

# Saddle

Whether your goal is to enjoy a peaceful ride on a wooded path or participate in an equestrian competition, nothing rivals the feeling of partnership you get when you're astride a horse.



By Jennifer O. Bryant

Few people realize the importance of horses in the life and culture of the Garden State.

The horse is the state animal of New Jersey, which boasts more horses per square mile than any other state in the country. The U.S. Equestrian Team, which fields teams from across the nation that participate in the Olympic Games as well as other international horse competitions, is headquartered in Gladstone. And, if your perspective on horseback riding is confined to the English saddle disciplines of jumping, dressage and eventing, you may be surprised to hear that western riding and rodeos are alive and well in New Jersey. Indeed, Cowtown in Woodstown has hosted professional rodeo competitions for 70 years.

It's no wonder folks, eager to ride a horse and learn horsemanship for the first time or refresh their riding skills, are delighted to find there are many stables in New Jersey. While some places specialize in breeding or training for equestrian competitions, others focus on introducing beginners to riding and horsemanship. Still others offer trail rides and access to wooded acres.

If you'd like to ride a horse in New Jersey, you don't need to take a trip out west for a dude-ranch vacation, nor do you need to buy and board a horse of your own, either. But once you find a stable that offers riding programs and lessons, you'll want to assess its facilities, training program and instructors.

Here are some pointers to consider in your assessment. We have also included details about several New Jersey stables that offer trail rides and lessons for beginning horseback riders.

## Stable visit

Visit any stable you're considering. You'll want to watch a lesson when riders of your approximate age and skill level are practicing. Wear sturdy, enclosed shoes and comfortable clothing you won't mind getting a little dirty or dusty.

When you arrive, make sure the stable is tidy, well-kept, in good repair and appears safe. Be alert to such hazards as fallen fences, overgrown fields or pastures, and heaps of dilapidated stable equipment, especially in pastures and riding rings.

Next, check out the barn and the horses. The interior shouldn't be so cluttered you can barely navigate an aisle. You don't want one that's covered with filth, or reeking of ammonia—a sure sign stalls haven't seen a pitchfork for some time. Other red flags are stalls filled with skin-and-bones horses, so much manure you can't see straw or wood-shavings bedding, and people smoking in the barn. Hay-filled wooden barns are firetraps and no reputable facility permits smoking anywhere in or near the barn and property.

If you have the opportunity, watch the horses as they are groomed and

## Lord Stirling Stable



Lord Stirling Stable in Basking Ridge has introductory rides one Sunday per month from May through October. Owned by Somerset County, it offers an unmounted introduction to horses and riding, followed by an hour-long trail ride, weather permitting, at a cost of \$25 for county residents and \$35 for non-residents.

Wear sturdy long pants or jeans and hard-soled shoes with low heels (no sneakers, wedgies or platform shoes). You'll need to wear an approved equestrian safety helmet, which you can rent for \$1.25 if you don't bring your own. You must be 12 years

or older to ride on Lord Stirling's trails.

If you enjoy your introductory ride, Lord Stirling offers 10-lesson packages. You'll ride stable-owned school horses in a group of up to eight people. Ten lessons cost \$145 for adults (resident) or \$240 (non-resident). Lessons for children cost \$135 (resident) or \$230 (non-resident). For \$11 you can rent a helmet for the 10 lessons.

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