

Get Ready to Go Horsepacking!

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“You can see what Man has made from the back of an automobile. But the best way to see what God has made is from the back of a horse.”—Charles M. Russell

Horsepacking trips are great because they can take you into the nether reaches of pristine wilderness beyond the reach of civilization—and even hikers—with a lot less effort on your part.

The horse does the work, and rather than watching your feet every step of the way, you get to watch the scenery. Outfitters choose surefooted horses for these trips, and it’s not uncommon that people come away from horsepacking with a newfound love and respect for these companionable, dependable animals that carry them safely through beautiful country. I’ve been doing travel writing for over 20 years, and no matter where I go, in the States or abroad, I try to spend at least one day seeing the country by horseback. It’s just the best way to really enjoy and get into the places you won’t see otherwise—parks, jungles, mountains, and canyonlands.

Choosing the Trip that’s Right for You

Horsepacking comes in a range of styles, from luxury to low budget. On the luxury trips, you’ll spend on the high end, but you’ll often get extras such as inn-to-inn trips (for those who don’t do well sleeping in a tent) or comfortable tentalows, gourmet meals, specialist guides such as historians, anthropologists or musicians accompanying the trip. Budget trips can be just as fun, though, but you might be helping with setting up the tents and meal preparation.

Adrenaline factor—how extreme do you want your adventure? Horsepacking trips can range from two nights to ten, from crossing a valley to going over the top of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. How much do you want? Ask about the difficulty of the trip, about how much experience is required, and if there’s a best time of year to go. What might be right for a single thrill seeker might not be the best choice for a family, and vice versa. And that’s another question to ask—what’s the usual social make up of these trips?

You’ll also want to know what to expect (daily routine). Outfitters are usually really considerate about people who don’t ride a lot. You’ll likely ride a few hours, break for lunch, ride more, break for dinner. They even

have beverage and pit stop breaks along the way there too. But always find out what time the trip begins and ends, when you will eat, and how many hours a day you’ll be in the saddle. By the way, you can always order a foam seat pad to make your trip that Cadillac ride.

Get Ready for Riding

Riding is an all-body workout, believe it or not—get ready by working out and stretching. Yoga is great preparation for riding. Light powerlifting or walking with 3 to 5 pound weights in your hands helps build your upper body strength. Remember, you’re going to be asking a 1200 pound animal to move for you!

Give it a practice run—go to your nearest stable or barn and ride for a couple of hours. Take a lesson in reining and stopping a horse. Take a second lesson in balance, timing and rhythm—the essentials of good riding. Take carrots with you, too!

Stuff to Bring

Gear: Water bottle and case that can be attached to a saddle, Swiss Army type knife, sunscreen, SPF lip balm, small flashlight, ziplock bags of varying sizes (including one that fits around your camera if you’re taking it along), moist travel towelettes, your own small first aid kit with ibuprofen, antibiotic cream, band-aids, and any medication you need. The outfitter usually provides you with a saddle bag in which you can put these things—but just in case, ask, “Do I get a saddle bag?”, because if not, take a daypack to be attached to your saddle.

Clothing: *Comfortable* clothing, hat with stampede strings (stays on in a high wind with straps under your neck), several bandannas, long sleeved cotton shirts, riding boots with heels (NOT tennis shoes, they get stuck in stirrups), jacket, rain gear and all-weather clothing (you never know when it’s going to rain and a horse does not have a roof over it!), panty hose under your *comfortable* jeans help keep you from chafing.

Food: Trail mix, nuts or dried fruit for those times in the saddle between meals when you need a little boost. Things like mints or hard candy in a little ziplock bag are handy at times if you get the dry mouth (a horse does not have a windbreak around him!).

The Inside Scoop

Get in shape. Do stretches. Horseback riding really uses far more muscles than you'll ever suspect, and you'll know about them the 2nd night into the trip—intimately. If you've taken a few lessons, that'll help—you don't need buns of steel for horsepacking, but you do want to work to develop Leather Butt. Take along one pair of big size panty hose (secretly) to wear under your jeans—it keeps you from chafing. Do NOT wear heavy jeans with big seams—the less waddage of inner seams, the less that rubs you. Riding tights are really comfortable, so are sweats—the only reason cowboys didn't wear them is—they didn't have them.

Most common mistake? Not knowing enough. Do your homework for this kind of trip. Ask what the alti-

tude is, if you're a flatlander from the coast, you need to know if you're climbing to 10,000 feet! And either have something for altitude sickness, or pick a lower altitude trip.

Read about horses. The more you understand the animal you'll be on for several days, the better off you'll be. They're a prey animal, we're predators—you can scare them. Use your head around them, be kind and respectful and don't act like a pluperfect idiot, avoid their backsides, and don't be a passenger—they're not on automatic pilot. Give them clear communication as to what you want and they will probably do anything and go anywhere for you (or for your dried raisins and apples!).

Happy trails!

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.