



THIS MONTH: BEACHES

TODAY: Sand castles in South Padre
◀ **Coming in August:** Dream vacations, from private winery tours to the world's most luxurious ship

BEACHES



Helen Anders/Special Contributor

Andy Hancock constantly touches up his castle.

Art goes with flow on Sand Castle Trail

By nature, South Padre sculpts a shifting display

By HELEN ANDERS
Special Contributor

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND — There's been a building boom here lately, and it has nothing to do with brick and mortar. It's all about sand castles. They've popped up all over the island, many of them lighted at night, often surrounded by tourists grabbing a photo op.

The newest South Padre attraction is the Sand Castle Trail, a collection of castles and other sand sculptures throughout the island, sculpted by professional sand artists — some local, some from as far away as Singapore. There are about 30 sculptures, give or take, at any particular moment. After all, they're made of sand.

"It's public art," sand artist Andy Hancock says with a shrug when he notices that a sand-sculpted sea turtle's nose has collapsed on his 22-foot-wide castle-plus-creatures sculpture in front of the South Padre Island Visitor Center. "If you can't fix it, don't make it."

It's a generous perspective, given that Hancock estimates it took him about 500 hours to build this particular sculpture on the Sand Castle Trail in late 2013, plus countless hours put into repairs since.

But sand sculptors are odd creatures: They revel in the ephemeral nature of what they do.

"I've seen less vandalism than I'd thought," says Lucinda Wierenga, better known on the island as Sandy Feet. "It can get discouraging, but I just have to look at the ones that have survived. I really believe in this project."

Wierenga is the prime mover behind the effort to get the city of South Padre Island behind the project. The city

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Photos by Remy Scalza/Special Contributor

A wrangler stops at a scenic overlook at Sundance Guest Ranch. Never been on a horse? A ranch hand will teach you the basics.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Wild West, Canadian style

At dude ranches, city slickers ride into beautiful sunsets, kayak over clear lakes and get Thai massages

By REMY SCALZA
Special Contributor

There's a saying in horse riding: "Fear travels down the reins." If that's the case, I'm in a world of trouble. I've come to Western Canada's Cariboo region, dude ranch capital of the country, from my home in nearby Vancouver.

A few hours' drive north of the city, gleaming condo towers and fusion restaurants give way to sagebrush and canyons. This is cattle country, where city slickers like me come to earn their spurs.

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Crystal Waters Ranch keeps a collection of loaner boots on hand.



Mount Bowman rises behind Echo Valley Ranch, which has a Thai influence. Treat yourself to Thai massages, hydrotherapy, aroma therapy and other therapies.

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Give free rein to your inner cowboy



Sundance Guest Ranch in Ashcroft is family-oriented, with more than 100 horses for all levels of riders.

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Roughly the size of Maine and cut through with rivers, mountains and dry plateaus, the Cariboo region is home to more than a dozen guest ranches.

Options range from working farms to luxury retreats where more time is spent in the spa than in the saddle.

Horses, of course, are the common denominator. My prior experience adds up to a handful of pony rides as a kid at backyard birthday parties. That's about to change.

Mounting up

My first stop is Sundance Guest Ranch, a 1,200-acre spread with a 100-strong herd of horses in the semi-desert hills above the broad Thompson River.

Sundance started out as a cattle ranch in 1864, around the time gold fever hit the Cariboo and thousands of miners streamed in hoping to strike pay dirt. Today, the ranch boasts an original 1890s homestead, plus updated motel-style quarters for guests.

"The No. 1 thing is to stay calm and confident," says Bryan Golat, a 30-year-old wrangler wearing an enormous silver belt buckle and denim shirt.

He's just helped me onto the back of a sleepy-eyed horse nicknamed "The Husband Carrier." While more experienced groups trot on out, we stick behind for a little Horsemanship 101 — how to steer, speed up and, most important, stop.

Then, suddenly, we're off. Fortunately, Husband Carrier proves true to his name. His big hooves pad out a steady clip-clop as we slowly ascend a dusty ridge, trailed by the ranch's resident coon hound.

On top, near a lone Ponderosa pine, the valley opens. The river below shimmers in the setting sun, snaking through a treeless moonscape of canyons and furrowed hills.

Back at the ranch, dinner fare is hardly the chuck wagon variety. I load up on grilled sirloin with merlot reduction and Yukon Gold potatoes, then stake out a seat at the end of a long wooden table alongside a dozen or so fellow dudes. War stories are traded — tales of bucking broncos, runaway horses and worse. After my first real ride, I'm just glad to be in one piece.

Back in the saddle

My next stop is a two-hour drive north, roughly following the route of the old Cariboo Gold Rush Trail. Semi-desert cedes to pine forests, and the air feels a few degrees cooler. Alongside a mile-long, crystal clear mountain lake, I find aptly named Crystal Waters Ranch, a working ranch with a few hundred head of cattle and nearly 100 horses.

Despite the size of the spread, the ranch is an intimate affair, just a few log cabins clustered around the lake shore. Guests come for

isolation, superb trout fishing and, of course, exceptional riding.

"We're surrounded by thousands and thousands of acres of crown land," meaning government-owned, says wrangler and owner Nicole Guetler, who first came to the Cariboo from Germany after college and got hooked. "You can ride out there forever."

She helps me onto a mellow horse named Custer, who's not exactly on his last stand but close enough for my tastes. We take off at a gentle clip into mixed aspen and poplar forest.

Recent rains have swollen forest streams, and when we cross, the horses plunge in nearly to their bellies.

"Don't worry, these are bush horses," Guetler explains. "They'll find their way."

Back at the ranch, farm life is in full swing. We arrive just minutes after two mares have given birth.

The foals shiver in the sun, trying desperately to get to their feet. Finally, one manages to stand for a split second before doing a face plant back in the mud. The mother looks on, lapping him with her big tongue for encouragement.

What really sets the ranch apart is Crystal Waters Lake. I trade the saddle for a kayak and push out. The water is as smooth as glass and just as clear. With the sun dipping low, I paddle out to the middle. Mergansers dive as I approach, and a pair of loons call into the night.

One last ride

On my final day in the Cariboo, I drive west toward a one-of-a-kind ranch on the edge of the snowcapped Marble Mountains.

Upon arrival, I'm ushered up an elegant stairway lined with lotus flowers and smiling Buddhas, through an elaborately carved teak door and onto a bed laid with handmade silk. It's time for my massage.

Echo Valley Ranch may well be the world's only Thai-themed dude ranch. Clustered around a towering wooden pagoda straight out of Southeast Asia are tidy little log cabins, a corral with 35 horses and a broad-timbered lodge. There's also a spa offering Thai massages, not to mention hydrotherapy, aromatherapy and sundry other therapies.

After my treatment, which does wonders after a few days in the saddle, I make my way to the lodge for lunch. Plates



Groups explore the foothills of snowcapped Mount Bowman at Echo Valley Ranch in Clinton. "Pairing horses and riders is definitely an art," says wrangler Sannukka Pekkala. "The right horse changes everything."



No biting bullets for sore muscles at Echo Valley, which offers something unique for a dude ranch: a Thai massage.



Crystal Waters Ranch in Bridge Lake offers guests roomy log cabins clustered around a mountain lake.



Wetlands surround the pastures of Crystal Waters, a working ranch with several hundred head of cattle and about 100 horses. Guests come for the isolation and trout fishing in addition to horseback riding.

of seared albacore tuna done rare are brought out by smiling Thai servers. Next comes soya-ginger marinated halibut and barbecue free-range chicken. I have to resolve not to stuff myself. After all, there's still one ride left.

"Pairing horses and riders is definitely an art," says Sannukka Pekkala, a 24-year-old wrangler with long blond hair who's busy in the corral. "The right horse changes everything." She thinks for a second, then chooses for me a chestnut quarter horse in the corner named Joker.

He's the one I've been waiting for. A veritable Rolls-Royce compared to my first two horses, Joker has a smooth gait and plenty of pep in his step. Halfway into our

ride, when Pekkala asks if we want to run, I'm ready.

For the briefest of moments, the horses break into a full-on gallop. The stride is effortless, a horizontal glide through the landscape. And all at once I get it — that horsey high that seasoned riders know and love, a feeling of moving in harmony with the animal beneath you.

When we finally ride back into Echo Valley, sprinklers are sending arching rainbows of water over the pastures. I hop down, give Joker a pat on the neck and knock the mud off my cowboy boots — a city slicker no more.

Remy Scalza is a freelance writer in Vancouver, British Columbia.

When you go

Sundance Guest Ranch. 6 Kirkland Ranch Road, Ashcroft, B.C. Daily rate covers accommodation, meals and two horse rides (morning and afternoon). Adult \$265; youth (14-18) \$195; child (8-13) \$160; child (5-7) \$35. sundanceguestranch.com

Crystal Waters Guest Ranch. North Bonaparte Road, Bridge Lake, B.C. The all-inclusive rate includes meals, log cabin lodging (with shared bathroom and shower) and horse rides. Adults \$199; children (10 and under) \$135. crystalwatersranch.com

Echo Valley Ranch. 10635 Jesmond Road, Jesmond, B.C. The daily rate, which includes accommodation and meals, ranges from \$210 to \$410 per person, depending on time of year. Horseback riding and spa services are extra. evranch.com

International travelers arrive at Vancouver International Airport and can either catch a connecting flight to Kamloops Airport (about 1 hour) or take a scenic drive to the Cariboo region (four or five hours).

June to August is high season for dude ranches in the Cariboo. Better rates and milder temperatures can be had in the April-May and September-October shoulder seasons. Many ranches close for winter.

What to bring: Most ranches supply cowboy boots and riding helmets. Sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat are essential. Visit the British Columbia tourism website for an overview of guest ranches in the Cariboo: hellobc.com/cariboo-chilcotin-coast/things-to-do/outdoor-activities/guest-ranches-horseback-riding.aspx