

HOW TO SELECT A BARN TO LEARN TO RIDE?

So how does someone go about finding a good horseback riding stable? The good news is you don't have to be an expert on horses in order to find a good riding stable. Investing a bit of time along with a healthy dose of common sense is going to go a long way.

Whether you're a newbie to the sport or a life-long rider, here are some tips on how to locate a stable and advice for what you should expect from a good horseback riding stable.

There are many to choose from, but you want to find the one that offers safety conscious instruction, takes good care of the horses and still makes it fun and stimulating for you the rider. As well, you need to pay attention to the vibes or atmosphere you're feeling ... you know, that 6th sense that makes you feel comfortable or wary? Listen to it.

And here begins the fun.

If you're a new rider, before you start your search you may want to think about which style of riding you want to learn. English and Western use different saddles however at the novice level, if taught properly, the basics of both styles are the same.

Beyond the basic level each discipline is quite specific. If you're not sure which style you want to learn, why not watch a lesson in each style?

Both English and Western are equally challenging; most adult riders prefer the subtle nuances of Western Riding. In addition there is no jumping in the Western style which appeals to most mature riders.

Whichever you choose, both horseback riding styles require professional and qualified instructors.

LOCATION

The first step is to decide on location; how far are you willing to drive? With urban sprawl, realistically you should be prepared to drive 30-60minutes from large cities. Many times it is worth the extra few minutes of driving to have a really excellent experience with horses.

Start making a list from an online search, print ads and of course ask your friends and co-workers if they recommend anywhere. Horseback riding is a very popular sport so chances are someone knows someone who's riding!

Another great resource could be provincial organizations that have accreditation programs for members. Horseback riding stables would have to meet set safety standards and other approval criteria.

Many horseback riding stables advertise online and have websites. This is a great place to start your research, getting a little more information on the facility and finding out about the costs. Just remember that when it comes to cost, the cheapest lesson is not always the safest and in the end could cost you a lot more!

And don't forget that if you live in a cold climate, like we do here in Canada, you're going to want a facility with an indoor arena. Once you get the riding bug, you're not going to want to miss a joyful riding day just because of nasty weather!

Whether by email or telephone, you now have a list of horseback riding stables to start contacting.

ASK QUESTIONS ... LOTS OF QUESTIONS!

Ask questions that will help narrow down the number of horseback riding stables that you actually visit. Ask about the credentials of the coaches, first aid training, and if the facility offers group, private and semi-private lessons.

For new riders private lessons are always preferable and most reputable stables prefer to only teach beginners in private lessons.

Another consideration is do they mix adults and children together in the same lesson or combine different levels of riders in the same lesson? Both these scenarios do not benefit the riders and usually cause a lot of frustration for both the students and the instructor. Adults and children learn differently and the needs of novice riders versus advanced ones makes mixing them a bad idea.

Once you have a few stables picked out the next step is to visit the facility and watch a horseback-riding lesson being taught. This will really give you an idea of the style and quality of teaching and how the instructors interact with the clients and the horses.

Keep in mind, a riding stable is a place of business, so make an appointment to visit the facility. If you just drop by, you may find that there is no one available to answer any of your questions and show you around.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

And as a business when you arrive you should expect to be treated just as you would walking in to any other business; there should be an obvious entrance and someone to greet you when you arrive.

The staff should be courteous and helpful. If a bunch of disinterested people just looks at you and no one inquires as to why you are there, this might not be the place for you.

While you are visiting the stables watch for things like the cleanliness of the stables; is there an obvious level of pride and care in the horses and the facility? Do the riders seem to be enjoying themselves? Do the horses appear well fed, happy and healthy or lethargic and sickly?

Obvious signs such as ribs showing on a horse, the barn being in disrepair or run down and horses standing in overcrowded paddocks are huge no-nos and reason to cross this place off your list.

Whether in the barn or during the riding lesson, **safety should be at the top of the list.** Like any other sport there is an inherent risk in horseback riding. You can never completely rule out accidents happening but you can manage the risk.

Choose a horseback riding stable that has clearly outlined safety rules including rider conduct and equipment. Whether this is a sport for yourself or your child make sure their programs are safe. Horses can be unpredictable: It is never OK to leave beginner riders of any age alone with a horse or horses either on the ground or astride.

Most horseback riding stables sell their lessons in packages or programs of weekly lessons for a month or more. Before you register for a series of lessons a good idea is to take an introductory or assessment lesson. This is a one-time lesson sold individually which allows you to experience the teaching and to interact with the instructor and the horses before making the time and financial commitments to a program.

Choosing a riding stable is a very personal thing and this is where the vibe and 6th sense comes in. Ask yourself; do I feel comfortable here? Do I get a little horsey happy coming down the driveway? Is the staff professional and do the instructors enjoy teaching? Would I feel safe taking instruction from them? Are they kind to the horses?

Speak to some of the other students. Are these the type of people you think you would like to spend time with? This would seem like fairly common sense things to consider but sometimes we need to be reminded!

And ask questions! Good facilities and instructors welcome your questions; after all you are there to learn!

Everybody has his or her reasons for wanting to learn how to ride. For some it's about making friends or it's a great form of exercise, while for others it's the thrill of competition. But the common theme is all about a love for horses.

Horseback riding can be a very social activity and can develop into a life long rewarding passion!