

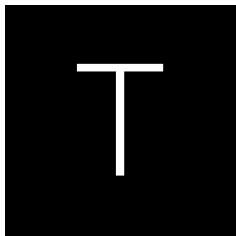
Go west!

Spending days in the saddle, learning the rhythms of ranch life, riding through the Arizona landscape under endless skies... Tonia George learns a little of what it takes to be a cowboy and of the west's spirit, beauty and hearty food

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JENNY ZARINS**







he Sonoran desert in Arizona, in all its dusky shades, dotted with tufts of vegetation and majestic cacti, might fit the celluloid image of the Wild West, but it seems an odd place to raise cattle. Of course, it wasn't always so. Back in

the 1870s, the heyday of the big cattle drives, the land was apparently verdant and full of streams.

As a horse-mad child, I longed to live with cowboys – riding all day in the fresh air, lassoing cattle while wearing a Stetson; now I had my chance. But the change since the late 19th century has been dramatic: these days, you have to look pretty hard to find the cows, let alone a real cowboy. Decades of overgrazing, and the advent of railways, which rendered long cattle drives unnecessary, changed the nature of the industry and many ranches shifted their skills from livestock to tourism. In the 1920s, rodeos and dude ranches – which were set up for visitors – became the money-spinners. One such dude ranch is the White Stallion Ranch in Tucson. Guests come to ride and take in the scenery: lavender mountains contrast with a cobalt blue sky, which fades to amber, providing a magical backdrop to the drumming of hooves and clouds of dust.

Happily, the tradition of cookouts is upheld here. Back in the day, a chuckwagon – ‘chuck’ being slang for food – served as the kitchen on long drives. The cooks enforced strict rules: cowboys had to ride downwind of the kitchen and every cowboy had to bring his plate to the basin for washing. Our breakfast was a little more refined: tables and chairs greeted us, as well as buttermilk pancakes, hash browns, sausages and eggs, all with a slug of maple syrup and a tin mug of coffee.

To get to grips with cowboy life, though, we had to experience a working ranch. The Arizona Cowboy College in Scottsdale is run by Rocco Wachman, a formidable, deeply tanned cowboy. When asked how his ranch differs from a dude ranch, he replied bluntly. “We charge guests but get them to work for us.”

The experience of life as a real cowboy offered here is far from luxurious – spending long days working in

the desert with no running water and just a roll-out mattress to lie on – but it's highly therapeutic.

Rocco turned out to be a memorable teacher with a whole host of metaphors tucked under his Stetson.

“Horses would make real bad poker players,” he told us. “They telegraph everything and you learn to read their signs.” Our roping lesson also began with another analogy, this time from *The Phantom of the Opera*: he likened the handling of the rope to the dramatic fling of an imaginary cape around the shoulders. It works a treat and I slung the lasso over the cow's horns on my third attempt. Only it wasn't quite as glamorous as I had envisaged: my target was a hollow plastic cow with no legs and I was standing three feet behind it.

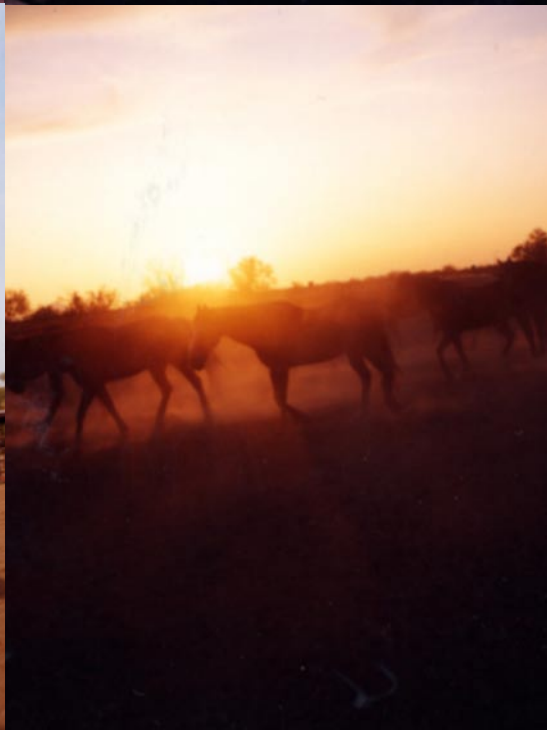
That night Lori, Rocco's business partner, showed us the traditional Dutch ovens that were used on the old chuckwagon drives. These are cast iron pots placed over hot coals and covered with more coals to give an even heat; a ‘gouch’ hook is used to lift off the heavy lids. They are great for braising beans, salted meats and other preserved foods that were taken on the drives.

According to Lori, men work better when they've had the right steak, so each wrangler gets his favourite cut barbecued over mesquite wood. As we gathered round the table, a couple of the men turned their backs to look out at the landscape. “Typical cowboys,” said Rocco. Supper here is not a social occasion, more a chance to refuel and predict tomorrow's weather.

More sociably, Rocco invited us to join him for some post-prandial entertainment. I was imagining a banjo and a camp fire. But instead we huddled around a huge plasma screen so that Rocco could show off his starring role in reality TV show, *Cowboy U*. Clearly, my ideas of ranch-style relaxation were sadly outdated.

Heading back onto the highway in our convertible, I thought how sad it is that all the cowboys have been sidelined into hospitality and reality TV. And as I stared into the wide horizon, feeling oh so Thelma and Louise, I was reminded of another of Rocco's sayings: “All the world's problems could be solved at the end of a dirt track.” I think he might be right.

To contact the Arizona Office of Tourism, call 020 8237 7977 or visit arizonaguide.com. See page 111 for travel details.



At White Stallion Ranch, opening page, the cowboys are adept at penning cattle, top left, and rodeos offer a chance to see them demonstrate their expert roping skills, above left, too. The breakfast cookout, top middle, is a serious business, providing pancakes, eggs and hash browns, far left, in preparation for the day ahead. Visitors can enjoy gentle rides across the flatlands, top right, but there's work to do at Arizona Cowboy College, where Rocco Wachman, left, runs the ranch with a firm hand





Beef stew, *above left*, benefits from slow cooking in an old-fashioned Dutch oven at Cowboy College. Tonia learns the art of roping with Rocco, *above middle*; and enjoys riding western-style, *far right*, seated in a large, comfortable saddle, with the reins held in one hand. The dogs enjoy scraps from dinner, *right*, while the horses relax, *below middle*, at the end of another long day. A Stetson is essential attire when learning how to be a cowboy, *below*

