

CLOCKWISE: Riding through the Victorian Alps on horseback is an exhilarating adventure; enjoy a stunning view of country Victoria with fellow riders; horses taking a drink by the dam; a curious horse



GALLOPING GOOD TIMES

Riding with bush horses is a dream come true when you join a high-country adventure

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY LYNN GUNNING

So this is how "The Man From Snowy River" felt. As my horse gallops along a narrow bush trail, stones flying from his hoofs, I'm transported back in time — fulfilling a lifelong dream to follow in the footsteps of an Australian legend: experiencing the Victorian Alps on horseback.

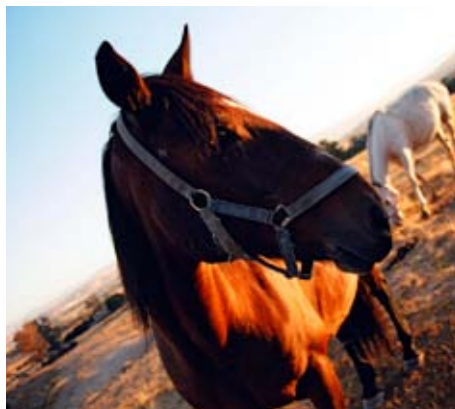
When I was in primary school, "The Man From Snowy River" captured my imagination. I could recite the first eight verses of the iconic poem penned by Banjo Paterson. For me, his freedom, and affinity with horses and mountains was captivating. He encapsulated the high-country cattlemen, with their rugged, dependable countenances battling against the elements in colonial outposts.

Merrijig, located just outside Mansfield, is three hours' drive northwest of Melbourne. Local operators offer a range of ride options: from two-hour rides to multi-day trips and stock musters. I choose an overnight ride with a camp-out under the stars run by **Lovick's High Country Adventure**.

There is certainly "movement at the station" as I arrive at the property on a warm Saturday morning for the overnight trip. A group of 30 riders is excitedly milling around, being outfitted with a horse and riding gear. Though I'm not an absolute beginner, I'm feeling apprehensive after 15 years out of the saddle. But owner Charlie Lovick reassures me all levels of ability are catered for and selects the perfect mount — a friendly and dependable Clydesdale with a predictable name, Clyde.

Lovick is a living legend in these parts, having been the head trainer of the horses used in *The Man From Snowy River* movies. A fifth-generation cattleman, Lovick has been running trail rides with his wife Glenda for 35 years. Cattlemen and women like the Lovicks keep traditions alive, and espouse the qualities of mateship and perseverance captured by Paterson in his classic verse. The chance to ride alongside them provides a rare opportunity to glimpse both their way of life, and the stunning scenery of this unique landscape. "A ride or cattle drive through the mountains gives a sense of tradition, a genuine experience," says Charlie. "It's a real link with our history."

As safety is a key component of riding, the guides check all gear to ensure it's correctly





“IT'S GREAT TO GET OUT INTO THE BUSH AND TAKE TRAILS THAT YOU CAN'T GET TO BY CAR”

fitted for each rider before they mount. Once in the saddle, each group receives a safety briefing and some general riding tips, before ambling off across the rolling paddocks.

On my trip, the morning is spent becoming accustomed to the gentle sway of the horse, and getting to know fellow riders. By mid-morning, we split into beginner, intermediate and advanced groups, and attempt our first gallop along a deserted country track. Despite some initial jolting, my confidence soon returns. I relax and begin to thoroughly enjoy the ground rapidly disappearing beneath me.

After lunch at a mountain hut, we enter Alpine National Park and take to rutted fire trails. I strike up a conversation with Katie, one of only two female guides. Katie joined the guiding team in a tree-change move away from the stress of city living.

“I'd lived in the city, but didn't enjoy it,” she explains. “Moving to the bush gave me the chance to live my dream job, and be paid to ride the trails.” As I drink in the pungent aroma of eucalyptus and the sight of dappled sunlight dancing through the gums, I envy the picture-perfect setting of her “workplace”.

By late afternoon, we've successfully navigated our way to The Hideout, a custom-built camp by the Howqua River. Glenda is there with refreshments laid out, and is preparing a huge roast dinner. We tend to the

horses, tidy up and sit down to a delicious hot meal, followed by a sing-a-long. The plethora of stories Charlie provides makes for great campfire entertainment. He's a fount of knowledge for everything from horse-handling to filmmaking and folklore. The accommodation is basic, yet comfortable. However, for some, falling asleep under the stars in the classic bushman's camping item — the swag — is another drawback.

Paul Gainsford had always wanted to do a high-country ride and sleep rough. Despite having earned the nickname of “Autumn” from the guides after being dislodged twice from his mount, he clearly enjoys the experience. “It's great to get out into the bush and take trails that you can't get to by car,” he grins. “It's a real adventure, especially when you're sleeping in a swag in the middle of nowhere.”

The next morning, I crawl out of my swag and begin walking like a bow-legged cowboy — I have leg muscles I didn't know existed. It isn't long before I'm back in the saddle and hovering above a small creek, hands clenched around the reins, preparing to tackle my first river crossing. The ground looks uneven, and I have to admit I'm nervous about tumbling at speed into the shallows.

As if on cue, Clyde rises to a trot, lengthens to a gallop and slides seamlessly into the stream. Heart pounding, I clutch his neck and



marvel at his sure-footedness. Cocooned in spray, I soon emerge from the river grinning widely, and thoroughly impressed with my newfound riding ability. Sigrid Thornton, eat your heart out!

By the time we trot back into the homestead on Sunday afternoon, I am considering a tree-change of my own. Relaxed and reinvigorated, I feel intimately connected with my homeland and history. ★

CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: Crossing a river on horseback is a tricky but fun challenge; lunch is served at a mountain hut; live out your own version of “The Man From Snowy River”; saddled and ready-to-go horses

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カウボーイ気分を楽しもう 草原を馬とともに駆ける、夢のようなカン トリー・アドベンチャー

マンスフィールド郊外にあるマーリジグは、メルボルンから北西へ車で3時間ほど。このツアーオペレーターたちは、馬の世話体験から2時間の乗馬体験、そして数日間にわたるツアーまで、さまざまなコースを用意している。今回は、ロビック・ハイ・カントリー・アドベンチャーが主催する、星空の下のキャンプ付き2日間ツアーに参加することに。

映画「スノーリバー」の雰囲気満点だ。馬は私を乗せて、細い道をゆっくりと進む。馬が蹴り上げる砂は、私を遙か昔に連れて行ってくれる。美しいビクトリアアルプスを進んでいけば、きっとそこにはロマンチックな時間が待っていると確信させてくれる。

オーナーのチャーリー・ロビックの自慢はどんな人でも楽しめるツアーを作り上げること。確かに、選んでもらった馬は私のレベルにぴったりだ。チャーリーはこのあたりではよく知られた存在で、「スノーリバー」に出演した馬のトレーナーも務めていたという。本業の牛飼いの仕事は彼で五代目。妻のグレンダとともにトレイルを馬とともに駆け抜けて、すでに35年になる。

ロビックのような牛飼いの夫婦は、伝統を受け継いでいる。彼らは忍耐強く、信頼関係を築くことに長けている。馬に乗って彼らと道を行くと、そうした生活の一端を垣間見ることができる。そして、目の前にはこの地独特の絶景が広がる。

馬に乗る前に、ガイドは必ずすべての馬具が乗り手に適当なものかを確認してくれる。そして鞍上にあがったあとは、安全に過ごすための注意と、ちょっとした乗馬のヒントをくれる。

今回の旅では、はじめの数時間は馬独特の揺れに慣れるので手一杯。一緒に参加する人々とも仲良くなれる時間でもある。お昼前には、それぞれのレベルに別

てトレイルを進み、旅が始まる。周囲の景色があつという間に流れていくように、だんだん気持ちが高まっていく。

ランチは山小屋で。そしてアルパイン国立公園に入り、わだちのついた消火用トレイルを進んでいく。街の生活に疲れ、ガイドに転身したというケイティと会話が弾む。ユーカリの香りが鼻をくすぐり、ゴムの木が作り出す木陰では陽の光が踊る。彼女の「仕事場」はなんと美しいことだろうと、少しうらやましく思う。

午後遅くに、ハウクア・リバーのそばにしつらえられた専用キャンプ場、ザ・ハイドアウトに無事到着。グレンダは軽食を広げ、おもしろい夕食の準備を始める。私たちは馬の世話をしてから、食卓についた。もちろん、すぐに歌が始まる。キャンプ場は質素だが、快適だ。しかし、寝袋に入り、星空の下で休むスタイルは人によって好みが変わるかもしれない。

翌朝。寝袋を丸め、カウボーイのように歩き出す。足の筋肉が自分のものではないようだ。しかし、すぐに出発の時間。手綱を握りしめ、少々緊張しながら初の小川越えに挑戦だ。地面が斜めになり、川に落ちるのではないかとひやひやする。

それが合図だったかのように、クライドはスピードをあげ、ごく自然に川の中に入って行く。もう、心臓はどきどきだ。ついには首にしがみつくとほどだったが、私の馬クライドの確かな足取りに少し落ちつきを取り戻す。そして水しぶきを浴びながら川から抜け出る頃には、自分の新たな才能を発見したような気分まで回復。牧場に戻った土曜の午後には、思い切ってここに引越してこようかとまで思い始めていた。リラックスした気分とともに、気力も充実している。そして何よりも、ふるさとの大地と歴史を肌で感じる事ができた。