

# Riding Mendocino

SEASIDE HORSEBACK RIDING, LUSH REDWOOD FORESTS, AND POSH FEATHER BEDS IN A CALIFORNIA BEACH TOWN



By Wolf Schneider

**A** GENTLE OCEAN FOG IS WAFTING THROUGH the air in Mendocino, California, moistening the redwoods, Douglas firs, and Pacific madroño trees, the wild rhododendrons and orchids that make this part of Northern California so lush and green. Seals are lazing on rocks off the shore of the Pacific Ocean.

Amid this West Coast idyll, horseback outfitter Lari Shea is getting ready for the most-requested piece of her riding expeditions: a full-throttle canter down the beach. Fixing her gaze on me, she says, “Shorten your reins and whatever you do, *don’t pass me.*” And we’re off. It’s just the two of us loping northward on the open beach through the fog on our hardy Arabian horses—the very ones on which Shea wins 50- and 100-mile endurance rides.

In this moment, rhythm is everything. The rhythm of the ride, of the waves, of the Western wonder that is California. Waves ebb, vanishing out into the great gray Pacific, then crashing back in as we lope our horses in the foamy surf. There’s the cadenced pace of our two horses springing forward, then rocking back onto the wet sand in their smooth, controlled run. Forward, back, forward, back. What I’m thinking about now is matching my movements to those of Faraj, the ultra-trustworthy 21-year-old gray Arab gelding with whom I’m paired for two days of riding. I lick the salty air on my lips as we fly by white seals perched on rocks, and

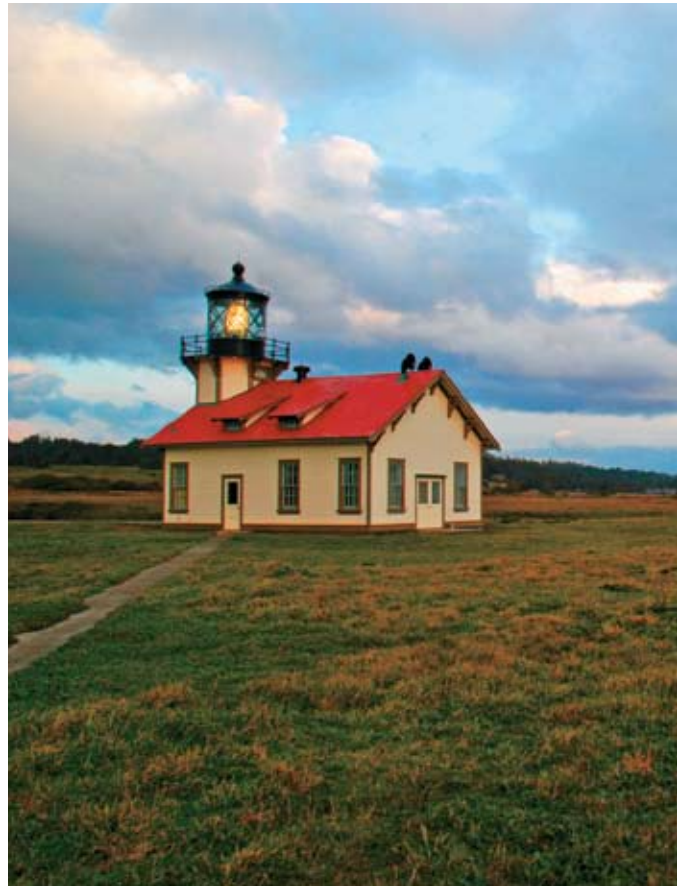


**Kicking it up in the Pacific Ocean surf on the Mendocino, California, coast. INSET: Horsewoman and equestrian travel outfitter Lari Shea of Ricochet Ridge Ranch (pictured with her gray roan Faraj).**









I steer Faraj alongside Shea and her horse, holding Faraj back by just a head's length so he doesn't challenge the other horse into a flat-out race. *Don't pass me.*

Shea doesn't give a lot of instruction; she distills it down to the absolute most important thing. Like when we rode for four hours yesterday in redwood forests. As we loped up mountainsides she advised, "Grab mane, lean forward, get your weight forward." When Faraj lunged up those mountains, I dipped my head down low onto his mane to protect myself from the low-hanging branches we were tearing through and realized why Shea uses Western saddles without saddle horns—so nothing's in the way when you lean over onto the horse's neck.

As we thunder down the beach in the Mendocino mist now, I give myself over to a trust that Faraj will maintain his footing, and to the rhythm and power of right now. You've got to love a horse who gives this kind of all-out commitment to sharing the moment with you. Strangers just 48 hours ago, my horse now carries his human safely into a bonding adventure where we both feel empowered.

**F**ARAJ IS ONE OF SHEA'S FAVORITES, BUT she's got 50 well-trained horses at her ranch in Fort Bragg, 10 miles north of Mendocino, a three-and-a-half-hour drive north from San Francisco. Shea is a feisty 5-foot-2-inch cowgirl—a very fit

cowboy-hatted, ponytailed 61. Raised in Michigan, she came to Northern California in the late 1960s. For a while she taught horsemanship at the College of the Redwoods and later launched Ricochet Ridge Ranch in 1977.

A superb outfitter with exceptionally trained horses, Shea is also a top endurance rider. So good, in fact, she's won the famed Tevis Cup, an annual 100-mile endurance race through the High Sierras. But mostly she leads horseback rides in Mendocino. The place fits her passion. "Horseback riding and cattle raising were integral parts of the lumber industry up here for 100 years," Shea says. "We ride through the forests on the old logging trails and on the old cattle ranches and on the beach."

Shea's horses are generally ridden in snaffle bits with running martingales to keep the reins low, and with Western, English, or Australian saddles. On the weeklong rides, she says, "We gallop for miles. And I teach people about conditioning horses for work. Everyone gets a stethoscope. They learn how to perform 12 different tests of metabolic function—cardiac recovery rate, respiratory recovery, and so on."

At the moment, though, I'm all about stirrup and reins, not stethoscope. Loping on the beach is a raw, primal joy. Riding in the nearby wooded coastal mountains is even more enthralling for me. The attentive Faraj—this horse has the personality of a trusted personal bodyguard—whisks me through a forest of 1,500-year-old redwoods and bracken

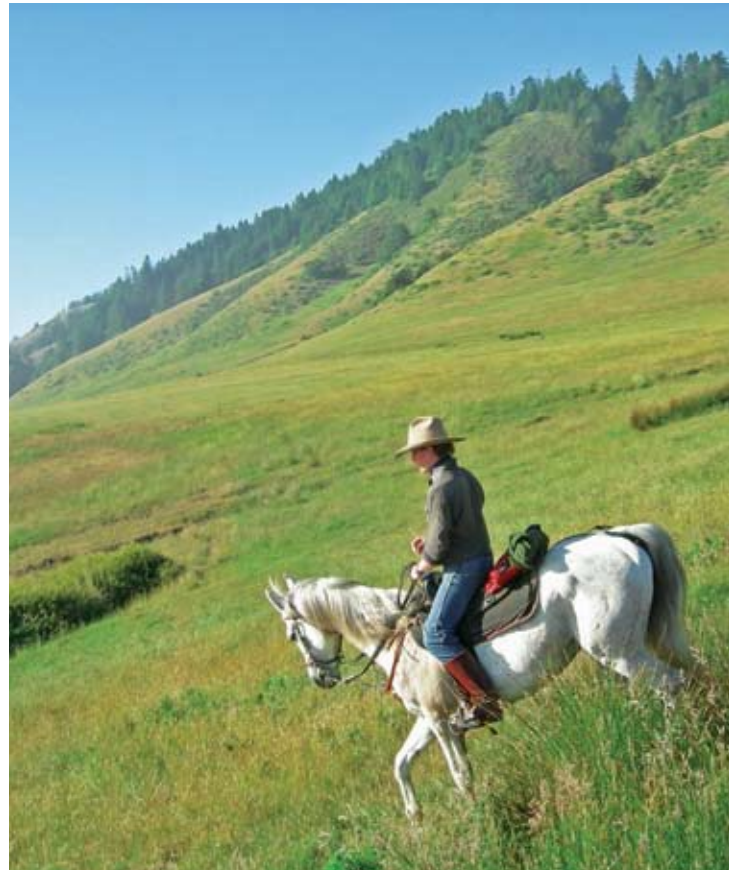


fern, past red columbine, wild purple irises, and white marguerite daisies. Think: New Zealand and *The Lord of the Rings*, it's *that* lush in the woods here. We don't run into Viggo Mortensen—although I half expect to, given the spiked fantasy quotient—but we do chew on leaves from a bay laurel tree. Sometimes we hear the roar of the ocean from a mile away, sometimes an osprey's cry. Mostly it's the horses' legs brushing against foliage, and their hooves cracking twigs. And the breathing of beings in tandem.

Atop one mountain, we dismount and let our horses graze in a field of wild rye and oat grasses while we snack on cashew nuts, wasabi peas, fresh cherries, and red wine that Shea's husband, Harvey, arrives with. The two met at a bar in Nairobi when she was leading a horseback trip there; afterward, he came to Mendocino to ride with her. "I thought, She does this all the time?" He moved from Pennsylvania and married her.

The relocation suited his environmental ethics. In Mendocino, he says, "Houses blend in and everyone tries to do the right thing by the environment." Popular with enviros, artists, and travelers, the quaint No-Cal town looks like a bit of coastal Victoriana plunked magically down in ravishing and wild countryside complete with cliffs and crashing surf.

Originally settled by the Pomo Indians, this land of



**OPPOSITE:** Established in the 1850s, the picturesque village of Mendocino (left) has been compared to Sausalito and Monterey. Lighthouse at Point Cabrillo, in Mendocino (right). **TOP:** Riding through the hills of Mendocino. **ABOVE:** Surveying the descent through ice plant to the beach along the Mendocino-Fort Bragg coastline.

rocky shoreline and treed interior is well worth protecting. Trees and plants grow bigger and stronger here—the redwoods to more than 300 feet—and earthy businesses predominate: wine grapes (the red zinfandel from local vineyard Edmeades has hints of blueberry and toffee aromas), orchard crops, fishing, logging (now fading due to overcutting), tourism, and a little covert marijuana growing. A progressive counter-culture presence has led some to dub Mendocino the most granola-ized of California's seaside towns. But the organic bent underpinning its beauty ultimately contributes to a sex appeal that breeds relaxation and romance.

Hollywood captured Mendocino's scenic assets when the TV series *Murder She Wrote* filmed here in the 1980s; then

the poignant Julia Roberts drama *Dying Young* came through, followed by Jim Carrey's nostalgic *The Majestic*. Director Sydney Pollack and celebrity photographer Greg Gorman have homes hereabouts.

"Mendocino is kind of like Sausalito or Monterey. It has a cute ocean and people who are into theater and are more artsy," says Bob Makela, owner of Makela's tack and Western store. Established in 1917 in the nearby more blue-collar town of Fort Bragg, Makela's is frequented by the horsy crowd.

"Myself, I like both towns," says Makela, who allows that Fort Bragg is home to "more long-timers." When he confides that he, like Shea, was an endurance rider "50 pounds ago," the least I can do is let the dry-witted Makela talk me into

TRAIL GUIDE

## Mendocino

**N**orthwest of San Francisco by 150 miles, Mendocino is a coastal art town akin to Carmel and Monterey down the coast but more rural and laid-back. Cliffs and crashing surf, salty sea air, lovely redwood forests, wildflowers, galleries, gourmet food, quaint inns and hotels—and not a chain store in sight. The drive along scenic Highway 1 is sure to unwind you even as it winds along the coast.

**GO**

Fly into Oakland or San Francisco airport. Drive north on Highway 101. At Cloverdale, take Highway 128 north to Albion. Then take Route 1 north.

**STAY**

**STANFORD INN BY THE SEA AND SPA,**

Mendocino nestles between the coastal forest and the Pacific Ocean, atop the banks of the Big River. Rooms are paneled with pine and redwood—each has a wood-burning fireplace or stove. The gorgeously landscaped grounds are filled with organic gardens. The pet-friendly inn even has llamas and horses. Free bikes for guests. Forty-one rooms and suites, priced from \$195 to \$700 nightly. (800) 331-8884; [www.stanfordinn.com](http://www.stanfordinn.com).

**DO**

**RIDING: LARI SHEA'S RICOCHET RIDGE**

**RANCH** in nearby Fort Bragg offers daily rides, weekend trips, and weeklong Redwood Coast riding vacations, with lodging at various Mendocino inns. Riding packages range from \$45 for a two-hour group ride to \$2,145 for a weeklong riding expedition. Riders range from absolute beginners to the very advanced. (888) 873-5777; [www.horse-vacation.com](http://www.horse-vacation.com).

**BIKE AND BOAT: CATCH A CANOE,**

at the Stanford Inn, rents out outrigger canoes, kayaks, canoes, and bicycles. The hybrid comfort bike was perfectly suited for the hard-packed

dirt of the **BIG RIVER TRAIL** in **BIG RIVER**

**STATE PARK**, where we rode along the Big River through marguerite daisies and redwood trees. Even more popular at Catch a Canoe are the outrigger boats—an inexpensive blast at \$25 an hour. Made out of redwood by a local craftsman, the stable crafts have a foot-operated rudder and some have a downwind sail that catches the wind. "With the outrigger, the



average person with no experience can actually control the boat right away," says Catch a Canoe manager Rick Hemmings. Pedaling or paddling along the river, you can see deer, harbor seals, river otters, blue herons, and ospreys. (707) 937-0273; [www.stanfordinn.com](http://www.stanfordinn.com).

**EAT**

**ALBION RIVER INN,** in Albion. The cliffside restaurant at the romantic Albion River Inn, with its clapboard cottages at Albion River Cove, serves coastal cuisine with Pan Pacific influences. There are 500 wine labels, and seafood is emphasized: Try the Dungeness Crab Strudel. (800) 479-7944; [www.albionriverinn.com](http://www.albionriverinn.com).

**CAFE BEAUJOLAIS,** in Mendocino. Located

in an old 1890s home with Ansel Adams photography on the walls and historic wainscoting, this standout restaurant serves French-based cuisine with California influences. The Copper River salmon fillet pan-roasted with balsamic glazed pearl onion confit, horseradish potatoes, and snap pea and shitake mushrooms was a menu highlight. Says waitress Nicoline VanderHayden, "There're places with ocean bars and views, but this is a country restaurant with the priority being the food." (707) 937-5614. [closed until January 19 dinner]

**THE RAVENS, STANFORD INN,** in Mendocino.

Gourmet contemporary cuisine that's all vegetarian, all organic, and served in a spectacular wooded setting. Try the tasty *futomaki* rolls—a kind of vegetarian sushi. (800) 331-8884; [www.stanfordinn.com](http://www.stanfordinn.com).

**MACCALLUM HOUSE INN & RESTAURANT,**

in Mendocino. North Coast cuisine is showcased in a Victorian setting with river-rock fireplaces with river-stone fireplaces. Try the popular Grilled Niman Ranch steak. (707) 937-0289; [www.maccallumhouse.com](http://www.maccallumhouse.com).

For more on **MENDOCINO**: [www.mendocino-coast.com](http://www.mendocino-coast.com), [www.gomendo.com](http://www.gomendo.com).

— W.S.



buying a plaid riding jacket by Outback Trading Company. It's the perfect thing to pull on as the sun goes down on this day of beautiful riding and beautiful country.

**K** NOWING I'D ONLY BE RIDING TWO DAYS of my trip, I planned to spend some time hanging out with my mom. She has been at no loss for things to do and see while I've been horseback, mainly golfing at Little River Inn while I've been riding. In our together time, we're going to do some hiking, sightseeing, and shopping.

The village of Mendocino was established in the 1850s, so the picturesque New England-style Victorians are authentic, not just scenic. The town is easy to walk, the surrounding wildflower-covered bluffs easy enough to hike. Mom and I spend some windswept hours exploring coastal trails and redwood forests. And of course we find time to stop in at the local galleries and shops. I buy local writer Mary Cesario Weaver's *A Mendocino Mystery*, which turns out to be atmospheric and suspenseful.

"Mendocino nestles above steep and treacherous cliffs over the rough, frigid sea, and along the mouth of the Big River, which forms a natural fishing harbor," Weaver writes, adding that the remote village has only 500 year-round residents but the area attracts another 1,000 visitors nightly to stay in the more than 50 hotels and inns.

One of those annual thousand who come craving solitude and scenery, I now also crave a nice nap before dinner. A vacation in the sea air does that to you, whether your day's been spent horseback riding or not. Happily, we're staying at a Craftsman-style lodge called the Stanford Inn by the Sea, which must have the best beds in Mendocino. Perched on a hillside with ocean views, this luxurious and rustic country inn is a turndown pleasure: Its plush feather beds with all-down pillows are an invitation to dream. And that's exactly what I do till it's time to eat.

At dinner, the Organic Bloody Mary at the Stanford Inn's vegetarian restaurant, The Ravens, is so good I have to have two, and the Mesquite Grilled Tofu in a chipotle barbecue sauce with grilled corn and twice-baked potato is likewise delicious. "People from L.A. get real excited about Mendocino," says Joan Stanford, who owns the inn with her sociable husband, Jeff. "We get a ton of Texans, especially out of Houston," Jeff says. "They were educated in Austin and awakened, you know, so they come here to get their fix." He's referring to the inn's progressive perks like edible marigolds in the salads (from their gardens), calming yoga classes (a way to get even more grounded), and hot-stone massages in the forest (ditto).

"We're much more rural than Carmel, and it takes longer to get here," Joan says. "The drive here slows you down, and you either like the shift in energy or not."

Me? I love it. Gazing out the Ravens' windows, I get lost in the quiet hillside of redwoods, firs, nasturtiums, wild iris, and calypso orchids. What could be better than luxury like this inside, with wilderness like that right outside? The trip will stay with me afterward, too. Soon I'll be back home loping on Dakota, the quarter horse I take a weekly lesson on. "That trip did you good," my trainer will say. "This is the most relaxed loping I've ever seen you and Dakota do."

Loping relaxation — what an apt description for the blessed state a riding vacation in beautiful Mendocino bestows.

## Stanford Inn's Organic Bloody Mary

**I**n a shaker filled with ice, pour 4 ounces of Santa Cruz Organic Tomato Juice, and squeeze in the juice from half a large organic lemon. Add a small pinch of crushed celery seed (the inn uses organic seed crushed against a plate with the back of a soup spoon), about ¼ teaspoon of The Wizard's Organic Vegan Worcestershire Sauce to taste, and half as much of Natural Value Organic Cayenne Hot Sauce. Shake well. Strain and pour in a highball glass filled with ice. Add two ounces of Rain organic vodka. Stir. Add another bit of crushed celery seed and one turn of black pepper from a pepper grinder to the top. Garnish with a wedge each of lime and lemon, and, if available, a thin stalk of organic celery.

— W.S.

