



Alberta is home to enormous trail riding opportunities and knowing where to go and how to prepare are key. Learn about some of Alberta's best horseback day trips and what you should know before you hit the trail.

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Pam Asheton began riding in Germany and France at the age of 11, later obtaining her instructor's ticket with the British Horse Society, coaching riders at the national and European qualifier levels. Now a resident of the Cochrane, Alberta area, Pam Asheton's Alberta Backcountry Equestrian One Day Trail Guide, just recently published, has received rave reviews from top equestrian publishers and journalists. sunwired@hotmail.com www.pamashton.ca

Trail riding is riding - to me - that translates to riding outdoors be it from your backyard, to riding ditches with friends, or hazing cattle homewards, with safety – yours AND the horse's in mind.

One girl who bought my guidebook remarked she was almost afraid to step out of her trailer, not quite the effect I had in mind when I wrote the guidebook.....(!)..... but I recognized what she was driving at.....convenient knives, trailers that might flip, broken limbs miles back country, it seemed overwhelming to her in those early stages as a green owner, who had never ridden outside of an arena.

Or, like all those people at the trailhead who visualize a grizzly bear behind every tree within

eying distance and who are already shallow breathing; I have been asked at every presentation or talk I've given about bears, every time.☐☐

Frankly, my horses have all been up close and personal to bears (the smell is eye-watering, literally).....moose, on the other hand, I've found far more of a hazard, and at the conference I'll be explaining all those reasons (if you are attending another one of the presentations, there will be a PDF downloadable after the conference from the website www.pamasheton.ca and you are very welcome to also email any questions, discoveries or comments).

Actually, there are an unbelievable amount of situations you can encounter even when hiking or mountain biking.....only with horses it tends to get a bit more complicated at times – an uneasy animal weighing roughly 1000-1200 lbs plus can impact you and the landscape in ways you may never have imagined.

Recently back in late September I went and watched Brenda Winder and Terri McKinley of Wild Deuce Retreats and Outfitting (they operate west of Rocky Mountain House) at their Working Mountain Horse Competitions and Sales – and I would have bought any of those 27 horses homewards. Bombproof (the opposite of explosive) was the word that came into mind.☐

These horses went into camps that had chainsaws buzzing, fires smoking, high winds and slickers flapping, carrying water containers and dragging logs....a lot of time and effort and care and consideration had gone into thinking out their training programs.

English or Western, Arabian or Quarter Horse or Warmblood, there's a consistent pattern and that, to me, aims for a ride that sings every time I throw a leg into that saddle and anticipate that day's own particular mountain magic weaving it spells.☐ People who've come to my clinics, I'll say for example, make sure you can unload your horse one foot at a time – you may have a serious injury one day that needs that kind of care.☐ Of teaching your horses to lead – who wants to haul your packhorse who's leaning on the dally – my, that trip to Montana's going to take one hell of a long time!☐ Of horses you can train to come to call – useful to whistle up a horse from a lunchtime graze when there's a thunderstorm storming in and you need to get out of there in a hurry.☐☐

To me, respecting their horse language and working with it, so they appreciate you for that deal,

and then, speaking the same tongue, work on a horse standing still for an elder who might have a stiff hip joint, helpfully close to a tree stump. There's a hundred, thousand different and useful variations and you may be saying some pretty grateful prayers afterwards that you did.

Good solid horsemanship pays off big-time. I am most definitely NOT of the school that says, take young horses into the wilderness and backcountry to get their eyes opened (!). In my opinion, it's much more likely the rider who'll be goggle eyed....no, my mountain schooling's done at home, young horses I start working in the indoor arenas (my least favourite place in the world, akin to a human going into their least liked school subject and I know a lot of horses who have to trot endlessly and pointlessly, to them, in circles are of the same mind).

No, arena work is for learning the Three Big Numbers of great horsemanship – free forward movement, rhythm in all paces, and correct bend in all movements. That applies as much to a mountain horse as a Grand Prix dressage horse, or a vaquero ranch roping candidate.

Each horse is different, with their own personality. Personally over the past years, when I was writing a weekly newspaper equestrian diary, I saw a LOT of clinics (actually, I almost ended up clinicanned-out, my do they talk you to death sometimes!), and I learned – as do all good horsemen – just more and more and more. Dave Elliott about REALLY understanding bits, Lane Moore explaining 'natural' hoof trimming (which is not 'barefoot' at all, and how I first imagined it), Chris Irwin who I watched snake-charm with human-into-horse body language, and Peter Campbell's impeccable timing in his colt-starting clinics.

And then I went backcountry, and met what I call The Mountain People. Survival experts, trackers, grazing lease range riders who know where every coyote den in ten miles is. Undoubtedly ranchers and then outfitters really opened my eyes, in terms of reading a landscape, understanding it, working through solutions when wrecks happened.....and they can storytell you to death with cowboy coffee that renders you sleepless weeks at a time.

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Some experiencing the backcountry have written terrific books, great and priceless reading material, notably:

- *TRAIL RIDING AND TRAINING*, by Janet Daly
- *Anything written about backcountry, packing, anecdotal stories by Stan Walchuk*
- *Mr. Walchuk Jr, information at www.bcoutfitter.com or telephone 250-569-3423*
- *HOW TO BE YOUR OWN VETERINARIAN, SOMETIMES* (second edition now out), by Ruth James DVM
- *WILDERNESS 911 (backcountry first aid)* by Eric Weiss MD
- *HANDBOOK OF THE CANADIAN ROCKIES*, fabulous bible containing anything you need to do with the Rockies and foothills, by Ben Gadd
- *GPS MADE EASY* by Lawrence Letham
- *HORSES, HITCHES AND ROCKY TRAILS* by Joe Back

Horsemanship, be it English or Western, is often an individual learning curve, some books (and instructors) you'll love, others you won't want to see for dust – as simple as that.

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Going back a decade or so, when I was working in France in the high above treeline ski resorts in the Savoie, we would always recommend a guide knowledgeable in that area if you were going off-piste (off-trail in this country's parlance), and I strongly advocate the same here in Alberta.

The Ghost is a prime example of a sometimes confusing landscape....I think I've counted one red diamond in the whole of its terrain. Go, though, with a guide that first time, get a feel for the landscape, the rivers, the mountains with very noticeable markings and you're set from there on. With a guide, too, there's a feeling of handing over some of the responsibility and for me, that's always been a comforting agreeable feeling.

Are guides a good idea if you're going into areas you're not familiar with? If they're too expensive for your budget how about them sitting around a table for less money, and you making notes? These are all good deals.

In the presentation I will be running through a few notations about maps and GPS, and satellite telephone and emergency receivers....how to get back to your rig even if the fog's somewhere around kneecap level. And how to notice details on a map that could be extremely useful if you

need to call in for assistance, and where precise location and saved minutes literally can be a lifesaver. This area comes high on my 'must-understand-easily mind-set, absolutely.

Of importance is the 'crossover' on shared trails with horse riders, mountain bikers, hikers and even quads – this to me, given the recreational users' feedback I've heard, appears to be a subject that needs careful and thoughtful airing. Mountain bikers think very differently to a hiker to a horse rider, so, points to consider and how to get them across with respect to all parties.

And now, the trails.....what's their history? Anyone know, really know? What's their construction, what are areas to be aware of in different seasons, and how to read maps accordingly. Some of the trails in the book I rode in three different seasons and I can tell you I came down some a lot faster than expected!

In England, bridleways and footpaths became 'rights of way' as a means of access between villages (bicycles when they arrived sure changed how young men could court their young ladies over much wider terrain and it actually significantly impacted the genetic pools – interesting, eh?!). Even in that built-up country, you can still ride on bridleways from coast to coast, only occasionally having to cross a main road.

France is slightly different, the estates were the 'droigt de seigneur' and footpaths and bridleways were fewer, with fewer legal rights and used in modern days relatively rarely.

So, what's the deal in Alberta?

My guidebook began with Kanananaskis Country, for very precise reasons I want to detail at the conference, and I'm going to mention some of its history (and how you can find out more with interpretative guides, or other books), how its trails developed and why, and where it's future is going.

Then, piece by piece, (as I mentioned earlier), I'm going to also touch on the Cypress Hills, further south to Waterton, then heading northwards and into wilder areas, namely then into the National Parks, and ending up with the Wilmore.

What are their rules? Why? Are their differences and if so, again, why? The trails, why do they exist where they are, how do you register to ride there, what's the etiquette? How can you find guides, reputable interpretative guides that make your trip a world-beater, remembered forever? Contact information for you, and a month's work of research to think, with pleasure, "today is a good day."

I'm also going to touch, briefly here, on horse welfare on these longer trips – there is a HUGE difference between one-day trips and excursions from a campsite, to Serious Backcountry.[]

Packing, fitness and veterinary and feet/shoe care here are a different ball game altogether.....how adventurous is Modern Man and Modern Woman (oops, let's not forget kids, children take to smoke, no washing and filthy clothes with instant affinity, be warned!) - ?

A few details for you, to perhaps whet your appetite.....!

Questions and Answers I can address any more lengthy information needed via my website, or at least direct you to where you can find answers.[] Or catch me afterwards at The Conference!

The full-on print-out from this synopsis of 'Trail and Mountain and Backcountry Riding' will be posted after the conference on the website www.pamasheton.ca in PDF format for downloading.[]

The Mountain People I pestered endlessly for answers for the backcountry equestrian guidebook gave me the gift of recognizing and absorbing as if by osmosis the seasons and rhythms – and the horses an ultimate gift, of showing me through their eyes so that finally you The Human 'get' it -[] it's the closest thing to being part of a landscape, as a four-legged thinks, and you realize just how linear your thinking was before.[]

My own journey's been amazing, and I hope yours will unfold to find your own backcountry – or

riding outdoors in the woods, the foothills, along a beach....to find that magic.