

Carmel Valley Ranch back in the saddle with public trail rides

By **Jeanne Cooper**
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Otis the miniature goat, nicknamed Goatis, greets visitors at Carmel Valley Trail Rides.

Proud as Carmel Valley is of its ranching heritage, those who wanted to explore the rugged region by horseback have for years either needed to bring their own steeds or stay at a private estate with stables.

Fortunately, the ongoing renewal of Carmel Valley Ranch — these days a posh, 500-acre resort — has also meant returning to its roots. It now offers the only public trail rides in the valley, winding through California chaparral with unparalleled vistas. Guides point out soaring hawks and turkey vultures, symbiotic lichen covering live oaks, and even the occasional deer carcass, i.e. leftovers for an unseen mountain lion.

“I think that people really enjoy getting back to nature,” said [Molly Heneks](#), co-owner of the year-old Carmel Valley Trail Rides concession. “You’re visiting this fabulous five-star resort, and you go just over the hill and you forget there’s even a resort there.”

Why now? “The sagebrush is in full bloom, and the air is warm, so you smell the sweet sage,” Heneks said. “The cicadas are calling, the birds are circling, and you have all those sweet summer sounds and smells.”

Don’t forget acres of flowering lavender along the drive to the ranch’s hillside lodge, which runs a shuttle to the stables.

Backstory: “I was just born into horses,” says Heneks, 29, who worked with her late father at Carmel Valley Ranch’s former stables while a teenager. After returning home from Humboldt County in 2013, Heneks, her mother and sister approached Carmel Valley Ranch about reviving its defunct equestrian program.

Their idea neatly coincided with the “summer camp” vision of the ranch’s new ownership, led by Hyatt Hotels scion [John Pritzker](#) of San Francisco. The ranch built new stables and corrals above the main lodge almost as elegant as the new treetop, indoor-outdoor suites below it.

Now Carmel Valley Trail Rides boasts some 30 horses and offers frequent trail rides and lessons for riders ages 8 and up; younger cowpokes enjoy hand-led “pony rides” and finger-painting miniature horses and donkeys (the paint washes off.) Otis the goat, nicknamed “Goatis,” greets visitors and sometimes tags along on trail rides.

Checking in: At Carmel Valley Ranch, animal lovers can also tour the apiary or new butterfly garden, go on bird-watching hikes, and watch turkeys and deer stroll by their spacious suites. For less pricey digs, seaside Carmel provides the most choices, including [Vendange Carmel Inn](#) and Suites, featuring decor inspired by Carmel Valley wineries.

Spend your day: Reserve a morning or sunset trail ride to avoid the heat, and cool off midday in a pool or at the ocean.

Dining: For dinner, extend the happy-trails vibe at the revamped Will’s Fargo Steakhouse + Bar, where pastoral scenes of Carmel Valley hang on the walls and diners linger over the newly expanded menu. For breakfast or lunch, [Mid Valley Shopping Center](#) can rein in costs with options such as Jeffrey’s Grill and Catering and Carmel Valley Coffee Roasters.

Don’t miss: A side trot to Carmel Valley Village. If more than a dozen wine-tasting rooms, including boot-decorated Cowgirl Winery, don’t appeal, dip into the specialty olive oils and vinegars at Quail & Olive.

Don’t bother: Dining at the ranch if you’re on a tight budget. Its lodge, River Ranch Cafe and Clubhouse restaurants all have tempting, locally sourced fare for all ages, but at whoa-there resort prices.

Word to the wise: The drought means horses can kick up a lot of dust; skip the white jeans, but do wear long pants and closed-toe shoes.

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If you go

GETTING THERE

Carmel Valley Trail Rides is inside Carmel Valley Ranch, 7 miles east of Carmel-by-the-Sea and about two hours south of San Francisco.

WHERE TO STAY

Carmel Valley Ranch: 1 Old Ranch Road; Carmel; (855) 687-7262; www.carmelvalleyranch.com. Splurge-worthy, rustic-chic studios and family-size suites. Rates start at \$500 per night, plus \$30 resort fee.

Vendange Carmel Inn and Suites: 24815 Carpenter St., Carmel; (831) 659-2261; www.vendangecarmel.com. Wine-centric renovated motel with easy access to the valley. Rates start at \$185 per night.

WHERE TO EAT

Will's Fargo Steakhouse + Bar: 16 W. Carmel Valley Road, Carmel Valley; (831) 659-2774; www.wfrestaurant.com. The remodeled local favorite offers dinner, Sunday brunch and, 4:30 to 6 p.m. daily, half-price drinks and appetizers. Entrees: \$8-\$34.

Jeffrey's Grill & Catering: 112 Mid Valley Center, Carmel; (831) 624-2029; www.jeffreysgrillandcatering.com. Shopping center cafe with sunny patio serves homey American breakfast and lunch. Entrees: \$9-\$13.

WHAT TO DO

Carmel Valley Trail Rides: Check in Carmel Valley Ranch (see above); (831) 626-2549; www.carmelvalleyranch.com/play-for-all-ages/equestrian-programs. By reservation only: One-hour Chaparral Loop and sunset rides for ages 8 and older, \$170.50; 45-minute pony rides for ages 2 to 7, \$71.50. (prices include 10 percent service charge.) 1:30 p.m. Saturdays: One-hour Kiddie Corral for ages 2 to 7, \$40. Private rides and lessons also available.