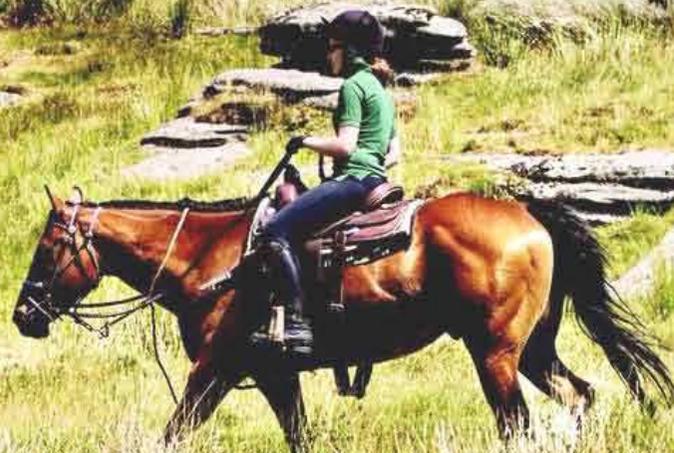


FEATURE

WILD WEST

Forget Patagonia and the African veld, Dartmoor is the perfect setting for a high-end horse trek in unspoiled nature

By Simon de Burton





For equine enthusiasts, there's nothing quite like the feeling of galloping a horse across wide open country, free from the constraints of walls, fences and roads. There's a widely held belief that one needs to travel far afield – to destinations such as Patagonia in Argentina or the African veld – to experience this sense of freedom. But luxury equestrian holiday organiser Liberty Trails is fast converting adventurous types from around the world to the joys of riding across the unspoiled wilds of Dartmoor in south-west England.

The Dartmoor National Park can be reached by train from London in just two and a half hours, yet it offers more than 350 square miles of largely unrestricted access to walkers and, more excitingly, riders.

Elaine Prior, who grew up in the area on her family's stud farm and has spent decades riding the moor, is now offering her wealth of experience to others through the high-end Liberty Trails vacation packages, organised in conjunction



with Devon's multi-award-winning Gidleigh Park, one of the most highly rated hotels in the world, which boasts a two Michelin-starred restaurant run by top chef Michael Caines.

Guests can bring their own steed or, at no extra charge, ride one of the firm's American Quarter Horses. Packages typically last three nights and two days, with rides lasting five hours and covering 25 miles – but since the service is entirely bespoke, any aspect can be tailored to your needs.



The day begins with riders being driven by Land Rover from Gidleigh Park to their mounts. After a morning in the saddle, lunch is served in a luxury dining tent out on the moor before more riding, followed by the return drive to the hotel for a well-earned rest and a gourmet dinner.

ABOVE: GIDLEIGH PARK IN DEVON IS A QUINTESSENTIAL ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL WITH A TWO MICHELIN-STARRED RESTAURANT AND ONE OF THE UK'S FINEST WINE LISTS



“It has to be emphasised that this is not something for novice riders,” says Prior, “but for confident horsemen and women who are looking for the opportunity to really escape out into the wild – in the company of experienced guides who have considerable experience and extensive local knowledge. We have welcomed clients from around the world, and even those who are lucky enough to live in the open spaces of Africa or America have been amazed by the beauty of Dartmoor, the incredible freedom provided by its vastness



and the variety of its landscape, which includes valleys, forests, grassland, rivers and of course, the towering rock formations known as tors.”

A typical package starts at £4,100 for two people and includes three nights’ accommodation at Gidleigh Park and two days’ riding. The season runs from April to October. For more information, see libertytrails.co.uk