

# Pack the Bags

Feels Like Home

The Flying L Ranch

Words by Stacy Bannerman



Tucked up against I-5 on the outskirts of Ashland, The Flying L Ranch is a haven for horses and humans alike, which is exactly what owner Leslie Hunter envisioned when she purchased the 11-acre spread seven years ago. A former outfitter and guide with the Oregon State Marine Board, and longtime resident of Southern Oregon, Leslie has three decades of hands-on experience working with horses. That knowledge, along with a passion for sharing the health benefits and sheer joy of riding, has helped Hunter provide thousands of people—from novice to expert riders—with safe and exhilarating trail rides, horseback riding retreats and equestrian adventures.

Hunter owns more than 40 horses, rotating them between several pastures in the Rogue Valley. Safety for the animal and the rider is her number one concern, with fun being “a very close second.” She credits her no-injury record to the fact that she weighs the experience and temperament of both the rider and the horse to make the perfect match.

Destination holidays on horseback include the Cabin-to-Cabin Mountain ride, a five-day expedition along the Pacific Crest Trail, and an overnight trip to the Coast to canter along the Pacific shore and saddle up for several hours of riding in the quiet green beauty of the Redwoods. The rare combination of beach and forest draws riders from across the country.

Katherine, a recent client, spent nearly 14 hours traveling from Birmingham, Alabama, for the ride of her life, which, according to her, was “spectacular! I can't imagine finding a better riding experience anywhere in the world. I'm already thinking of how I can get back there!”

For Laura, a professor from Texas, being on horseback as the tide rolled in and the sun began to drop, turning the sky rosy gold, was her chance to tick an off item on her Bucket List.

Laura says, “Leslie treated me like a princess, and made sure I got to do everything I wanted. We went on a variety of rides—different horses, different terrains and different speeds. We had great food, a wonderful place to stay and sincere hopes to return next year.”

Attending to the Bucket List was also on the agenda for another woman who, after struggling with morbid obesity for many, many years, had shed well over 100 pounds.

What she wanted to do, at least once in her life, was get on a horse. With Hunter's firm hands and gentle guidance, she did, in a two-hour private riding lesson.

Ranch-based retreats and custom-tailored weekend getaways are also available, and Hunter serves as the perfect hostess, arranging rafting trips, winery tours or tickets to artistic and cultural events in Ashland and the surrounding area.

The Flying L has comfortable on-site accommodations for travelers of the two- and four-legged variety, including a rustic four-bedroom turn-of-the-century farmhouse and a charming guest cottage. The farmhouse and cottage are uniquely decorated, with cozy queen size beds in most of the rooms. Full- or partial-care horse boarding is available year-round, and equine guests are put up in one of 12 partially covered stalls, with several pastures and pens open for horseplay.

During the summer, The Flying L hosts Camp Howdy for Kids, a series of weekly day camps that teach kids ages six to 16 how to ride and care for horses. Based on Certified Horsemanship Association instruction, each session includes mounted lessons, basic skills for equine care, lectures on horsemanship theory and safety, and horse-related crafts and activities. Campers get to experience daily life on a working ranch, and find out what it really means to own a horse.

Having owned horses for most of her life, Hunter is well aware of their profoundly healing affect. Studies show that the use of horses in therapy creates a powerful physical metaphor for dealing with intimidating and challenging situations, increases problem-solving and communication skills, and helps reduce depression, stress and anxiety. Clients receiving equine-assisted family therapy experienced significant improvement even after conventional treatment methods failed (Mann and Williams, 2002). Hunter is currently laying the groundwork for Freedom Horses LLC, which will provide equine therapy for at-risk youth, people with disabilities and veterans.

Over the past few years, the ranch has become somewhat of a magnet for veterans and military family members who "just seem to show up here," says Hunter. "I guess it's something about the horses and the land."

There's no guesswork involved for the guest who's staying at the farmhouse with her daughter from Hawaii, the military spouse who comes each morning to feed her horse or the combat veteran who mucks stalls every night. They each came for different reasons, seeking different things, but whether they've been at The Flying L Ranch for a week, a month or more than a year, they are all there now "because it feels like home."

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