



Yoga COWGIRLS

WITH JENNIFER DENISON

Let me introduce you to my friend, Jennifer Denison. Raised a Colorado country girl, Jennifer has owned horses all of her teenage and adult life. She now has Quarter Horses and a Paint, which she uses for trail riding and tending cattle. Horses are not only a hobby for Jennifer, but also her profession. A senior editor and the cowboy culture editor at *Western Horseman* magazine, Jennifer has made a living for more than 12 years photographing and writing about horses and the people who ride them. She co-authored two horse-related books, *Bringing Up Baby* and *Backcountry Basics*. Jennifer and her ranch-raised husband, Robert, live in an antique-filled farmhouse nestled on a small acreage in the mountains outside Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Horsemanship and yoga ride hand-in-hand at the Home Ranch.



THIS PAST SPRING, Montana ranch-raised horsewoman Tammy Pate invited me to a week-long women's yoga and horsemanship retreat that she and her friend, Janice Baxter, a yoga instructor from Florida, were having at a guest ranch outside Steamboat Springs, Colorado. This would be my second time attending the retreat.

I've owned and ridden horses my entire life, but until two years ago, I'd never done yoga and didn't see how it applied to horseback riding. With Tammy's prodding, however, I decided I had nothing to lose, except maybe the pounds I'd packed on over the winter.

That week changed the way I looked at fitness, riding, my body, and my mind. Janice and Tammy gave me the tools to develop an inner awareness and balanced state of being that continues to help me overcome insecurity in the saddle and ride in harmony with my horse. Moreover, they made me realize that

living on a farm or ranch is not just a lifestyle, but a deeply rooted value system that, like the ancient art of yoga, influences how you see the world and relate to other people, animals, and the land. By applying yoga principles to my rural Western horse life, I became a member of an elite group of women who call themselves "cowgirl yoginis."

COWGIRL YOGINIS come in many shapes and sizes, and from all walks of life. She might be an urban professional who does yoga during the week to relieve tension and develop strength and flexibility so she'll be limber for her weekend horseback adventures. Or she might be a retired woman whose kids are grown and she wants to improve her posture, circulation, and suppleness. Many own horses and ride regularly; others are new to riding or only get to ride occasionally on vacation. All possess a common love for horses and an inner zest for life that makes them cowgirls.

"Cowgirl is an attitude," Tammy says. "It's an inner quality that allows her to do something for no one else's reasons but her own."

TAMMY GREW UP riding horses and competing in rodeos in her native Montana. She attended college on a rodeo scholarship before marrying her cowboy husband, Curt Pate, who travels around the world conducting horsemanship and stock-handling clinics. The couple has two children: a daughter, Mesa, 19, and a son, Rial, 21, both skilled riders.

Tammy started practicing yoga eight years ago as a way to enhance her fitness while her son was at sports practice. As she immersed herself in the art, she realized that yoga, like growing a garden or raising livestock, is more than an exercise—it's a mindset and a traditional way of experiencing life.

"I remember thinking, 'This has been my whole life, and I didn't even know there was a term for it,'" she says.

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Cowgirl yoginis push themselves to the edge of their comfort zone.



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Janice, on the other hand, spent many years in Hawaii, where she was a social worker and taught yoga and transcendental meditation. Today, she lives in Sarasota, Florida, where she uses her "Harmony in Health" program to help people enhance their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

The two women, from vastly different backgrounds, met through a mutual friend at a horse sanctuary in Hawaii. They quickly discovered the connection between yoga and riding, and joined forces five years ago to offer a unique retreat at The Home Ranch in Clark, Colorado.

THE HOME RANCH is the only guest ranch in Colorado to earn the distinguished Relais & Chateaux designation for "outstanding properties with a truly unique character." It offers well-appointed lodging in one of eight rustic cabins, each equipped with a hot tub, or six lodge rooms. Executive chef Clyde Nelson prepares gourmet

meals using fresh herbs grown on the ranch and as many locally raised meats and vegetables as possible. A wine connoisseur, he handpicks an appropriate wine to accompany each meal. What makes The Home Ranch different from other guest ranches, though, is its horses and its commitment to teaching guests safe, effective horsemanship practices.

Most guest ranches buy very calm "dude" horses to carry riders on nose-to-tail rides, but The Home Ranch raises many of its stout, well-mannered horses and allows them to maintain independent minds. Guests are encouraged to get to know their horses and make them do things like crossing obstacles and transitioning to faster gaits. Safety is a priority, though, and friendly, expert handlers are there to guide guests and help them with the horses.

THE RANCH HOSTS four week-long Women's Yoga and Horsemanship Retreats each year in May, June, September, and October.

Each day typically begins between 7:30 and 8 a.m. with a hatha yoga session, in which Janice guides participants through poses picked for their equestrian benefits. Breakfast follows the workout, and then it's off to the barn to saddle up and ride. The horsemanship sessions are tailored to the interests of the riders, and vary from arena instruction to trail riding to cattle work.

Tammy applies principles from the yoga sessions into the horsemanship program. Some of her basic catch phrases are "slower is faster" and "honor the edge."

"Each time you work with your horse, you must approach him with an open heart and be in the moment," she says. "You have to let go of your agenda and just focus on being with your horse. If you're feeling rushed or nervous, your horse senses that, so use deep breathing to bring you to a state of focus and calmness."

IN YOGA, as in any form of physical fitness, Janice encourages participants to push their limits, to explore each pose to the edge of their comfort zones. Tammy does the same in horsemanship, instructing

riders to push themselves and their horses just beyond their limits, but not so far that they lose confidence.

Part of honoring the rider, the horse, and the riding experience is setting realistic goals. That's why Janice and Tammy ask the retreat participants each morning to set a personal affirmation for the day.

According to Janice, research shows that our thoughts and verbal messages affect us on a subconscious and cellular level. She advises practicing positive self-talk and acknowledging negative thoughts, packaging them up, releasing them, and replacing them with rational, believable, positive thoughts.

IT'S THROUGH THESE self-help and yoga principles that each person at the retreat leaves with a heightened sense of self-awareness and confidence; improved balance on the ground and in the saddle; and a respect for themselves, their horses, and the environment.

For more information on The Home Ranch and the Women's Yoga and Horsemanship Retreats, visit www.homeranch.com.



Yoga is

Invigoration in relaxation.
Freedom in routine.
Confidence through self control.
Energy within and energy without.
— Ymber Delecto

