

TAKE A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE!

2014 IS THE YEAR OF THE HORSE, AND IT'S TIME TO SADDLE UP

By Katharine Fletcher | Photos: Eric Fletcher

"Are you afraid of heights?" Guide Josh Walton of Alpine Stables in Waterton Lakes National Park had good reason to ask. Our four-day horseback ride of this popular park south of Calgary would see us riding soaring ridges, where wind whipped our mounts' manes and tails every which-way.

Watson's quarter-horses were sure-footed athletes, and each had their traits: my horse Major scrupulously picked his way along precipitous scree trails while husband Eric's mount, Jackie, powered her way through thick and thin, up and down. Both inspired confidence.

That was a good thing. On the first day, we rode to Snowshoe Campground, dumped our gear, ate lunch, then remounted to ascend Avion Ridge, riding along its exposed backbone. From its elevation of almost 2,500 metres, we gazed west into British Columbia and south into Montana. Range upon range slipped to the horizon. After dismounting, with our



Riding in Banff National Park near Mount Assiniboine with Holidays on Horseback.

legs dangling over the edge, we dreamed our dreams of First Nations traders, grizzlies and mountain explorers.

Returning to camp, Watson said, "I've not been to Goat Lake for four years. Want to try?" Yes.

No wonder he'd not been for a while. We ascended hairpin

switchbacks until we were exposed on a precipitous talus slope with a narrow metre-wide trail: a real nail-biter. Cautiously ascending, we had to dismount briefly and with Watson's advice held the reins in front of our horses while clambering up a metre-high ledge. Our horses followed, jumped up, then we remounted. From that point onwards I wondered how the heck we'd descend.

Goat Lake was worth it, shallow

waters in a mountain bowl surrounded by ragged cliffs. During lunch I scanned them with binoculars and voila, a male mountain goat sauntered along, jumping nonchalantly from one toehold to another.

Once we started down, my apprehensions vaporized. The winning combination of our surefooted horses and Walton's advice vanquished fears. Typical of most riders here, after we conquered the talus, I wanted more.

"More" arrived the next day. We ascended South Kootenay Trail, riding the spine of the Continental Divide as it zig-zagged between Waterton Lakes and the adjoining Akamina Kishinena Provincial Park. Here, waist-high, stunted "kruppelholz" evergreens reveal how brutal such exposed elevations are to vegetation. Finally, we emerged from the treeline, onto the Great Divide Trail's summit ridge.

From an elevation of over 2,000 metres, we peered down the 300-metre drop to Lone Lake Campground while our

horses rested. Unfortunately for us intrepid explorers, mountain weather descended, reminding us that Mother Nature rules. Roiling clouds, marble-sized-hail squalls and plunging temperatures made returning to camp prudent.

Ironically, a blue sky and 24C greeted our next day's return to Alpine Stables.

Already, I long to return. I love horses and the opening up of the West with horses fascinates me. Plus, riding connects us to the country in uniquely western ways, where cowboy culture and mountain-horse guiding are part of Canadian history. Fortunately, an array of riding adventures is available across Canada, from one-hour saunters to multi-day lodge-based rides.

For instance, Holiday on Horseback, in Alberta's Banff National Park, offers a deservedly popular ride that thrills novices with an introduction to mountain riding and an overnight at Sundance Lodge. Cozy bunks ease tired muscles, and the

SOME OTTAWA-AREA EQUESTRIAN PLACES

In Ottawa itself, book a wagon ride with John Cundell, who operates the last stable in Lowertown. This is an awesome treat in winter! 613-241-8054.

Or watch the famous RCMP Musical Ride and visit their stables in Rockcliffe – rcmp-grc.gc.ca/mr-ce/centre-eng.htm

A bit further afield, up the Ottawa Valley at Foresters Falls, Ont., Walter Willet offers horse camping and horse workshops at his Horse Country Campground. 613-867-0585 – horsecountrycampground.com

In summer, kids trek up to Low, Que. to enjoy Nathalie Legault's and André Thérien's Camp Equimax with many equestrian activities. 819-422-3287 – campequimax.com

If you have your own horse, you can ride alongside Gatineau Park. Contact Pontiac Equestrian Association – en.pontiacequestre.com

cook conjures delicious cowboy cuisine from her stove. Marry these to a crackling wood fire and easy chairs, a canopy of stars overhead and you've experienced an unforgettable Rocky Mountain ride.

If you're hankering for remote backcountry, Wayne Sawchuk guides rides into northern British Columbia's Muskwa Kechika, a sprawling wilderness area the size of France. With Sawchuk, horses navigate exhilarating mountain passes

and cross turquoise rivers. This is real backcountry and if you're like me and Eric, you'll enjoy tenting, catching your horse and saddling up, plus helping cook campfire meals.

Yet another mood awaits to the east, in northern Saskatchewan's Prince Albert National Park. Here Gord Vaadeland of Sturgeon River Ranch takes riders to see Canada's only free-roaming bison herd. Although they eluded us this time, our cowboy guides prepared a campfire dinner,



Descending along Avion Ridge to return to Snowshoe camp. Waterton Lakes National Park.

Josh Watson leading the way through an alpine meadow in Waterton Lakes National Park.



played guitar and spun yarns into the wee hours. They were still at it when I hit my sleeping bag in the nearby teepee.

Also in Saskatchewan, George Gaber offers stays at cattle operation, La Reata Ranch. After breakfast, it's time to watch his herd of horses gallop down from the hills to the

corral, eager to be fed.

Friendly staff help everyone groom their horses for a ride into coulee country, where gullies pucker the hills and sage perfumes the breeze. Throughout the day, we paused to appreciate views of Gaber's cattle and calves, broad expanses of the Saskatchewan River, and to hear curlews' mournful calls as we rode.

Truly, whatever your cowboy dreams may be, there's still time to indulge them this year, the Year of the Horse. ■

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Sirius Wilderness First Aid (40hrs)	Oct 18-19 Oct 25-26	Kanata	\$450/person
ITLS Basic/Advanced	Nov 14-16	Ottawa	\$375/person, \$305/student/military rate



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