

Backcountry adventure reveals another side of Banff

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

It didn't take long before we entered a completely different world.

As we rode away from the Banff Trail Riders stables on the outskirts of Banff, Alta., we passed the last of the hikers and cyclists.

We were headed to Sundance Lodge in the Banff wilderness, and until we returned two days later, we saw no one other than our fellow riders and those running the lodge.

Banff National Park is justifiably famous for its magnificent landscapes. But as Canada's most visited national park, road-accessible areas can get crazy busy. With 6,000 sq. kilometres of wilderness, there's plenty of space to escape the crowds. However, backcountry travel usually entails lugging a heavy backpack and being self-sufficient for camping. A horseback trip offers an attractive alternative. We can still explore the backcountry yet sleep in a real bed, have hot showers, and eat well while not worrying about cooking.

A couple of hours later, we stopped for lunch beside Healy Creek. The guides unloaded the grub carried by Katie the mule and started a fire. This was no quick sandwich-type lunch. Instead, we dined on barbecued steaks accompanied by salads and pastries, washed down with cowboy coffee. No worries about going hungry on this trip.

As we sat down to eat on a nearby log, it became apparent that the one worry we would have is sore legs and rear ends unaccustomed to long hours in the saddle.

Lunch even came with entertainment as a grizzly bear wandered by on the opposite side of the creek. It completely ignored us, and never even looked our way as it slowly ambled along.

As the mule was reloaded after lunch, we learned just how important these animals are to the entire operation. Motorized vehicles are not allowed in the park's back-



A horseback trip into the wilds of Banff National Park offers an attractive alternative to lugging a heavy backpack and being self-sufficient for camping. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

country, so absolutely everything from food (for both people and horses) to supplies, visitors' gear, you name it, goes in or out by mule. Some employees are full-time packers, almost continually guiding mule trains between Banff and Sundance Lodge.

Late that afternoon we arrived at the lodge, an 11-room, two-story log building in a picture-perfect setting next to Brewster Creek, backed by soaring mountain peaks. An inviting verandah with chairs and benches overlooks the creek, while the main floor is divided into a comfortable sitting room with a wood-burning stove, and a spacious kitchen-dining room where all meals are served.

The lodge is off-grid with no electricity, phone or cell service, though power is supplied by large solar panels and propane.

A big hit with everyone is the resident wildlife. Hoary marmots have adopted the area around the lodge

and we frequently watched them feeding on the grasses in front.

It's always a treat encountering these fluffy, oversized rodents in the Rockies, but often it's a challenge to find and photograph them. Here we can almost walk right up to them.

Next morning it was back on the horses to explore farther afield, along more gorgeous valleys, meadows, and wooded hillsides. We rode across Brewster Creek a few times, with some exciting crossings in the fast-flowing water. The trails we followed date back to the early days of exploration on horseback and patrols by wardens and fire spotters.

Back at the lodge that evening, we sat down with Banff Trail Riders owner Julie Canning to learn more about running the largest trail-riding outfit in Canada, with everything from hour-long rides along the Bow River to five days far into the backcountry.

Canning has around 300 horses at a ranch near Didsbury, Alta. They winter there and most are brought to Banff in the spring. A lot goes on behind the scenes in the stable, such as the almost constant work of the farrier, leather repairs to some of the 500 saddles, and keeping tabs on the horses' health.

The company decided to go strictly with geldings for trail rides. As Canning explained, "It's like high school with a bunch of boys together. Everything's OK, but throw a couple of girls in the middle and all hell breaks loose." The exception is for mules, where both males and females are used.

Besides being a business, Canning sees riding as playing an educational role. "The gap between urban and rural is widening. I'm committed to our rural and wilderness lifestyles. If we can help people connect with their landscape through riding horses, there's a lot of joy that can come from that."

For more details on horseback trips and other activities, see www.banfflakelouise.com.

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Hoary marmots have adopted the area around the Sundance Lodge, and visitors can watch them feed on the grass in front of the building.



Lunch comprised barbecued steaks accompanied by salads and pastries and washed down with cowboy coffee.



Katie the mule carries the grub.