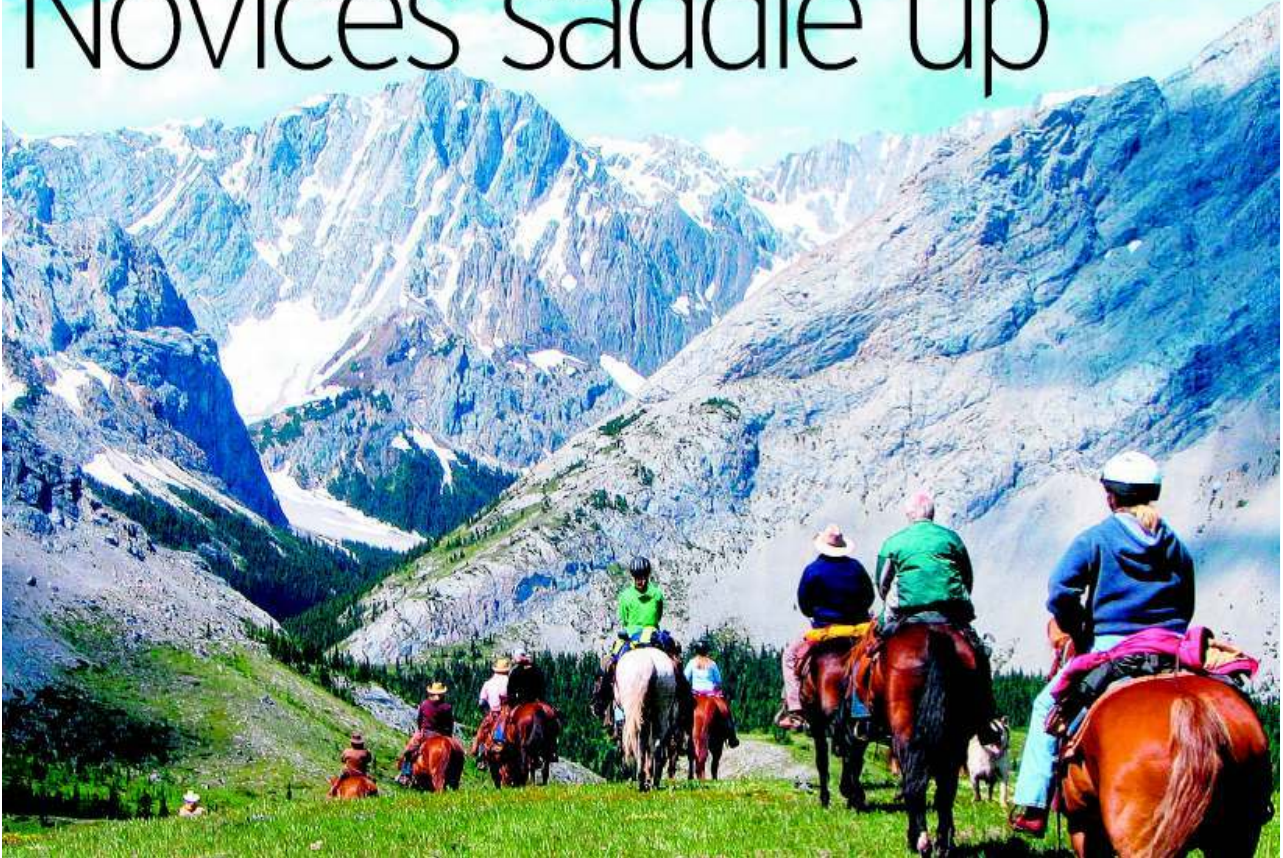




Novices saddle up



Noble beasts: A trail ride sets out from the Anchor D ranch in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, Canada, and (below) a covered wagon makes a crossing

Riding in pristine snow enhances a Canada tour, writes

Kevin Hepworth

I HAVE always had an aversion to horses – or more correctly, they seem to have had an aversion to me.

Don't get me wrong . . . I think they are noble beasts and there is a certain enjoyment to the one carrying your money getting its brightly coloured rider to the finish line ahead of the other brightly coloured riders.

Yet, the last time I attempted to ride one – some 35 years ago – it was having a bit of a set to with its four-legged neighbour and it was my knee that was bitten. Not a happy memory.

So with a degree of trepidation and more than one failed attempt to beg out of it, I found myself heading southwest from Canada's Calgary to the quaintly-named Sheep River Valley and Dewy and Jan Matthews' Anchor D ranch.

It was December, we had been in the wild west province for a couple of days, the temperature had sunk to a cosy -15C and we were going horse riding into the foothills of the mighty Rocky Mountains.

For almost a quarter of a century Dewy and wife Jan have taken groups of riders – thankfully, of all standards – into the back country of the Kananaskis Wilderness Park. They offer everything from a half-day ride out of the homestead to a week-long trek into the heart of the Rockies.

"It's getting folk to see this country the way it should be seen – from the back of a good horse," Dewy offers.

As Dewy and crew saddle up and make a couple of adjustments to the choice of mounts when advised he has five uber-novices on his hands – "Never lost a guest yet and not about to start now . . . ground's too hard for digging to hide a body" – the rest of the ranch crew make sure everyone is suitably kitted with warm boots, gloves and headgear.

"You've got a tonne of heater right between your legs – you'll be fine," is

the final judgment.

A quick lesson in how to steer, another in how to raise up in the stirrups to "help your horse" and it's away into the hills.

Within minutes of leaving the ranch gate, the snow-covered surrounds are pristine. The horses are the heroes here, consummate professionals who know the game.

Dewy and the other trailhands on the ride offer a snatch of advice here and there, make a call on how the greenhorn is settling into the saddle and pick up the pace.

A walk to a gentle canter to a mild gallop. It's invigorating, terrifying and a whole lot of fun.

"Just let them make the decisions," Dewy suggests on a descent down through the pine trees.

"They don't want to fall down any more than you do, and they've been here before."

There are stops along the way to scan the slopes for elk, to have a breathless look at a timeless landscape and for Dewy to point out where the Puma took down a deer



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 Page 2 of 2



the day before. “You can stop lookin’ so nervous, he ain’t hungry no more,” he delivers with a wry grin.

Three and a half hours in and even the thought of some relief to aching knees and thighs is not enough to dull the edge of disappointment when the ranch house comes into view. The

ride is over, but not the hospitality. The morning is capped off with what is almost a family lunch around the dining room table – doorstep-thick fresh bread, piles of fillings and endless tales of deer, bear, rodeos and adventure cap what has been an unexpectedly brilliant experience.

Winter is not be the prime time for a trail ride – the official season is May to October – but the idea of being the only lunatics in a pristine landscape adds a piquancy to the experience that you may not find in summer.

We’ll find out about that next time because, like many of Dewy’s guests, we’ll be going back.

The writer was a guest of Travel Alberta Canada

need to know

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