When I was a little girl growing up in New York, the closest I ever got to being a cowgirl was watching my mom try to lasso a taxicab. I remember singing “Home on the Range,” but we city slickers living in the proverbial concrete jungle only dreamed about the place where the deer and the antelope play. Who would have thought that years later, I would be sitting tall in the saddle learning how to rope and ride reminiscent of Billy Crystal and Bruno Kirby in the unforgettable, almost iconic film, “City Slickers.” After years of hearing my mom tell me not to play in the dirt, I’ve been getting dusty, dirty and having the time of my life playing a cowgirl on television—and even a little bit in real life.
One of my more memorable adventures on “Arizona Highways” was a trip to Rancho de los Caballeros in Wickenburg to Giddy-Up Gals Getaway. As most of you know, we gals often get pigeonholed as shoppers and spa-goers; though I will fess up to liking both of the aforementioned activities, I knew my girlfriends and I could have just as much fun if not more pretending to be Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane.

So in the weary hours of the morning just after sunrise, I wrangled Loping Lin Sue, aka Lin Sue Cooney of KPNX Channel 12, and Jumping Julie Koeth a makeup artist in real life, and asked them to join me for a cowgirl adventure. Fully aware that there would be no manicures or pedicures on this excursion, they jumped at the chance without hesitation.

The ranch itself is less rugged and more luxurious than I had imagined—I will admit I was excited to learn there was a spa on the property. I knew my dogs would be tired after a long day of living out our western dreams. When we arrived, we met up with other gals who came alone or with friends and even some mothers and daughters traveling from all over the country to bond, build friendships, have fun and escape to the simple serenity of the desert.

**WOMEN VS. COWS**

A few groups took off exceptionally early for a trail ride and some riding instruction, but we three amigos were geared up for a challenge, so we signed up for something called team penning. I had absolutely no idea what team penning was and I quickly discovered that it was anything but a leisurely stroll on a horse. This was about skill, horsemanship and teamwork, not to mention good old-fashioned friendly competition between us and those other femme fatales.

In team penning, you and your riding partners work together as a team to wrangle up a bunch of headstrong cows that are going every which way (other than where you want them to go) to the other end of the corral. As if that’s not difficult enough, the goal is to do this as fast as you can or at least faster than the other team.

There’s an audience, an announcer and all eyes are on you as your team tries to heat the clock and the time of your competition. My greatest challenge—or should I say my greatest fear—was making sure those sharp-horned cows stayed in front of me rather than bringing up my rear.

On our first try, the *Phoenix Brunettes*—feeling a little cocky because we had the home field advantage—actually ran out the clock, whereas the Native New Yorkers who rode right before us penned their cows in just 36 seconds. It was a humbling first attempt, but in our defense, have you ever watched a New Yorker hail a cab in the rain?

I was clearly the weak link having only played a cowgirl on television. In spite of the fact that I looked the part, my inexperience was painfully obvious given my inability to get my horse to cooperate no matter how much I kicked, cried and eventually begged him to giddy-up! My teammates Lin Sue and Julie are both excellent riders and I am certain they would have corralled our herd in less than half our time without yours truly.

Instead of taking away my spurs, my pose, being supportive and steadfastly competitive, encouraged me to give it another try. I knew that under no circumstances could I let my girls down, so I channeled my best inner cowgirl combined with Clint Eastwood and stared down those bulls as if to say, “Go ahead, make my day.”

This time around, with a little—well, a lot—of help from my girlfriends, I reined in those cows with more than a few seconds to spare. After that experience we were on fire, so we tried our hands at roping, which is a lot more difficult than it looks in the movies. We never quite graduated to livestock, but Lin Sue and
I did manage to rope a cowboy, even though it was just for the cameras. Lin Sue remarked, “Robin, you didn’t get your steer.” With a wink I responded, “But I did get my stud!”

**BACK AT THE RANCH**

C’mon, it was just girl talk, I mean, we were at Giddy, Up Gal Camp, for goodness sake. We quickly discovered that the wranglers’ life—even on a guest ranch—is hard work, so we were happy to dust off our boots come lunchtime and enjoy a hearty meal fit for even a wanna-be cowgirl. During lunch, I had the chance to mingle with some of the other guests and find out why they had opted to spend their vacation cowgirl style instead of lounging on the beach.

“I’ve been interested in horses and always wanted to be a cowgirl since I was three years old,” says Trish Tweedly. Living just outside of New York, she was ready for an escape from the bright lights of Broadway. “I think it’s the tranquility of the desert, frankly; we have a very busy lifestyle and I can totally relax in Arizona.” These sentiments are the foundation of how the ranch got started so many years ago.

Rancho de los Caballeros has been welcoming guests since 1948. Its name, which means “Ranch of the Gentleman on Horseback,” pays homage to the style of the Spanish caballeros who introduced skillful riding and gracious living to the untamed desert. Over the past 61 years, the Ranch has grown to a full service resort offering amenities that include an 18-hole championship golf course, tennis and a spa that offers homegrown treatments with products indigenous to the pristine Sonoran desert.

There’s even a Caballeros Kids Camp program that gives little buckaroos a chance to learn basic horsemanship and participate in scavenger hunts, crafts and cookouts complete with marshmallow roasts around a campfire.

In spite of all its advancements, the ranch has maintained the philosophy and tradition of Western life and hospitality. Owner Rusty Gant credits this to his father Dallas, the man who built the property so many years ago. He says his family’s desire to share the beauty of this unspoiled landscape is ever-present on these 20,000 acres of rolling hillsides, wide-open spaces and flowering desert beauty.

You can ride or hike all week and never see the same trail twice, taking in the spectacular flora and fauna that blossoms under an endless blue sky and sunsets that create a kaleidoscope of the warmest hues found on the color wheel.

These are just a few of the reasons guests keep coming back year after year, and why General Manager Rui Pereira says Giddy-Up Gals Getaway has become so popular. “It’s a way for old friends to reconnect, moms and their daughters to bond and for all the girls to just cut loose and leave the guys behind.”

Karen Werner of Cincinnati and her two best friends from high school have been doing a yearly girls-only trip for the past 20 years. They call themselves thrill seekers and their quest for adventure has taken them all over the world doing everything from white water rafting to snowmobiling. The organizer of the group—Terry, aka Julie McCoy—says that they decided to visit Rancho de los Caballeros in an attempt to try something a little different.

“We are getting a little older and wanted an experience and adventure that didn’t leave us so sore or with any broken bones or sprains,” she says. “Also, this time I took my daughter and her friend who were on spring break from college and she loves horses, so we thought, ‘Why not give it a try?’”

Terry describes her trip as beautiful all around from the spectacular setting, to the great food, to the pampering in the spa. And for these adrenaline junkies, it was just the shot they needed when they took home the top prize for team penning.

“We not only bonded with each other, but made lots of new friends. Not to mention the wranglers felt like they were part of our family,” Terry says. “On a scale of one to 10, it was a 10 all the way around and we can’t wait to come back next year.”

**WEEKEND COWGIRLS**

Giddy-Up Gals Getaway began four years ago at Rancho de los Caballeros and has become so popular that they now offer this package five times a year. A typical weekend...
Even if you go in as a city slicker, chances are, you will giddy-up on home as a cowgirl.

starts on Thursday; the gals arrive, check in and head into the dining room for a meal and a chance to get acquainted with the wranglers. Friday is usually horseback riding, roping, a nature hike and perhaps a spa day. Friday night, guests can look forward to a traditional chuckwagon cookout with delicious ranch fixings along with some fireside western entertainment. Did anyone say s’mores?

After a good night’s rest, guests wake up Saturday morning to the smell of cowboy coffee and get ready for either a round of golf or some team penning. By then, aspiring cowgirls have bonded enough to engage in some healthy, hearty Wild West competition—it makes for some good stories when you leave the ranch and share your pictures and experiences with your friends back home.

“Most of the women feel like they have had the best time of their lives and they book their next trip before they even leave,” says Pereira.

After pulling off my boots, taking off my cowboy hat, and getting ready for my drive back into town, I could not help but relive my day at Giddy-Up Gals Getaway. It was like getting to play a character in a movie, complete with the costume, scenery and attitude. Only there were no scripts in this drama—or in my case, comedy—just a group of gals making up the lines, having way too much fun and laughing all the way to the credit roll.

Regardless of where you grow up, I would venture to say that every kid at one time wants to be a cowboy or cowgirl. It is a dream that is played out every day in backyards, playgrounds and schoolyards. At Rancho de los Caballeros in Wickenburg, those dreams can easily be turned into reality.

You may not rope a steer on your first try or rein in a group of cows in less than two minutes, but one thing’s for sure: seldom is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day. Even if you go in as a city slicker, chances are, you will giddy-up on home as a cowgirl.

Robin Sewell is the Executive Producer and Host of Arizona Highways Television. Now in its sixth season, Arizona Highways Television explores the Grand Canyon State, bringing television viewers across the State the breathtaking images, quaint rural towns, locally owned businesses, the history, and the people who make Arizona truly unforgettable.