

Happy trails

CALGARY - Moose Mountain's 7-Day Explorer is a rugged adventure for wannabe cowpokes.

By Anne Georg for The Calgary Herald - September 4, 2008



I stepped out of my sedan into the barnyard of M & M Ranch south of Bragg Creek and looked down, careful not to step into manure.

My brand-new Roper boots flashed like neon signs, exposing me as a greenhorn.

I came to the ranch to have an adventure on horseback. Undine MacLaine greeted me with her wholesome smile and a firm handshake that instilled confidence. She and her husband Neil MacLaine, serious and seasoned horse people, guide multi-day pack trips from the ranch with their company Moose Mountain Adventures.

"We try to keep Moose Mountain Adventures true to a Western heritage," Neil told me. The operation takes small groups of riders on expeditions where they camp in the backcountry, eat hearty food cooked on a campfire and take responsibility for their horses' care. The camps are comfortable but basic, and leave a minimal environmental footprint.

I'm a wannabe cowgirl and that's why, in late August, I found myself on Google looking -- as so many of us did during a summer of high gas prices -- for a "staycation." Moose

Mountain's 7-Day Explorer held the promise of being just the kind of rugged adventure I've always wanted to do, but could never do alone. And it was on my doorstep, in our beloved Kananaskis Country just west of Calgary.

The expedition includes four nights in camp, five days of riding and a night on each end of the trip in a bed and breakfast near Bragg Creek.

Day 1 soon arrived. First, each person in my group was assigned a horse. The MacLaines assessed each rider's horsemanship, factoring in their height and weight. They explained we'd saddle our own horses and curry (groom) them at the beginning and end of each day. They coached us in trail riding basics. And then we hit the trail.

At first my posse seemed like a discordant mix: a young German woman who giggled nonstop; a newly minted chemistry PhD grad; a handsome, sad widower and his amiable friend; a well-travelled German couple; a dour young Bavarian woman who didn't speak English; and me.

I like horses, but I'm equally frightened of them. They're big. They kick. They bite. They buck.

But my horse, Little Star, was a gentle-natured Missouri Foxtrotter who quickly put my fears at ease. The 21-hand sorrel mare was all business on the trail: sure-footed on the steep inclines and declines; and she didn't balk at any of the conditions we rode through.

At first I was tentative with her grooming. I awkwardly picked up a hoof to clean it. I spooked at any unexpected movement, dropping the hoof and jumping out of the way. But I lost my skittishness after a couple of days.

I wasn't as successful getting Little Star to take the bit. I needed to overcome my fear of being bitten. And I needed dexterity to slide my thumb inside her lower lip, around her teeth and then sneak the bit in. I managed to do it once. But only once. Progress sometimes comes in small steps.

With less to fear, I concentrated on practising horsemanship. I learned to trot without bouncing too much and to direct Little Star with the reins and my legs. And I learned the hard way never to tie her to a dead tree.

I wanted photos of my posse galloping across the high plains. So I rode Little Star to the end of the Box Canyon mesa. I tied her to what seemed to me a strong fir tree (it wasn't), and proceeded to photograph the riders as they whooped toward me.

Suddenly, from behind me, Little Star neighed. A tree crashed. I turned and watched, horrified, as she broke loose, dragging the dead tree and kicking at it. She got rid of the thing and galloped to join the other horses. No harm done, save for my red face.

I tried to salvage my bruised pride by remarking that at least my knot hadn't come undone. "No one's totally useless," Neil said with a smile. "You can always be used as a bad example."

Neil's an ex-military man and a history buff. He knows this backcountry and has a million stories about the region. He's also secretive about the network of trails Moose Mountain Adventure maintains. No doubt that's why we ran into very little traffic during our five-day adventure.

We travelled almost 100 kilometres, sleeping in canvas tents in two camps. All of our meals were cooked on an open campfire, and one of our guides, Richard Cutfield, prepared free-range beef from his ranch.

The breakfast menu varied, from bacon and eggs to bannock with Saskatoon berry jam. Simple picnic lunches always included an apple or pear. We saved the cores for our horses.

Each day held a new adventure. One day we woke up to rain. The trail was muddy and we were cold and soggy. At lunch, we had a snowball fight on Forgetmenot Mountain. A couple of hours later we rested on a sunny windswept ridge overlooking the Elbow Valley.

Another day, we basked in bucolic alpine meadows dotted with wildflowers in Cougar Gap. We covered a lot of territory. A bond grew between people and ponies.

Riding Little Star down tricky downhill or uphill trails engaged me fully, physically and mentally. Other times we ambled comfortably along grassy slopes. And over several campfires and several pots of cowboy coffee, the riders too, ceased to be strangers to each other. We commiserated about our aching muscles and our sore butts.

The weary looking German banker had an unexpected elfish sense of humour. Like the time he found the bleached bone of a cow pelvis in the meadow. He put it over his face and scared the living daylights out of me, much to the merriment of the other bandits in the posse.

The giggly German woman made us all laugh. The pensive widower became progressively more light-hearted. Even our unilingual Bavarian companion got in on the jokes now and again.

The PhD grad was a savvy campfire raconteur. She noticed a scrape on my hand and asked me how it had happened. When I described the mundane event, she deadpanned, "That might be. But you have to say that a cougar did it."

That's how I learned campfire stories are not even supposed to resemble the truth. If you don't have a yarn to tell, a joke will do. Or you can pour the cowboy coffee and laugh.

Sadly, every trail has an end and so did ours.

As I prepared to leave, I looked down to hide my sentimental tears from my trail companions. There were my Ropers, scuffed and worn. I looked up and blew a kiss goodbye to each of my posse. Then I climbed into my sedan and headed into the sunset.

If You Go

Contact Neil and Undine MacLaine at Moose Mountain Adventures, 403-949-3329 or see packtrips.ca.

The next 7-Day Explorer (and the last of the season) goes Sept. 13 to 19. The cost is \$1,575 plus GST and includes transfers to and from Calgary, all meals and all accommodations, including two nights in a local bed and breakfast.

Also on offer are day rides, hayrides and other multi-day pack trips. Check the website for more information.

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