surprise travel advisors and their clients.

However, according to the 2018 Family Travel Survey*, only 4 percent of American families have experienced a Dude Ranch vacation, and just 7.5 percent say they are planning one. This offers agents a unique opportunity to grow this market. With a ten percent average commission, minimum-stay requirements of six or seven nights, and a high percentage of repeat annual stays, recommending a dude ranch can prove very lucrative to savvy agents.

There are three main types of ranches:

Resort Ranches (\$\$\$\$) - the largest of the three, where horseback riding is an option among a number of other activities and on-site amenities, such as tennis courts, gourmet chefs and full-service spas and children's programs.

Dude Ranches (\$\$\$) - horseback riding is the main focus with a variety of other experiences.

Working Guest Ranches (\$\$) - functioning cattle ranches where guests participate with care.



Photo courtesy White Stallion Ranch

*Conducted by the Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality, NYU School of Professional Studies, June - July 2018, the US Family Travel Survey reached 1,724 consumers, 18 years or older, with one or more children 17 years or younger.



Photo courtesy Tanque Verde Ranch

Ranches vary in range of accommodations, activities, dining options, pricing and size (from 8-10 guests to more than 100).

These differences have a large impact on experiences like social interaction and dining. Clients need to be carefully qualified regarding the type of ranch experience they prefer. In some situations, a certain level of horsemanship is required.

In other cases, beginner riders are welcomed and trained thoroughly before heading out on trails.

Professional advisors should learn about the wide variety of Dude Ranch Vacation experiences.

By way of example, typical Dude Ranches may cost about \$300 per person, per night, all-inclusive of accommodations, activities and meals. With a ten percent average commission, and minimum stay requirements of six or seven nights, commissions for a family of four's vacation could net income upwards of \$1,200 per booking.

The Family Travel Association (FTA) realizes too few families understand how a Dude Ranch vacation fits their needs and desires. Additionally, one of the Dude Ranch industry's key sales and marketing channels, professional travel advisors, have little exposure to Dude Ranches, and are just starting to understand the value and experience they represent for families.

The Family Travel Association Dude Ranch Guide is designed to help educate advisors to the various aspects of the Dude Ranch vacation experience, what kinds of clients might be best for you to introduce the concept to during your next consultation, and help you navigate through that sales process. Because they are family-owned businesses, most ranch owners and management staff welcome advisors developing a direct relationship that would include commission levels.

Print out this guide for further reference.

For a complete listing of all Dude Ranch members of the FTA, you can click here:

<https://familytravel.org/members/ranches/>

We hope you print out this guide, and keep it close by your desk as a reference for sales success. We also recommend that you reach out to Dude Ranch owners directly to request detailed information about commission policies and to form deeper business relationships.

While this first draft is the culmination of a tremendous effort on the part of so many knowledgeable experts, we look forward to receiving your feedback and to continuously update this guide to enhance everyone's Dude Ranch vacation sales.



This guide was developed for our members with leading experts in the field, and we would like to especially thank the following for their contributions:

- Gene Kilgore, Ranch Vacations
- David Craig, C Lazy U Ranch
- Susanne Walsh, White Stallion Ranch
- Colleen Hodson & Leah Bright; the Dude Ranchers' Association
- Sally Black, Vactionkids.com & FTA Director of Travel Advisor Initiatives

INSPIRING YOUR CLIENTS

So, who among your clients likely are most interested in taking a Dude Ranch vacation? By understanding the interests, past travel patterns and future desires.

One of your greatest resources for learning about the Dude Ranch segment is FTA Member The Dude Ranchers' Association (DRA). Their more than 100 members can be found within more than 40 national/state parks, and close to many others, as well as national monuments.

Where will you find families readily interested in Dude Ranch vacations? While they are living all over the United States and Canada, the greatest opportunity for you is with certain family types and demographics in some key markets. According to Google Trends, the states with the most frequent search requests for the phrases "Dude Ranch" or "Resort Ranch" by state from Dec. 15, 2017-2018, are:

State	resort ranch	State	dude ranch
Arizona	100	Wyoming	100
Nevada	90	Montana	70
Kansas	48	Arkansas	61
Colorado	47	Colorado	58
Oregon	40	Utah	54
Utah	39	Tennessee	49
Montana	38	New York	48
New Mexico	36	Connecticut	46
Louisiana	35	South Dakota	45
California	34	Florida	45

Families in these states able and interested in spending \$10-15,000 for week for a family of four likely are candidates. Additionally, "look for someone in the family who is a rider, or love horses, or perhaps someone who has childhood memories with horses and riding," said Susanne Walsh, marketing and guest relations at White Stallion Ranch, in Tucson, Arizona.



Photo courtesy Mountain Sky Guest Ranch

Know what your clients are looking for

Wanting to experience a Western lifestyle (4.75) actually ranked below even seeking “luxury things, nice food, and a comfortable place to stay” (5.04), in the UCF study. (on a 1-7 scale, with 7 being “strongly agree”)

But don't limit your prospect base. In a 2016 study that explored the motivational factors for Dude Ranch Vacations, researchers at the University of Central Florida's (UCF) Rosen College surveyed 150 Dude Ranch guests and found that the five most important inspiring factors (on a 1-7 scale, with 7 being “strongly agree”) were:

- 1) finding contentment through relaxing 6.14;
- 2) experiencing adventure 5.93;
- 3) visiting new places 5.92;
- 4) escaping from the ordinary or routine environment at home 5.72;
- 5) trying something different in a different environment 5.69.

In fact, the DRA regularly promotes dude ranch vacations as a “one-of-a-kind escape.” Gene Kilgore, a leading Dude Ranch authority, and owner/operator of several marketing websites for this segment, calls Dude Ranches “the best family vacation value in America.”

Why? “Because it's all inclusive, offers something for children of all ages, and is ideal for disconnecting from the world, but reconnecting with yourself and your family,” Kilgore says.

Ranch vacations are also great for families looking to disconnect, and reconnect, owners say. “What a lot of people find on a dude ranch are those opportunities for high quality family time together,” said Walsh. “They're playing board games in the afternoon, doing jigsaw puzzles. You see families gravitating to places where they enjoy each other's company.”

Not unlike marketing tools for many other vacation types, the best sales tool you will have for a Dude Ranch sale is word-of-mouth referrals from previous guests. According to the University of Florida study, Family/Friends was the highest-rated influencer (5.39), followed by social media (5.27) and then Dude Ranch affiliated websites (5.24).

Dude ranch-affiliated websites include

- <https://duderanch.org/>
- <https://ranchweb.com/>
- <https://bestdunderanches.com>
- <https://ranchvacations.com>

Clients also may seek out independent reviews from websites that have Dude Ranch specific forums, like TripAdvisor.com. There you can learn more about what travelers are looking for by following their lines of inquiry, and what features in a Dude Ranch vacation they are seeking.



Photo courtesy Mountain Sky Guest Ranch

Some consumer magazines, websites and newspapers also have reviewed Dude Ranches:

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/worlds-best/resort-hotels-in-west>

<https://www.cntraveler.com/story/why-luxury-dude-ranches-are-the-new-glamping>

<https://www.10best.com/interests/hotels-resorts/10-duke-ranches-you-need-to-visit-during-winter/>

<https://www.bostonherald.com/2019/01/06/travel-4/>

Finally, consider what are you doing at your website, on your social media platform, and through your client newsletter, to attract qualified sales leads. Clients become aware of you and your knowledge during the awareness phase, and might be inspired by Dude Ranch images and your expertise. As they engage with you and you assist them in discovering the possibilities of a Dude Ranch Vacation, you can ease them through the purchase process.

It might be helpful to consider the following:

Sales Funnel State



Words & phrases to attract clients at this stage

Reconnecting with family, “one-of-a-kind escape,” riding, outdoor adventures, hiking, all-inclusive.

Looking for diversity of experiences, safety, skill building, ease of budgeting, high quality food and beverage, a wide variety of activities.

Luxury or mid-range accommodations? Proximity to departure point. Time of year traveling, age of children, meal plan types, spa requirements, adult beverage preferences.

What's included in the price? Seasonal promotions.

QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

What are the best initial questions to qualify a traveler for intent to purchase? The FTA spoke with a number of experts, and this is what they told us:

- What are the ages of your children?
- Do you have pets at home?
- Do your children love animals?
- What kinds of outdoor activities do you participate in regularly (e.g. walks, hikes, kayaking)?
- How important is it that your family disconnect from technology?
- Are you looking to step outside of your typical family vacation?
- Has your family ever been to a National Park? If so, what was that like?
- Tell me about some outdoor vacations you've taken in past. (Look for parallels that your clients and their families appreciate and are curious about nature, like whale watching off the New England coast.)



QUALIFYING THE RIGHT RANCH

Once you start attracting the right customer, how can you initiate the discussion about exploring a Dude Ranch Vacation, and then nurture the dialogue along to successfully close the sale? This section of the Guide provides you with tips about what a solid conversation looks like.

The problem for many advisors is that ranches vary widely in their offerings, appeal to different age groups and families.

"All ranches are different," Walsh says. "One may cater to a more middle-class family, while another appeals to 5-star luxury clients who seek out celebrity chefs. Only certain ones have cattle or sheep operations, if someone is looking for that 'City Slicker' experience. And some resorts are better for different ages of children."

While all DRA ranches have certified safety programs and training, the size of a ranch, where it is located and what kind of terrain is available could impact their clients' riding experience. Depending on the experience level of riders in the family, an advisor will seek to match that experience with the ranch.

Other factors impacting which Dude Ranch your clients will choose, according to the 2016 University of Central Florida study, are (on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being "strongly agree"):

- 1) good value for money and quality of food & beverage, 6.1;
- 2) images and thoughts of the landscape, including mountains and meadows, 5.8 and 5.7;
- 3) the western "feel" of the ranch 5.7; and
- 4) the variety of the terrain and riding activities at the ranch 5.6 and 5.6.



Photo courtesy 3 Bars Ranch



Modern Dude Ranches offer so many different activities and features, there is bound to be a perfect vacation for all of your clients.

An important consideration is the room type a family might want or require. Some ranches offer individual cabins or casita types of accommodations while others are in main lodge buildings. Some ranches have a mix. Be sure to have an understanding of the number of guests, ages and any specific needs they may have for their rooms.

Additionally, the time of year that a family is looking to travel will limit their options. Some northern ranches remain open in the winter months, offering a variety of activities, including snowmobiling, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, tubing and sledding, and make for festive Christmas/holiday celebrations. Meanwhile those in destinations like Arizona and New Mexico, likely are open year-around.

Finally, while the Dude Ranch industry rate structure generally is simpler than the cruise lines, they still can vary widely from ranch to ranch. The room type and time of year are the two biggest factors. "If your client is coming spring break, or during the holidays, they're going to pay the highest rates of the year," says Walsh. Meanwhile, the number of adults and children, will dictate the size of room, which impacts rate as well.

Photo courtesy Marble Mountain Ranch





Photo courtesy Tanque Verde Ranch



Photo courtesy Gros Ventre River Ranch

Photo courtesy Paradise Guest Ranch



RIDING

Minimum riding age requirements vary. Understanding the difference in riding programs and what a family is looking for will empower you to pick the right ranch for your client.



Photo courtesy 3 Bars Ranch

Important questions:

- How long are you and your family looking to ride?
- Are there times of day you prefer to ride?
- Are you looking for slow rides, and what kind of terrain are you seeking (e.g. open meadow riding, mountain trail riding)?
- Would you and your children want the opportunity to ride and care for a single horse during your stay (e.g. brushing/saddling)?
- What are the ages of your guests, and will they need riding lessons?
- What is the experience level of you and your children (e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced)?
- Are you seeking non-riding days?

DINING

Whether your clients are looking for 5-Star Celebrity chefs, or traditional ranch food, you'll be able to satisfy everyone's palate.

Important questions:

- What do you like to eat at home?
- Do you favor home recipes, comfort food?
- Do you have special diet needs?
- Are you looking for plated service, or buffet?



OTHER ACTIVITIES

Ranch activities can vary widely as well, from fishing to white water rafting, to mountain biking and shooting. What else does your client enjoy doing?

Important questions:

- Outside of riding horses, what other activities do your children participate in on vacation?
- (e.g. hiking, fly-fishing, canoeing, tennis, volleyball, western dancing, hay rides, rec room, photography, culinary lessons, etc.)
- How about the adults participating in this vacation?
- Do they like more structured or unstructured programs?

BUDGET, CHILDCARE & OTHER CONCERNS



Most ranches are all inclusive, though some may have special rates for non-riders, families, children, or seniors.

- Be attuned to minimum-stay requirements, tipping/gratuity policies and what else may be included.
- Is the client looking for a children's program/child-care program, what are the ranch's minimum age for children, and what care and activities would the client require?
- Do you have wheelchair and/or other accessibility requirements?
- What is the on property liquor availability/policy?
- Are general goods available or for sale at the ranch?
- Are laundry facilities provided?
- Is it important that your family have cell phone, WiFi and/or Internet access?

Photo courtesy Mountain Sky Guest Ranch

The Family Travel Association is:

a coalition of leading family travel suppliers, destinations, media, professional travel advisors and experts coming together to create a single, collective voice on behalf of the travel industry and those companies serving traveling families.

We strive to help change the way families travel — charting a path for future generations of travelers.

OUR MISSION

To inspire families to travel – and to travel more – while advocating for travel as an essential part of every child’s education.

Visit us at: www.familytravel.org