

Seeing Americas on our own Horses, from Little Valley, New York to Bridger Tetons in Wyoming

Riding by herds of Buffalo in the Badlands, riding past Mount Rushmore, and riding for days in the beautiful valleys near the Bridger Tetons are just a few of my wonderful memories from a recent trip out west with my family, friends, and our own horses. I have always dreamed of taking my horse out west and seeing America, but it never seemed the right time, until recently when good friends, Jim and Dolly Little of The CrossPatch who train horses (and people!) decided to go out west. We all knew that the key to a successful trip is proper preparation. We started planning the trip about a year in advance, and luckily much sooner with our horses. We are fortunate to live in a mountainous area near the Allegheny mountains in Little Valley, New York. This terrain has allowed us to train and ride our horses for years in the steep mountains. We are avid trail riders and go on several overnight trailrides year round. This enabled us to have the confidence we needed in our horses, given the altitude and the terrain out west. This was critical to the success of our trip. Most of our horses are Paints or Quarter Horses, and we have found that they are very versatile and sensible on the trail.

Our route took us across the United States from Little Valley, N.Y. with our ultimate destination being the Bridger Teton Wilderness area in Wyoming. The primary documents we needed for travel were health papers for every horse within 30 days, coggins and proof of ownership. We left September 13th and returned October 3rd. We researched the best places to stop along the way for our horses, making sure we could feed, water and give them some exercise and overnight accommodations. We had purchased books about horse travel, most notably The North American Horse Directory, which lists accommodation's and veterinarians by state. We also discovered a lot of places by just talking to people. We made sure we traveled around the big cities, or drove through them at night, the biggest one in our route was Chicago, we knew we did not want to see the windy city pulling 10 horses in the daylight, let alone rush hour.

We left Little Valley and headed out West pulling 10 horses, all of our supplies, most notable, enough grain and alfalfa cubes, three drums of our own water, food, medical supplies, tack, warm clothing, camping gear and one Siamese cat (he loves to travel!). We traveled with a 25x8 EBY Gooseneck trailer hauling 9 horses and one miniature. The trailer was hauled by a Ford 350, 7.3 liter, 1 ton, diesel crew cab truck. There were a total of 19 people in 4 rigs. We had 5 people and 10 horses in our rig. Our route led us through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota and ended up in Wyoming. We primarily traveled on the interstate, and stopped about every three or four hours to refuel and water the horses. Truck stops are always dependable resources for water. We had the front area of the trailer sectioned off with 3 bunks and a bed in the goose. For feed on our trip we used pelleted grain that we figured six pounds daily per horse, and alfalfa cubes because they are easy to carry and purchase and you don't have to worry about changing hay and a getting colic. We also could

carry alfalfa out of state without certifying it like hay. It is also a good idea to add unsweetened Koolaid to your horse's water, it helps them get used to any kind of water while away from home.

We had planned to be away from home for three weeks. Our first night's sleep was west of Chicago, near a truck stop. We watered, fed and walked the horses around, gave them a little exercise and a sampling of the local grass. The horses slept on a picket line from the trailer and we slept in army cots set up in the front of the trailer and the kids slept out on the grass in their sleeping bags and bed rolls made by the Amish. Our second day was full of traveling and we ended up staying in a stockyard in South Dakota. We had learned about stockyards in our research. They are plentiful in the Midwest and western states, primarily to hold cows, but it gave our horses an opportunity not to be tied up or hobbled for a night. We did hobble train our horses for the trail and since you cannot tie to trees out west. The stockyard cost us five dollars a horse. We had the choice of putting them in their own stall or together. From the stockyard, we proceeded to the Badlands of South Dakota and stayed for three days. The first night was under a stunning orange and red sky, listening to coyotes, big sky and stars. We proceeded deeper into the Badlands the following day and began to see tremendous amounts of wildlife, herds of Buffalo, antelope, deer and prairie dogs. It was the first time for a lot of us to see and ride near these animals.

The terrain of the Badlands was excellent for riding, some areas are rolling hills of grass, and others are desert like - dry, ashy and is surrounded by jagged mountains, but few trees and water holes. It was an enormous area, and you could ride everywhere, there were no limits. We rode for long hours together and with the few watering holes in the Badlands, those waterproof outback hats we used came in handy with a little canteen water for your thirsty horse. From the Badlands, we went to see Mount Rushmore in Keystone, South Dakota. Seeing Mount Rushmore, brought an unexpected incident in our plans. The road into see Mount Rushmore was quite steep, too steep for our truck and trailer, pulling 10 horses. Luckily we (and our horses) were prepared to quickly unload on the highway and ride past the monument. What could have been a chaotic experience, was a wonderful experience, since our horses were so well trained loading and unloading off and on the trailer, and to be ridden with just halters and lead lines. We were all very happy how well our horses loaded, traveled and unloaded the entire time. They were all lined up head to head, and had plenty of room, each time we had to reload them, they walked right on to the trailer.

From Mount Rushmore, we proceeded into Wyoming, to see Devils Tower - the first National Monument in the United States, or more notable, the haunting structure from the movie Close Encounters. We spent the night outside this monument, tying our horses by a near by fence. We could not ride around in this area, since it was all privately owned. We had known this from our research, but went to the area to see the monument. From there we headed to Riverton, Wyoming to meet some old friends who would take us up into the Bridger Teton Wilderness area, where would camp for several

days. Getting into the Bridger Teton Wilderness is very steep and narrow. We again had to unload on one occasion - but all enjoyed it by this time because we entered the area on horseback, sighting moose and crossing the Continental Divide. It gave us such confidence and pleasure in our horses.

We ended up setting up a serious camp site in the Bridger Teton area. It was quite a change from camping in the Badlands. It was 80 degrees in the Badlands, 20 degrees in the Tetons. Everybody's long underwear and outback coats came out. The terrain the Bridger Teton Wilderness area was stunning. There were miles of open golden fields, streams, "cricks" everywhere to replenish your horses thirst and mountains as far as the eye could see. We rode for hours and hours everyday through valleys, wooded areas, open plains and saw elk, antelope, and some cows. We stayed in the Bridger Teton area for 5 days. We headed home, which was memorable as well, we saw Fort Laramie and the Oregon Trail and met some wonderful people. All of the horses were fine on the way home.

I would recommend this trip to anyone who can condition their horses, and who has an attraction to riding out west. All of our preparations helped make it a successful trip, most notable: conditioning our horses, and having them used to everything, using alfalfa cubes instead of hay, being prepared for anything, like knowing that we had a blacksmith along and could vet our horses, having information before hand on where to stay and deciding to take at least three weeks to complete the trip, it takes a week just for traveling out and back. For me it was only made possible because of Jim and Dolly Little. It is important that your well prepared, but that you are also with people who have experience in traveling and camping with horses. I trusted them with taking my horse all the way to Wyoming and will trust them again, since they will be making annual trips for friends and any interested parties.

It is beautiful country and sharing it with your four legged friend, family and friends give you a renewed sense for our country and a small sense of what it was like a hundred years ago.