

Squaw Butte Backcountry Horsemen Fun Ride in the Sawtooth's

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By Linda Paul

As the trip winds down, euphoria and melancholy gather like the Muses' faces on stage. Euphoria is nourished by new friendships, great stories, rides, scenery, and food, not to mention a week spent offline and blissfully ignorant of the latest grim headlines. Melancholy stems from the reality that all joyful adventures must come to an end, and soon granite peaks will give way to shrieking red and blue loyalists.

The trip began inauspiciously. Nearly half of the original participants were missing thanks to a shit storm of bad luck, including a car wreck. My adventures began, as a guest of Janine Townsend, with a short (how short, I had no idea) scouting trip from our campsite to Stanley Lake. First to arrive and set up camp, we were eager to explore. This was my maiden voyage aboard Bubba the Mule. We rode alongside a road that was far too busy, then worked our way down to the lake, scouting future swimming sites. Transcending a ridiculously steep embankment, we offered the animals a drink, but they were more interested in grass than in water. On the way back up that embankment, Bubba the Mule and I encountered a parting of the ways. Despite my grand efforts to hang onto at least one rein, I ended up holding a hank of leather attached to nothing but air. Injured pride aside, I tied the remaining rein into a very short roping rein, remounted Bubba and we headed back to camp just in time to greet the newest arrivals.



Watcha doing down there?

Early the next morning we made an ambitious 16-mile round-trip trek to Observation Divide. The original intent was to scale the pass up to Sawtooth Lake, but we called it good at the base of Observation Peak. By the time we made it back to camp, our horses' feet were tender and our heinies were raw, (well mine anyway). We packed up camp and moved from Stanley Lake to Tin Cup Transfer Station near Petit Lake, via pizza, beer, and gallons of

ice water in Stanley. We were treated to a Tin Cup full moon that night.



The next morning, we awaited a visit from the Chicks who were camped at Alturas, the next lake over. Lorraine arrived promptly at 9:30, leading Chick's riderless horse. During their 90-minute ride to Tin Cup, a deer had leaped out of the woods and into the face of Chick's four-year-old horse, causing an acrobatic up and over maneuver that resulted in four broken Chick ribs and putting an end to his riding for the week. Undaunted, we left, minus the Chicks, for a 12-mile round-trip to Farley Lake. This was a steep ride over lots of Sawtooth granite. An even steeper slither downhill took us to a flattish outcropping with a view of the lake, where we had lunch.



Farley Lake

Right after dinner that night, Rob scurried home to pick up Linda, who had been recovering from the aftermath of a devastating dental implosion. (See what I mean about the fate of this trip?) The Adams returned around noon the following day. We jettisoned a ride in favor of a move to a nicer campsite with better shade and a fabulous swimming hole — not deep enough for horse swimming, but plenty deep enough for human therapy. The horses'

feet and our derrieres needed a break anyway.



Thursday morning dawned with ominous, dark clouds hovering above the peaks, but the sun quickly burned them away. During the night Kelley's horse, Tawny, tried to dig for gold among the rocks under her high line, but only managed to liberate a shoe. She got fitted with a boot, thanks to Linda Erickson and Janine. Our goal for the day was Alice Lake, 5.5 rocky miles up a 1,600 feet incline that skirts the Sawtooth's version of El Capitan at 9,901 feet elevation. The ride required 5 stream crossings, the last of which entailed a dicey looking bridge, plus sharing the trail with a plethora of hikers. As the weekend approached, the pedestrians arrived *en masse*: a delightfully polite boy scout troop, a solo female hiker with no map and earbuds turned up loud enough that she was blithely unaware of the six horses bearing down on her; and, in addition to several other large groups, a pack of post-adolescent males with dreads and a boom box cranked loud enough to make our horses shiver as we passed them on the trail.



Morning sun warming El Capitan



Approaching the bridge over 5th river crossing



Alice Lake lunch break



Sisterhood



Alice Lake

The next morning, we saddled up for a nice cross-country ride across flat land to visit the Chicks, if they were still in camp. The first 45 minutes were a delightful break from rocks and elevation, then we came to a swampy canal crossing with a foot bridge of sorts marking the way.



Is THAT the crossing?

Looking for an easier crossing, we headed toward the foothills, passing through a delightful meadow along the way. I'm not sure what that grass was laced with. Tawny snuck her head down for a nibble, but instead she buckled at the knees and conveniently paused for Kelley to hop off a moment before she began a nice happy-horse roll, saddle be damned. As we all gaped in disbelief, the urge to drop and roll hit my horse, and then Rob's horse! By this time, Bubba the Mule was riderless thanks to the cinch sore that I gave him the first day of our trip. For this ride, Janine had let him follow us at will, and roll he did, too. A happier mule I've never seen.



Horse glee

We were ultimately forced to lurch our way through a bog that sucked two more shoes off Tawny. We never did find the Chicks' campsite. On the way back home, Kelley and Tawny lead the way across the scary canal crossing, rather than renegotiating the miserable morning bog.



Between the forest and the bog . . .



That night, the camp woke at midnight to the anguished cries and whinnies of all six horses. I raced out of bed in half clothes, expecting to find a bear-shredded horse, but found, instead, Tawny, happily snatching bites of grass between Janine's and Rob's high lines, much to the delight of Bubba and the dismay of Kiger, Payette, and Tucker, and to the worry of Boo, Tawny's high line mate. The payoff, after we all tumbled out of our bunks sans britches to restore the natural order of things, was the sight of a blood-red, nearly full moon just rising over the horizon. Smoke had drifted in from the southwest, making breathing tortuous and easing the regret of the end of a great trip.



Smokey sky

I am immensely grateful to Janine for the opportunity to experience this marvelous week offline and in life. Thanks to Rob, also, for planning the event and for supplying me with a mount after I broke poor Bubba. Although our ranks were fewer than planned, we enjoyed each other's company and shared food. I had the pleasure of meeting Linda Adams, Kelley Ragland, and Shelly Duff. I feel badly for Chick and his painful ribs and also for those who never even made it to Idaho. Now I'm back to enjoying the comfort of my shower and dreading the screaming news.

