The Doctor is wearing a Stetson and riding a horse. He looks slightly over-excited. "I've had two lessons and I'm cantering already. I've never ridden before. It's purely for this!" says Matt Smith from his elevated position.

"This" is A Town Called Mercy, the third instalment of the new series of Doctor Who. "We're in the Wild West! I get to ride horses! I get to play cowboy. Guns! Saloon bar doors... You literally get Doctor Who does the Wild West."

A Town called Mercy is the first time the Doctor has "done" the Old West since 1966. That story, with William Hartnell as the Doctor, was called The Gunfighters, but its working title was The Gunslingers. This time round there's just a single Gunslinger to contend with, but as he is seven feet tall and has a Gatling gun in place of his right arm (see overleaf), one is more than enough.

The story follows the arrival of the Tardis in a small desert settlement. "Just crossing the boundary line summons a not-quite-human killer from the desert heat haze," says showrunner Steven Moffat. "The Doctor finds himself not just in the crossfire of an ancient conflict (a cyborg killer and an alien fugitive) but faced with a moral dilemma. Which side should he take?"

Cast and crew are all paranoid about giving anything else away. "I can't really say the reason why the Tardis has taken us to the Wild West but it has," says Karen Gillan, who plays companion Amy. "And as soon as we arrive we realise that there's something not quite right about this place - and it's something that needs to be sorted out quite swiftly." Mercy, she adds, is "a small town with a big problem."

Matt Smith really isn't that bothered by plotlines or problems. He is just loving playing a cowboy. "Oh man it's fun. Stetsons and everything. We did a scene last night that was just brilliant. A showdown in a windswept street... It's quite exciting to get to play a cowboy. What's wonderful about the Doctor is, of course, you get to do the narrow-eyed stuff and the posturing, but then two lines later he'll be snapping out of it going, 'Oh this is ridiculous, what am I doing?' So he can be ironic, play a role, wear a hat, then step outside of it and see how silly it all is."

Arthur Darvill, meanwhile, is mildly peeved that, as Rory, he doesn't get to have so much cowboy fun. "I don't get to burst through any saloon bar doors. I might try to put some in. I've invented a new award, which I think Bafta should give, which is the Best Performance in the Back of Shot. So I'm going to burst through some saloon doors and see if it makes the episode."

And they all get to play with guns, which makes Karen Gillan, in particular, very happy: "I do have a bit of a gun moment in this. But then Amy has had a few gun moments. I'm thinking now she knows..."
The Wild West as we know it is actually about four hours’ drive from Benidorm.

When the Franco regime introduced tax breaks for film-making in 1964, the industry exploded: A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More, and then most of For a Few Dollars More. When the Franco regime introduced tax breaks for film-making in 1964, the industry exploded: Once Upon a Time in the West and The Good, the Bad and the Ugly were just two of the classics shot here.

Fort Bravo is one of three film sets in the area, and the only one still in use. They became well known thanks to the Italian director Sergio Leone. He filmed scenes there with Clint Eastwood for A Fistful of Dollars and then most of For a Few Dollars More. When the Franco regime introduced tax breaks for film-making in 1964, the industry exploded: Once Upon a Time in the West and The Good, the Bad and the Ugly were just two of the classics shot here.

Now Fort Bravo is something of a ghost town itself. Not only have westerns fallen out of fashion, but Quarazate in Morocco has taken over as Hollywood’s go-to desert backdrop – the extras work for just six Euros a day, says one frustrated worker at Fort Bravo!

But anyway, why do a Doctor Who western? “Why not do a Doctor Who western?” was how it came about,” says the show’s new executive producer, Caroline Skinner. “We didn’t want to design a series of movie clichés, but to see the Doctor in this environment was just a fantastic opportunity for some brilliant storytelling. Just look at it!” she says, spreading her arms to take in the town below and the wide horizon beyond.

“It’s thrilling to be out here where they shot the original westerns. Ordinarily you’d build a lot of things as sets but we’ve got the brilliant opportunity of actually being here. I’ve just got off the plane and driving through this landscape just blows you away. We haven’t seen Matt’s Doctor do anything like this before.” Benji Wilson

Read about the Doctor’s first Wild West adventure, The Gunfighters, at radiotimes.com/blog/doctor-who-story-guide