



Riders on the beach at sunset, Morgan's Rock Lodge, Nicaragua

GALLOP POLLE

ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON SADDLES UP FOR A BIT OF TRAILBLAZING IN ANTIGUA, NICARAGUA, NEW MEXICO AND MEXICO.

Photography: Mowgli Frere (unless otherwise stated)

The sun, the beach, the odd-shaped pool and the exotic fruit for breakfast: that's what dream holidays are made of. But, I've come to realise that beyond the classic attractions there's a whole new world to be discovered and the best way to get into the rhythm of the surrounding nature is by hopping into the saddle.

This is not the pony club: it's sexy, thrilling, exhilarating and unforgettable. Riding 'en tete a tete' with just a guide for company is the perfect way to explore idyllic landscapes without a hint of noise or interference: just the soundtrack of the wild.

I gave way to my inner-cowgirl fantasy, never mind the fact that I hadn't ridden in years and that my partner was reluctant, to say the least. It was time to strap on those stirrups and ride into the sunset.



The Carlisle Bay Hotel

ANTIGUA, BRITISH WEST INDIES EASY RIDER

It's true that Antiguan beaches are picture perfect. However, I don't know whether there are really 365 beaches, as the locals claim – one for each day of the year! One of them though, is definitely home to one of the swankiest resorts in the Caribbean.

The Carlisle Bay Hotel is a masterpiece of modern design. Far from having the usual 'rough around the edges' Caribbean décor, it blends Caribbean with urban and contemporary cool. The entire hotel's décor is about sophistication without airs and graces – from the entrance pavilion with its plantation-style shutters, oversized exotic floral arrangements and sleek dark furniture covered in pristine white fabrics. The mix of Chinese, Indonesian and European styles throughout the resort works very well, and the sheer volumes leave you in awe. The elegant rooms are swathed in subtle hues of grey and lavender. Rich Jim Thompson raw silk curtains, decadent exterior daybeds and enormous oval bathtubs, big enough for two, add to the charm. Subtle grainy black and white photography hangs on the walls, while delicate orchids add a splash of colour. In-room gadgets include a snazzy espresso machine, fibre optic bedside reading lights and a DVD player. Impeccable service, luscious food and a stylish aura make it one of a kind in the British West Indies.

The beachside hotel also has a stunning swimming pool, two restaurants, a slick spa, an ultra-hip library, a 45-seater blue leather screening room where you can catch a movie nightly and a poolside bar for sipping refreshing vodka, coconut rum and pineapple Indigo Coolers.

I thought there wasn't much to do in the Caribbean aside from water-sports. But I was wrong: a visit to the Springhill riding school is recommended.

It's been a while since I sat in a saddle and I'm a little anxious. When Karen, our South African guide, introduces us to our horses, Bilbo and Susie, we giggle nervously asking for an instruction manual.

We opt for helmets. Uncool, but you never know. The tack room isn't deluxe, but there's a fun family atmosphere and everyone is prepared to muck in.

Setting off through the lush hills, we are in admiration of the amusingly named flora: Dagger Tree cacti, Monkey No Climb shrubs and the thorny Cassie bush. The terrain is covered in exotic orange and purple blooms. We ride on by pastel chattel cottages and scrawny chickens, then come across a couple of gigantic bulls tethered to tiny trees.

Relaxing, it's easy to drop down a gear and slot into that slow Caribbean pace. Taking in the scenery, the smells and the sun, we are mesmerised by the stunning views across Falmouth Bay. The coastline still green, sprinkled with the odd white



chattel house and its red roof, and down below, the blindingly blue waters of the Caribbean dotted with tiny white specks I know to be swanky yachts.

The plan is to go for a swim at the end of the day. A first for us! The animals don't need much coaxing, they are keen to head in. I glance over at my other half. His mount is pawing at the shallow turquoise waters: the horse is definitely having a ball. I venture in, and soon Susie's hooves are off the ground. She's paddling away as I sit, waist high, in the warm water. It's like taking a bath with a large pet: a bizarre yet thrilling sensation quite unlike any other. I want to lie on her neck and whisper sweet nothings into her ears: after all we have bonded. After a few laps we ride back to the stables bareback. That however, is an acquired taste ...

FACT FILE Fly with Qantas and then American Airlines www.qantas.com.au and www.aa.com **CLIMATE** Pleasant year-round climate, average daily temperature drops a few degrees in winter (December to March) from the usual high of around 30°C. Fairly dry throughout most of the year except during the rainy season (mid-September to November) when daily showers can be expected. Hurricane season runs from June to September. **MONEY** East Caribbean dollar; 1 Australian Dollar = 2.14456 East Caribbean Dollar **VISA REQUIREMENTS** No visas for Commonwealth members **HEALTH** Hepatitis A, yellow fever and routine immunisations such as tetanus-diphtheria, measles-mumps-rubella, polio, and varicella immunisations highly recommended. **FOR MORE INFORMATION** Antigua and Barbuda Tourism www.antigua-barbuda.org; Riding Club www.springhillridingclub.com; Carlisle Bay Hotel www.carlisle-bay.com



Morgan's Rock Lodge pool area

NICARAGUA, MORGAN'S ROCK – RIDING IN THE 'LAND OF LAKES AND VOLCANOES'

Nicaragua is just emerging from decades of revolution and guerrilla warfare. Torn apart for the last 500 years, first by colonisers then by US backed military-style dictatorships opposed by guerrilla factions, the country has been left in ruins. Born in the early 90s, democracy has brought peace and reconstruction. Despite the striking poverty, the country is now looking to its one big asset – its totally raw and unspoiled nature – to take its place alongside successful neighbours like Costa Rica in the tourism game. Admittedly, there aren't many romantic places to stay... yet, but a brand new luxurious hacienda wedged between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean is leading the way in eco-tourism.

Morgan's Rock Lodge has it all, from the perfect pool-with-a-view to a pristine kilometre-long beach and a private tropical forest sheltering deer, birds and howler monkeys. To get to my eco-designer cabin, I ignore my fear of heights to walk the solid hanging bridge suspended 22 metres over the jungle. The cabins blend in perfectly with their environment. Huge king beds, eucalyptus pillars, gleaming almond floors and copper wiring all reinforce the tree-house feel. Decks have hanging day beds and director chairs where we enjoyed the 6am coffee delivery.

The 14-cottage lodge offers a taste of nature and nurture. It aims to merge sustainable development, education and guest pampering with a final goal of becoming entirely self-sufficient. The Finca (farm) produces most of the food on the spot, from organic shrimps to fruit, meats and dairy. Energy saving and reforestation are priorities too, with solar panels used for heating water and more than 1.5 million trees planted already.

To explore the trails that criss-cross the property's 1,800 hectares, our guide, Jesus, assigns us our horses. They are tiny and adorned in colourful tack. Pale leather saddles and stirrups are covered with tassels and fringes. Paloma, my petite white mare, is cooperative and copes with surprisingly steep hills considering her short little legs. It isn't the most comfortable ride but making progress through the dense jungle is magical. All around are unknown sounds and movements. We are privileged guests in this busy jungle that evidently wasn't made for us clumsy humans. Butterflies flicker past: orange, yellow, white and electric blue, some tiny, some bigger than both my hands put together. Lianas, shrubs, flowers and trees thrive, growing haphazardly everywhere.



Morgan's Rock Lodge room interior

Atop a hill, the coastline reveals itself in all its glory, stretching all the way to Costa Rica. My boyfriend is concentrating on Jesus' historical summary. If only we spoke better Spanish. But nature speaks for itself. Climbing down again, we pass the slightly eerie mangroves where the trees block out the sun with their skinny fingers, and we erupt out onto the beach.

It's the end of the day, the witching hour, where the sun sets into the Pacific and a supernatural light bathes the beach. The horses are game for one last gallop on the sand. Hooked, we make a date for another ride the following day.

FACT FILE Fly with Qantas and American Airlines www.qantas.com.au and www.aa.com **CLIMATE** Nicaragua is generally hot with an average temperature of 26°C year round. Humidity averages around 75 per cent and there are two seasons, rainy (May to mid-November) and dry. The hottest time of year is from February to May, when temperatures often reach towards 35°C. **MONEY** Cordoba; 1 Australia dollar = 12.7923 Nicaragua cordobas **VISA REQUIREMENTS** Australians and New Zealanders require visas or a 30-day tourist card. **HEALTH** Malaria and mosquito-borne diseases are prevalent throughout Nicaragua, primarily but not exclusively, during the wet season (May to November). Recommended vaccines include Hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG), typhoid, tetanus-diphtheria and measles. **MORE INFORMATION** Morgan's Rock www.morgansrock.com Nicaragua tourism www.intur.gob.ni



Guests' cabin, Blue Water Ranch



small town in national forest



Rider in forest

NEW MEXICO, COWBOY COUNTRY

To live the ultimate cowboy experience, head to the Bluewater Canyon Ranch in New Mexico. Located high up in the tip of the Rocky Mountains, the ranch is set in 320 acres of beautiful pine forest. It's the Little House In The Prairie meets Rawhide. The two cosy log cabins and the ranch house are the only things for miles around. I can't remember the last time I felt so happily isolated. It's just us and the twelve horses, two dogs and eight cats surrounded by unbridled nature...

The ranch house and cabins were built from scratch and there's no doubt the creators are Europeans. Inside the cabins there's a real Swiss mountain chalet feeling from the sleek bathrooms, the shiny pine furniture to the thick down duvets and of course, the crunchy muesli mix for breakfast.

Outdoors creative touches of recycling give the place additional charm: a bridge made out of an old train wagon base or the old tractor seats installed high up around the riding pen. It's one of those places where more than just effort has gone into comfort and design, there's a dose of humour to it too. It's simple, welcoming and comfortable. Like an old pair of cowboy boots.

To build your confidence on horseback, and pick up a few essential tips, ranch owners, Herbert & Magrit start you off with a few laps in the round pen. Riding in the Southern USA means Western style: wide saddles, horses trained to react to verbal instructions and of course, cowboy hats.

By the afternoon we're ready for a ride out into the National Forest that surrounds the ranch. We follow Sheridan, the young wrangler who was born for a life in the saddle. This is one of his quieter days, his hobby is 'exotic rodeo'. He'll climb onto anything from bulls to zebra and even ostriches 'just to be silly'!



Horses at Blue Water Ranch.

We ride in silence for a while, single file. When we stop at a viewing point I use my hand to block out the sun. It's overwhelming to see so much space. The view is unobstructed as far as Texas over sloping woodlands reminiscent of so many westerns.

We carry on up and down steep hills and through prairie fields in bloom. I follow Sheridan's stetson bobbing through the tall grass and the yellow fluff. I'm in a postcard. It's just too perfect. Moving through nature on this animal's back feels so right, even my better half is grinning: content in his newfound cowboy role. I can't believe some people actually live their lives like this. I'm horribly jealous and decide there and then that we've had enough of the big city. I was destined to be a cowgirl.

Back at the ranch, we get into the spirit of things and get a few roping lessons. Who knows when that might come in handy? Apparently mountain lions have been known to roam these hills...

In the evening, we exchange the day's stories over delicious, homemade paella at the ranch's family table, before retiring to our cabin's fireplace; sated, exhausted and happy.

FACT FILE Fly Qantas & American Airlines www.qantas.com.au and www.aa.com **CLIMATE** In summer months temperatures often exceed 35°C. The average monthly maximum temperatures during July, the warmest month, range from slightly above 30° C at lower elevations to the upper 20° C at high elevations. January is the coldest month, with temperatures ranging from 10°C to 2°C in the higher elevations of the north. **VISA REQUIREMENTS** Australians travelling for business or tourism for less than 90 days do not require a visa. **HEALTH** Immunisation against diphtheria, measles, poliomyelitis, and rubella is now universally required. www.health.state.nm.us/ **MORE INFORMATION** New Mexico Tourism www.newmexico.org/ Bluewater Canyon Ranch www.bluewatercanyon.com



Swimming pool, Careyes, Mexico



Rider on the beach, Careyes, Mexico.

MEXICO, RIDING WITH RAMON

A couple of hour's drive in the dazzling heat from Puerto Vallarta down the Pacific Coast, and we only had eyes for the huge, glittering pool. Tall swaying palm trees, oversized daybeds and a small private beach dotted with thatched parasols make the isolated resort of El Careyes a paradise found. In the water a couple float on a double mattress, absorbed in their magazines – Fortune for him, a glossy bridal for her: it's easy to see what's on their minds...

Set in a semi-circle, the resort looks out onto the sea: a miniature village in shocking colours. The library, activities centre, spa and shops full of glorious goodies nestle in the alcoves at garden level under the rooms. Different suites offer different views of the pool or the Pacific, some with their own kitchens, some with their own outdoor jacuzzis and some with their own pools. But all are styled in simple whitewashed walls with dashes of hot colours, typical of the area. The surrounding hills are green and covered in pink and yellow frangipani blooms. To the right a handful of villas above in the cliffside are privileged to share the view over the glittering Costa Careyes.

Ochre, terracotta and emerald dazzle against the azure sky. It's pure Mexican. The sculptured gardens are heavy with bougainvillea, hibiscus and giant cacti.

At the Ranchito, we are greeted by Ramon, grinning a golden smile, and the sleepy stable cat. Ramon offers us leather calf chaps, to prevent friction – and it helps us look the part too!

Our strapping horses, Negrito and Vaquero are impressive. But the arid heat seems to have taken the fight out of them. Are we interrupting their siesta? We give them a little physical encouragement and ride out through heavy undergrowth past the mangroves.

At the beach, we head uphill and Ramon points out two secluded mega-villas encased in the cliff edge. These glaring yellow and pink houses come with infinity pools all around their edges. Nice.

Although we are close to civilisation we feel a million miles away. It's so still. By the lake, a white heron meditates, oblivious to us. The air is dry and dusty and I am overwhelmed by the smell of leather, earth and horse. We ponder over the tropical vegetation, and see a deer, then racoon and snake tracks. I'm fascinated. A falcon shrieks overhead. There's something surreal about the experience.

On the way back, Ramon breaks the spell and heads off at a gallop. Before I know it we all are. For a moment I'm totally disoriented, bouncing around, but soon enough my ride settles into a comfortable canter. I call ahead to my partner, who looks the part with his new leather gaucho-style hat. He turns back and looks thrilled with the speed. The thunder of hooves is just too loud for a conversation. Reassured, I let a huge smile escape. I'm actually really enjoying this and looking forward to watching the electric pink sunset armed with a Corona. **H4C**

FACT FILE Fly with Qantas and American Airlines www.qantas.com.au and www.aa.com **CLIMATE** Mexico's climate is less variable and warmer than the US due to its topography and its position between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. **MONEY** Mexican Pesos; 1 Australian dollar = 8.82907 Mexican pesos **VISA REQUIREMENTS** Need a Mexican government tourist card (tarjeta de turista), available from embassies or at border crossings. **HEALTH** Recommended vaccines include Hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG), typhoid, tetanus-diphtheria and measles. **MORE INFORMATION** Mexico Tourism www.visitmexico.com El Careyes Resort www.elcareyesresort.com