

# Canter the California Coast

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

DESTINATIONS

The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks competed with the pounding of our horses' hooves on the wet sand as Ricochet Ridge Ranch owner Lari Shea cantered along beside me on her Arabian Horse gelding, Rascal.

The golden sunset lit the ocean aglow, while the full moon rose above the bluffs. My Tennessee Walking Horse cross, Poncho, stretched his long legs and floated me along the retreating tide of Ten Mile Beach in Mendocino County's MacKerricher State Park.

It was the end of a full-day ride at Ricochet Ridge Ranch, in Fort Bragg, California, and what a perfect one it was.

## Midnight Arrival

Only two days before, I'd driven from the Oakland airport on the dark, twisted Highway 128 through the vineyards of Anderson Valley. Enormous redwood trees appeared to be growing out of the sides of the road.

Less than an hour later, a clearing offered a vista of the quiet Pacific Ocean. A young buck, silhouetted by the near-full moon, glanced my way as though in welcome.

Rolling down the window to take in the view, the brisk salty air brought me momentarily back to my eastern Canadian roots.

I meandered through the historical town of Mendocino in search of the Hill House Inn, where I'd be staying. What a joy to find a lit fireplace and an enormous bed awaiting me.

It was just after midnight.

## Ranch Welcome

The next morning, over breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Lari explained the itinerary for the next two days. The gray-haired 66-year-old sporting red cowboy boots and black jodhpurs appeared to be in great

physical shape. Her smile lit up the room, and her vibrant energy radiated around her.

After breakfast, I followed Lari on the 10-mile drive to the ranch through the quaint town of Fort Bragg, bursting with art galleries and gift shops.

We arrived at the ranch, strategically situated next to the main road and just across the street from the coastal park. There, I met fellow riders Fernando and his wife, Susan, returning guests from Miami.

Joining us would be Stephanie, a ranch guide, for her last ride before heading back to her hometown of Bottrop, Germany.


An orientation held in the 24-stall barn's arena was followed by a video focusing not only on riding safety, but also on the health and well-being of the horse.

Due to a last-minute decision to come to Ricochet Ridge, I'd missed the first day's warm-up ride on the beach; I'd be joining Fernando and Susan on their last two days of a four-day ride.

First, we'd ride on Lari's other property, Simcha, which means "a joyous or blessed occasion" in Hebrew. Simcha's 315 acres, combined with the surrounding private property, make up more than 25,000 acres of trails.

As we hauled the horses up to

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*We take you to  
Ricochet Ridge  
Ranch on Mendocino,  
California's  
magnificent coast,  
where distance rider  
Lari Shea offers rides  
through redwood  
forests and on the  
beach.*



**Online bonus!** For a photo gallery of Shawn Hamilton's ride at Ricochet Ridge Ranch, go to [www.trailridermag.com](http://www.trailridermag.com).

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Simcha, Lari recollected the story of how she and her husband, Harvey, whom she met on a ride in Nairobi, had their first date here, a ride to the crest of the hill.

### A Special Spot

We mounted up and started our ascent. The trail was a little slippery from the previous day's rain, but my horse, Rioja, a 10-year-old Arabian Horse gelding, felt pretty sure on his feet.

Arabians and other endurance-savvy breeds such as Russian Orlov and Akhal-Teke crosses make up about half of the Ricochet Ridge Ranch herd, as endurance riding is Lari's favorite pastime.

Winner of the Tevis Cup in 1989, Lari is not only a successful endurance competitor, but also a wealth of information on keeping horses fit and healthy. The other half is everything from Quarter Horses to Clydesdales to accommodate a gamut of clients, who also have their choice of tack.

A little canter to get to the top of the hill rewarded us with a spectacular view of the beach below, followed by a descent into the cool, musty forest valley.

Enormous redwood trees, some more than 1,500 years old, towered above us,

"The sun's light found small cracks between the trees, illuminating the green moss hanging from them," notes Shawn Hamilton of her ride into the redwood forest.



"The sun turned the sky golden, and a full moon rose above the bluffs – a spectacular moment in time, enjoying a ride in all of nature's glory," says Shawn Hamilton of her sunset ride on the beach.

fell in love. Years later, we watched the sunset from this very spot and decided to build our dream home here."

We lunched on the picnic table that now sits on the spot, sharing a bottle of wine and taking in the vista. Lari showed me the beach where we would ride that afternoon.

### A Beach Gallop

We trailered back to the ranch, but were soon back in the saddle, riding through a small wooded area that headed to the beach trail.

A deer crossed our path. The vibrant colors of the ice plant came into view and I could hear the ocean. A few seals slithered off the rocks and dipped into the water. A heron flew past us and landed just a few yards away.

With not a person in sight we had the entire beach to ourselves. Rioja's quickening pace told me that we were in for a gallop down the beach shortly.

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shadowing the midday sun. Rioja leapt over a creek, thrusting me out of the saddle. We cantered our way back up the steep ridge. The fit horses were unaffected by the climb.

After winding along the trail, we came to Lari and Harvey's new house perched on the top of the ridge.

"This was our picnic spot that day of our first date," Lari exclaimed. "And where we





"Is everyone ready?" shouted Lari.

The next thing I knew, Rioja, ears forward, was galloping along the sand. The salty air touched my tongue and I could see the huge smiles on Fernando and Susan's faces as our mounts carried us through the waves.

Wow, I thought. This is fun!

It had been years since I'd felt the exuberance of riding on the beach. There's just something magical about being on a horse cantering along the sand, as the waves roll in at their feet.

The trail back to the ranch passed a few park campgrounds. I asked Lari if they allow horses in the campsites. "No," she replied. "But some of my clients camp here and keep their horses at Ricochet Ridge Ranch. Then they join our guided rides throughout the week."

"If I ever get my dream to throw my horse on the trailer and venture across North America, this will indeed be one of my top destinations," I told her.

### Her Path to Here

Over a bottle of wine during a nice dinner at the Cliff House Restaurant in Fort Bragg, I learned of Lari's interesting path to the successful businesswoman she is now.

In 1979, after a divorce leaving her a single mom with two young kids, Lari was living on her land in Mendocino while teaching Horsemastership at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg.

Using her savings, Lari purchased a dressage/endurance prospect, a 2-year-old Russian Orlov/Arabian cross named Tzar, and started her journey. Lari purchased Tzar from Kerry Ridgway, a world-renowned endurance-riding veterinarian.

Three years later, when Tzar was 5 years old and winning first-level dressage competitions, Dr. Ridgway helped Lari acquire Tzar's sire, Natures Ballet.

It was financially impossible for Lari to acquire the Russian Orlov stallion, priced at \$70,000. So Lari decided she'd ask the owner, Sonny Ferriss, if she could train and compete with the stallion, who'd proven his endurance potential in a few races.

Lari valued her time at \$1,000 dollars per month. She figured that after three years, she'd have \$36,000 or 51 percent interest in the horse.

With Tzar's success in competition as a résumé, Dr. Ridgway hand-delivered Lari's



Ricochet Ridge Ranch offers access to more than 25,000 acres of trails.

offer, accompanied by photos of Tzar sporting saddlebags loaded with a chainsaw and diapers, with both of her children on his back.

Sonny wanted what was best for the horse, and, with some of Natures Ballet offspring already on the ground, he agreed to the offer to promote the bloodline.

Nine months later, Sonny showed up at Lari's farm with five of Natures Ballet's offspring, ranging from 6 months to 5 years



Lari Shea went from a struggling single mom to a successful business owner doing what she loves.

old. It was a dream-come-true for Lari. But this was just the beginning.

Six months later, busy training horses and continuing her teaching, Lari was approached by neighbors down the road requesting to go on a trail ride with their friends.

With six riders total, Lari managed to put one rider on Natures Ballet, one on Tzar, and the other four on the greenbroke horses. She rode her daughter's Welsh pony.

After a lovely hour's ride, the pleased guests asked Lari how much they owed her. Figuring she made \$10 an hour teaching, that's what she asked for. To her surprise, they gave her \$10 each! Lari instantly recognized the possibility of a viable business doing what she loved, and Ricochet Ridge Ranch was born.

Now, 30 years later, the successful business holds as many as 60 short rides per day and at least six week-long riding vacations per year.

Lari no longer teaches in the classroom, but she still shares her knowledge and wisdom about all things horse from the saddle.

### Into the Forest

The next morning, we started at 10 a.m. — so civilized compared to my usual up-with-the sun ventures when moving camp each day.

We were trailering to one of the private properties Lari has permission to ride on — a beautiful 3,000 acres with the Ten Mile River and Seaside Creek meandering through it.

Another trailer pulled up. It was Lari's friend, Beanie, joining us today on her stunning palomino Quarter Horse, Fancy. Lari's husband, Harvey, would join us on Poncho, a 17-hand Tennessee Walking Horse cross.

Lari mounted up on her Arabian gelding, Rascal, with no bridle, just a neck loop.

After a short jaunt through the lush green valley, we headed into the forest and began our uphill canter. It was the longest uphill canter I'd ever done, but Rioja was unaffected.

The wide, twisted trail, carpeted with rust-colored redwood needles, was bordered by Douglas firs, redwoods, and huge clumps of swaying pampas grass backlit by the morning light.

The sun's light found small cracks be-

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tween the trees, illuminating the green moss hanging from them.

At the top, the horses drank from a small puddle, while we gazed at the ocean far below through a small opening in the trees. I could see why Lari calls this the Spectacular Trail. We got off the horses to stretch our legs, and Harvey pointed out mountain lion tracks.

Fancy had been fed a few carrots before our ride and was coughing a little on the canter up. Lari got out her stethoscope and listened to Fancy's heart rate. The mare seemed fine.

On the ride down, Lari got off her horse to walk. I joined her to stretch my legs. As we hiked down the path, she related some of her endurance-competition experiences.

We finished the ride back to the trailers through an old orchard, where we let the horses graze.

### Back to the Beach

Lari had errands to run, so I joined another ranch guide, James, and a Canadian couple on a short ride on the beach. I chose to ride Poncho, the gentle giant Harvey had ridden that morning.

Off we went! The waves, twice the size than they'd been the previous day, rolled in strong. Poncho, keen to get his legs wet, walked right in up to his hocks. The waves' retreat made me feel as though I was in motion when, in fact, I was stationary.

We then headed to the packed sand and



Ricochet Ridge Ranch owner Lari Shea, a former endurance rider, teaches guests how to take a horse's pulse and respiration rates on the trail.


asked our horses to canter. Poncho was amazing; his huge stride just floated me along the wet sand. The Canadian couple grinned like kids.

After a late lunch, I met Lari for a sunset ride, where she hoped we could see our full mirror image in the wet sand during low tide. Once again, I chose Poncho. She was aboard Rascal.

The sun had already started its descent when the beach came into view. We trotted to the packed wet sand, then allowed the horses to stretch out, cantering in unison side by side.

The sun turned the sky golden, and a full moon rose above the bluffs — a spectacular moment in time, enjoying a ride in

all of nature's glory. I couldn't think of a better way to end my adventure.

As Lari often says, "What unites us all is a love of the out-of-doors, a spirit of adventure, and a passion for horses!" 

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For more information on Ricochet Ridge Ranch, call (888) 873-5777 or (707) 964-7669; or visit [www.horse-vacation.com](http://www.horse-vacation.com).

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As the owner of Clix Photography ([www.clix-photo.com](http://www.clix-photo.com)), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events and capture images that appear in top magazines, including *The Trail Rider*. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.