

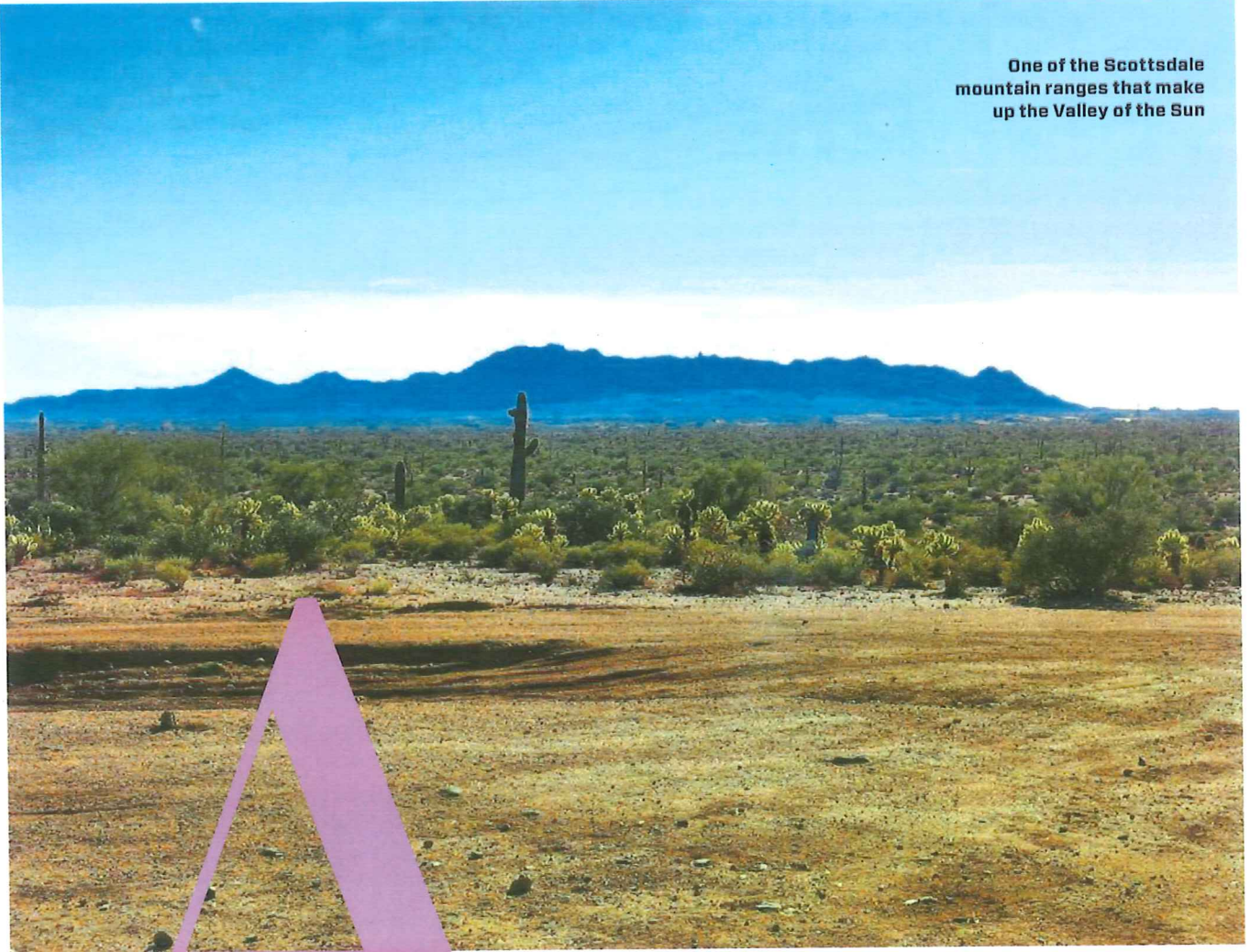
*You may not be able to become a real cowboy or cowgirl in a day,
but you can sure feel like one. Our fearless writer got in the saddle in the Sonoran Desert
to put her horsemanship — and galloping — skills to the test.*

GET ON YOUR HIGH HORSE

*By Margie Goldsmith
Opening photo by Mark Lipczynski*



One of the Scottsdale mountain ranges that make up the Valley of the Sun



AS I GET OUT OF THE CAR ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SCOTTSDALE, Arizona, a woman wearing a denim shirt, jeans and a belt with a silver buckle as big as a cereal bowl greets me. Lori Birdwell, owner of Arizona Cowboy College, former rodeo queen and equestrian champion, is trailed by a large black pig. I jump back. “That’s Myron,” Lori says. “He’s harmless. He keeps the snakes away.”

I’m here because every year, I make myself do something that scares me to death — I’m terrified of horses. I’ve tried riding a couple of times in the past, but that hasn’t helped. I’m still frightened. So when I saw the “Cowboy for a Day” offering at the Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North, I signed up. Hesitantly.

“Listen,” I say cheerfully to Lori. “I’m getting married in two weeks so I can’t afford to fall. I don’t want to be pushed down the aisle in a wheelchair.”

She looks at me with very steely eyes. “We don’t guarantee you won’t fall,” she says.

Lori leads me toward the barn, past stalls of mainly quarter horses, Thoroughbreds, Paints, Arabians and an Appaloosa. The horses are huge, not like the donkey-sized horse I tried to ride in Mongolia a few years ago. “Mongolian horses have very short legs, so if you fall, you won’t fall far,” my Mongolian guide told me. Not reassuring. As I mounted the horse, he added, “And don’t say ‘go horse’ or ‘giddyup.’ The horse does not speak English. Just say ‘chew.’”

“Chew,” I said. “Chew, chew, chew,” I repeated, but my horse would not budge.

“That’s because he knows you have no control over him,” the guide said. He whipped my mount with a branch, but the horse wouldn’t move. For two hours, sitting on a painfully uncomfortable wooden saddle, the horse and I were towed by rope across the Gobi Desert. So much for my dream of galloping across the plains like Genghis Khan.

This time, I am determined to not let the horse be in control. Lori introduces me to Elaine Pawlowski, ranch manager and “jigger boss” (second in command), with whom I’ll be spending the day. “You’ve ridden before?” Elaine asks.

I decide not to tell her about my experience in Mongolia, but I tell her about my other riding experience years ago at a

*“A quarter horse
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in 22 seconds and
40 miles an hour.”*

California dude ranch. “They put me in with all these little kid beginners,” I say. “They said if I could learn to lope, they’d let me go out with the intermediate riders. So I held onto the horn for dear life and galloped. I was fearless!”

Elaine gives me a strange look. “Fearless?” she asks. “Then why were you holding onto the horn? That’s not fearless.”

Elaine stops in front of a stall with a large horse. “When you’re going up to a horse, he’s sizing you up,” she says. “He’s thinking, ‘Are you the one who’s gonna make me go through hell?’ If you’re too timid, the horse won’t pay attention. They want you to be the leader. You need to be the head mare.” She opens the gate and attaches a rope to the brown mare. “This is Billie,” she says. “She’s going to be your horse today.” I start to pat Billie’s face to show I’m not afraid. “No,” Elaine says, “Don’t do that. Horses don’t like to be patted on the face. When they meet each other, they rub shoulders. Just approach her shoulder.”

I tentatively place my hand on Billie’s shoulder. “Do you have a carrot?” I ask. Surely that will make Billie like me.

“Nope, we don’t give horses snacks. We have ’em eat naturally. I don’t want her nuzzling, trying to get treats.” Elaine leads Billie from the stall to an outdoor bullpen. “When a horse listens, the ears are back, but if the ears are pinned back, watch out,” she says. Happily, Billie’s ears are not pinned back. “And horses are prey animals, so if you get behind one and run, the horse will run too because they’ll think you’re a lion.”

She leads Billie to the bullpen. “If a horse isn’t ready to be ridden, you have to lunge them,” Elaine says.

“Lunge them?” I ask.

“Run them,” she says. “A quarter horse can run 440 yards in 22 seconds and 40 miles an hour.” She closes the gate, gives Billie a hand command and Billie begins to gallop around the edge of the ring. “You wear her out mentally, and she lasts longer,” Elaine explains. “You lunge her to burn off some of that pent-up energy.”

Not too much energy, I hope, because I really want to gallop in the Sonoran Desert.

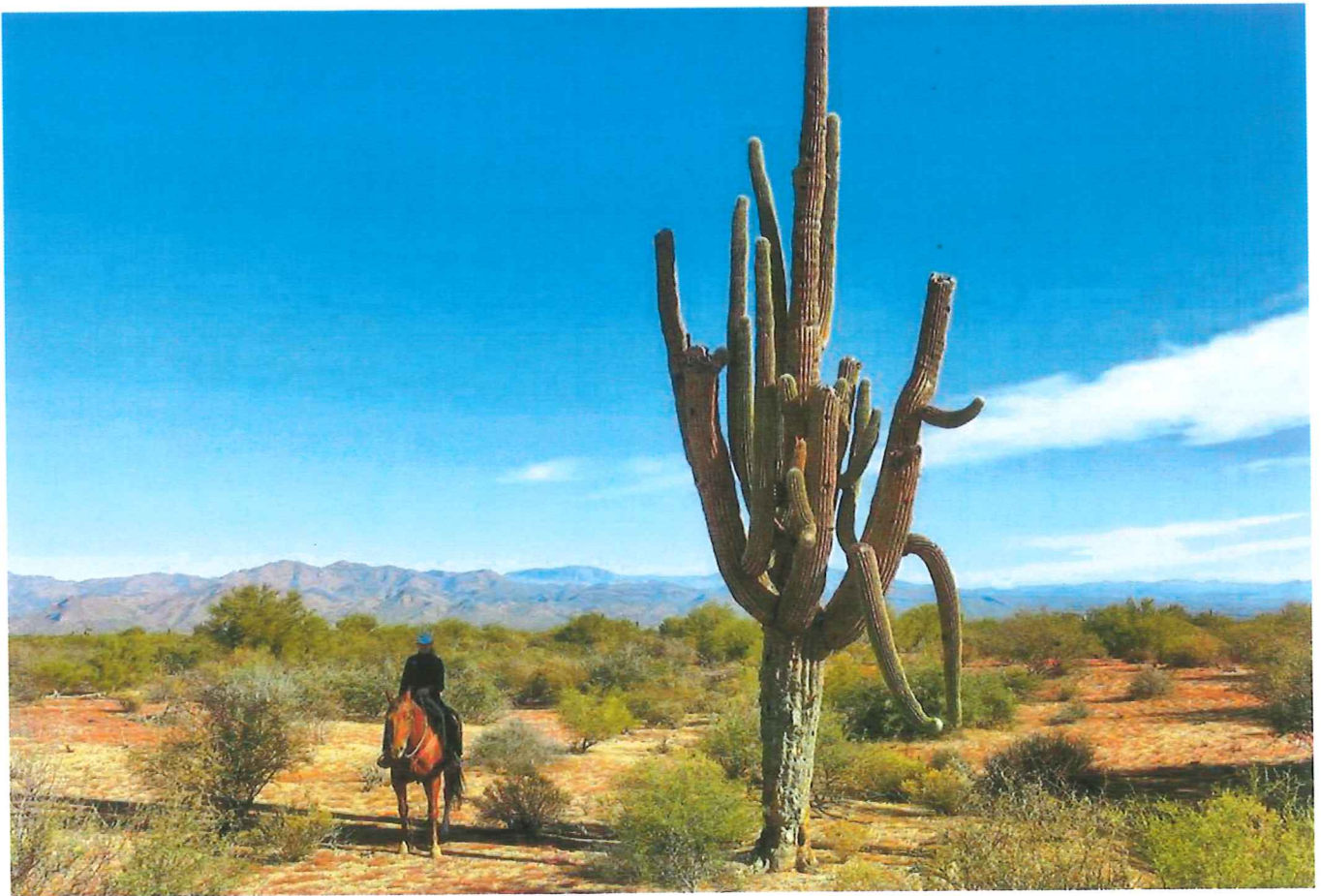
L LEARN HOW TO GROOM A HORSE. “MAKE SURE YOU always have one hand on her, because horses have the brain of a 3-year-old,” she says. “You have to be in control.” I learn how to attach the bridle. Billie has enormous teeth, but somehow I succeed in not getting bitten. She shows me how to brush Billie’s flank. “You don’t brush a horse to make it look pretty,” she says. “You do it to see if there are injuries.”

To brush Billie’s other side, I move as far away from her as possible. “What are you doing?” Elaine says. “Do you want to get kicked?”

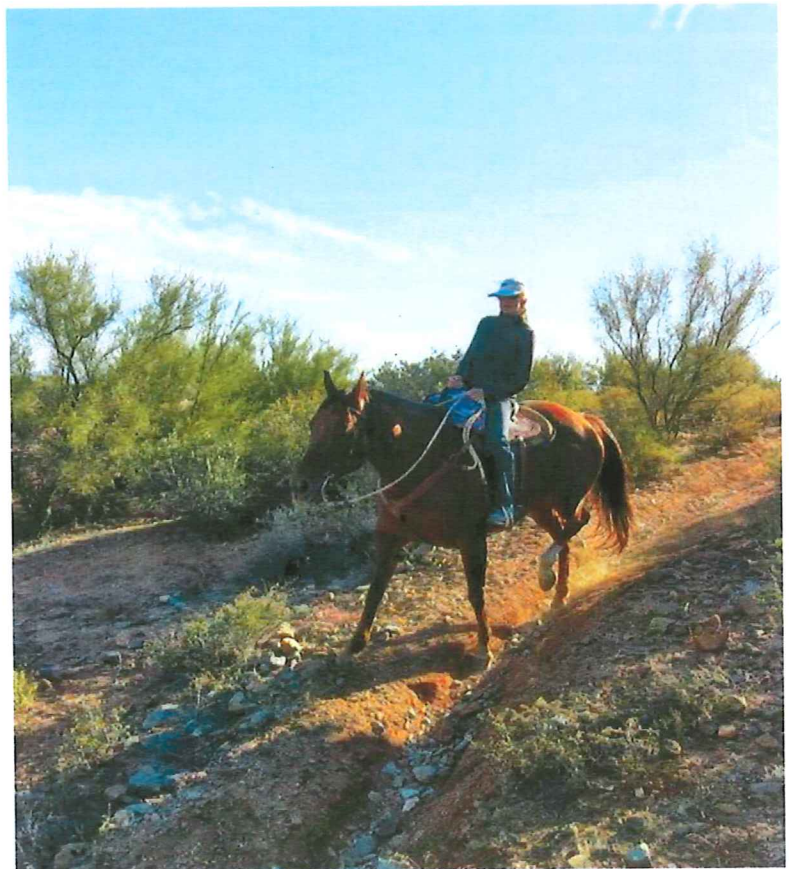
“But that’s why I stayed away,” I say.

“Horses can move backward, you know,” she says.

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“Make sure you always have one hand on her, because horses have the brain of a 3-year-old. You have to be in control.”



TOP: Amid giant saguaros, Margie Goldsmith rides in the Sonoran Desert.
RIGHT: Margie Goldsmith learns to lean back while going downhill.

MARGIE GOLDSMITH

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"But at the dude ranch, they told me to stay away from a horse's rear end."

"Well, they taught you wrong. Put your body right up against her and keep it there as you move around to the other side."

I take a deep breath, pray to the horse gods and walk tentatively around Billie's backside, forcing my shoulder to touch her tail. Billie holds still, and for a moment, I finally feel like the head mare. But now it's time to lift her hooves and clean out the dirt. How am I going to pick up the leg of a 1,000-pound animal? "Squeeze the tendon," Elaine says. Miraculously, it works. Billie allows me to clean her hooves. I throw a pad on her back and reach for the saddle that I can barely lift. "How heavy is this?" I ask.

"Thirty-five pounds," Elaine says. "Less than a bag of feed."

It feels more like 80 pounds. After three failed attempts, Elaine helps me heave it over Billie.

Lunch is sandwiches in the kitchen with Elaine and the ranch owner, Lori. I'm curious as to why people come here. "Some come to ride better," Lori says. "Some want to change their lives, and some want to retire and buy a ranch. It's all over the map."

Elaine looks at her watch, stands up and straps a small black gun onto her belt.

"What's that for?" I ask.

"Just in case there's snakes around," she says. "If my horse bucks and I fall off, you'll have to help me up," she says. Elaine was once a firefighter, and she's built like a weightlifter.

"I don't think I could lift you off the ground, and I know I could never get you back on your horse," I admit.

Lori looks at me. "I'm getting another wrangler," she says. She opens the door and calls to Dennis to saddle up. Good. I'll have help if I have to get Elaine back on her horse.

We lead the saddled horses to the driveway. "Remember," Elaine says, "Don't get too aggressive. You can't muscle 1,000 pounds; you have to be persuasive. Get her to do what you want by looking at her ears." I climb up on a wooden bench and swing onto the saddle. Never mind that I'm wearing sneakers and a baseball cap; when I take the reins in my hand, I feel like a cowgirl.

Billie begins to jerk her head from side to side. "She's twitching," Elaine says. "Don't let her do whatever she wants. Give her a little yank."

I snap the reins and Billie stands still. "Good girl," I say as I pat her on the shoulder.

"Hey," says Elaine, "you don't pat her or say 'good



BIT AND BRIDLE

Want to be a cowboy or a cowgirl for a day or even a week? We have the details on how to get you there.

"Cowboy for a Day" Experience

At Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North, guests can experience the one-day immersive "Cowboy for a Day" program. Work alongside cowboys at Arizona Cowboy College and learn horse-handling and horse-riding skills. Price is \$450 per person. (Guests can be fitted with custom boots and a hat in a range of styles and prices for an additional cost, beginning at \$250). Return to the resort for an optional cowboy picnic (\$80 per couple) and optional stargazing (\$150 per couple). Fourseasons.com/scottsdale

Arizona Cowboy College Camp

Arizona Cowboy College also offers a three-day program where guests sleep in the bunkhouse and learn skills (price: \$1,250). The five-day program consists of two days sleeping at the ranch and three days sleeping at the Cowboy College wilderness ranch, and includes grooming, riding, cattle work, roping and equine safety (price: \$2,250). Included in both packages are training, accommodations, meals and airport transfer. Cowboycollege.com

GETTING THERE - American Airlines offers 314 peak daily flights to Phoenix (PHX) from 76 cities in four countries, with 59 of those flights from our hubs, including Charlotte (CLT; 9 flights a day), Chicago (ORD; 10), Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW; 14), Los Angeles (LAX; 10), Miami (MIA; 3), New York (JFK; 3), Philadelphia (PHL; 7) and Washington, D.C. (DCA; 3).

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ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK LEGER



A wrangler at the college prepares to saddle up.

girl' when she's been naughty. And she doesn't care if you pet her — that's for you, not her."

We move onto the dirt road. Elaine leads, I'm in the middle and Dennis takes the rear. "Always keep this same distance from me and follow exactly in my footsteps," she says. "And squeeze your calves and toes out, not your knees. That's why all cowboys are bowlegged."

Soon, we're in the Sonoran Desert making our own trail through green cacti that shine like iridescent ghosts backlit by the sun. We pass leafy-green mesquite and Palo Verde trees. It's beautiful and silent. Equally good, Billie is obeying me, unlike the stubborn horse in Mongolia. When Elaine turns to the right to get around a giant Saguaro cactus, I decide to go left. It works! I'm in control and happy, but Elaine is not. "You have to follow exactly in my footsteps because there's gopher holes everywhere," Elaine says. "Billie could fall and break her neck and you could too."

After a while, I'm feeling confident, even going up and down steep hills and leaning forward and backward, something that once terrified me. Now I want to gallop. Once, on a trip in Tuscany, I took an English riding lesson at an equestrian center; after a few hours in the ring, we followed the instructor to a forest trail and everyone galloped. There was no horn as there is on a western saddle, so I clung to the horse's hair praying I wouldn't

fall off. I stayed on, but suddenly we were heading straight toward an overhanging branch and there was nothing to do. I ducked and the branch scratched my neck, but I didn't fall off.

We've come to an area of the desert with low-lying cactus but no trees nor overhanging branches. "Can we gallop?" I ask Elaine.

"Not here," she says. "There's holes."

We arrive at a lookout point on the edge of a 2,500-foot-high cliff, and I gaze out at the Superstition Mountains, Weaver's Needle, Tom's Thumb and Pinnacle Peak — all places I've hiked on previous trips to Scottsdale but am now seeing from a different vantage point. I'm looking out at my old friends while sitting tall on a horse.

On the way back, we loop around an old barbed-wire fence and arrive at a narrow dirt road. Elaine turns and smiles. "Ready to lope?" I nod. "Remember," she says, "tuck your hips under and go with the horse's rhythm."

Soon, Billie is flying down the road and I'm bobbing up and down, slamming against the saddle on every step. I'll ache tomorrow, but right now I don't mind. I'm here and I'm doing it: galloping fearlessly in the Sonoran Desert. 🐾

MARGIE GOLDSMITH has traveled to and written about 127 countries. She has won 33 awards for her stories in many publications, including *Business Jet Traveler*, *Islands and O*, *The Oprah Magazine*.

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