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# To New Heights by Horse

By Peter Verburg  
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Just below the summit of Cougar Mountain, in southwestern Alberta, is a grassy plateau the size of a football field. The meadow is roughly 8,000 feet above sea level, a modest altitude for the Canadian Rockies, but standing there is a singular experience. What makes the humpbacked mountain such an unforgettable place is the surrounding scenery: a 360-degree panorama of deep, forested valley and craggy, snowcapped peaks.

Unless a person has access to a helicopter, there are only two ways to reach this spot and enjoy the spectacle: on foot, or with the help of a four-legged friend.

The former method would consume an entire day and an incredible amount of energy. My wife, Leona, and I chose the latter. On horseback, we discovered the ups and downs of riding through the Rocky Mountains.

For those who can tolerate the physical challenges, a hoofed trek through the Rockies is a fantastic way to spend a vacation. Rugged terrain is no obstacle (as it is to those traveling by foot or mountain bike), and a person can get far enough away to forget everything but the natural world. The sights, sounds and most of the smells are so incredibly delicious that by the end of the trip we were talking about getting back in the saddle the next summer. But next time I'll remember to bring a flask of whiskey to soothe the sore spots.

The Rockies span almost the entire continent, but one of the best spots to explore them on horseback is Kananaskis Country, a 1,600-square-mile mountain playground nestled in the front ranges of the Canadian Rockies. Named after an Indian who survived a blow to the head by a battle ax, Kananaskis is one of Canada's best-kept secrets.

A provincial mountain park established in 1977 by the government of Alberta, Kananaskis is a mere child compared with its 100-year-old neighbor, Banff National Park. The park encompasses the foothills and eastern slopes of the Rockies southwest of Calgary, Alberta's largest city, and borders Banff and the Continental Divide to the west.

Within the borders of Kananaskis lie an unparalleled 500 miles of trail open to horses, not to mention some of North America's best fly-fishing and kayaking. The area also boasts the highest drivable point in Canada and the highest established hiking trail in the Rockies.

Something other than age and geography separates Kananaskis from Banff and most other Rocky Mountain resorts: people. Because the area is quite young, it has received very little marketing and media attention. Hence many of the trails are as secluded as they were when Pacific settlers first passed through the region on their way to Oregon.

Kananaskis is an easy area to explore as a side trip to Calgary, just one hour away by car. In fact, the busiest time for Kananaskis outfitters—whose season usually starts in May and ends in October—are the days surrounding the annual Calgary Stampede (July 9 to 18 this year). Horse riding in the mountains before and after the Stampede is so popular that some outfitters are booked six months to a year in advance. And this year is an especially advantageous time for Americans to visit, since a strong U.S. dollar (about 73 cents buys one Canadian dollar) translates into travel bargains.

Several professional outfitters offer day rides and overnight trips through Kananaskis. The one we hooked up with, Anchor D Guiding and Outfitting Ltd., has been inflicting saddle sores on city dwellers for almost 16 years. I first



discovered Anchor D on the Internet at <http://www.anchorD.com>.

The Anchor D ranch is located 50 miles southwest of Calgary in the Sheep River Valley, not far from the edge of Kananaskis. A range of rides is available—from single-day trips (\$73) to week-long treks over the Continental Divide (about \$870). We booked a weekend ride (about \$240 per person) up through the Sheep River Valley to Anchor D's wilderness camp.

(In retrospect, we should have chosen a longer trip. We discovered that horse-riding adventures, while long on peace, are not exactly short on suffering, at least for a couple of greenhorns. After the first day, we slid off our saddles with knees so sore we could barely walk. Those aches greatly diminish after a person has been "broken in.")

The drive from Calgary to the Anchor D ranch and nearby trail head was the first pleasing experience of the trip. With the mountains to the west lighted up by a brilliant yellow glow from the morning sun, we drove down provincial Highway 22 through Alberta's premier ranching country, a verdant landscape of gently rolling hills. The last stretch of asphalt before the trail head is Highway 546 west of the town of Turner Valley. Winding through the foothills, we passed through enormous stands of aspen and spruce that rise up from the Sheep River. A whitetail deer watched us go by.

Blackfoot Indians, who hunted in the region in the 1800s, call the area itou-kai-you, which means "sheep at the head of the river," a reference to the large number of bighorn sheep that spend their winters grazing at the lower elevations. The river itself carves a deep trench through the bedrock as it tumbles out of the low frontal range, 13 miles from its source on Mt. Rae. It eventually feeds into the much larger Bow River just east of Calgary.

Three shaggy-maned steeds were delivered to the trail head at 10:30 a.m. Our seasoned guide, Curtis, had an unkempt mustache and a droopy felt hat and came armed with a large-caliber grizzly taming rifle. "Insurance," he said with a toothy grin to Leona as he loaded our gear onto the pack mule.

My gelding, Tom, a dark brown quarter horse, greeted me with the weary suspicion you might expect from an animal that is handled by dozens of strangers over the summer. Before long, we were heading up the rocky trail, breathing in the heavy scent of lodgepole pine. The emerald green Sheep River meandered 100 feet below, swirling over rapids that would challenge the most experienced white-water paddler. We passed a herd of free-range cattle resting in the shade.

For the next seven hours, our sturdy mountain "ponies" forded the foot-deep Sheep River a dozen times, clambered up steep banks and trudged reluctantly through patches of muck. They and we sweated hard under the blazing sun. With no cloud in sight, our only respite from the 90-degree heat was occasional shade from ancient towering spruce trees.

Curtis pointed out Mt. Gibraltar, whose flush north face protrudes over the valley. In 1994, a British marine and a Canadian rescue specialist jumped off the peak, at 5,730 feet, to earn the dubious distinction of completing the world's longest rope slide; some of the descent was done at speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour.

The trail wove in and out of dense thickets, occasionally returning to an old, narrow gravel road built early in the century to transport coal out of the valley. No motorized vehicles are allowed beyond the trail head; Anchor D uses pack horses and a horse-drawn wagon to shuttle supplies.

For the next three hours the three of us rode past jagged mountain peaks under a cobalt sky. The low front range consists of primarily sandstone and shale, so much of the exposed rock has brownish hues. Farther in we encountered the light gray tones of dolomite, granite and limestone. Since this was midsummer, we observed a colorful array of wildflowers, including bluebells, evening primrose and the bright red Indian paintbrush. We also spotted the beautiful but poisonous purple larkspur; one mouthful will kill a cow, Curtis cheerfully informed us.

Later in the day, after a lunch break next to the Sheep River, we took a side trip up Burns Creek to a multitiered, 1,000-foot waterfall. Curtis led us along old cut lines carved into the forest for mineral exploration during World War II. Eventually we came to an enormous cliff where Burns Creek, a tributary of the Sheep, cascades into an exquisitely foaming pool.

Shortly after 7 p.m. we arrived at camp, situated 11 miles from the trail head at an elevation of 6,500 feet, just as the sun and mountains started to form a stunning silhouette. Here we met up with fellow sojourners, most of whom were



experienced riders. They included a retired dentist, a single mother with her two teenage kids and a couple of computer programmers from England who, along with their 9- and 11-year-old daughters, were visiting the Rockies for the first time.

There we enjoyed a hearty meal of fire-roasted chicken, rice, vegetables and fresh salad. The only resting place for our aching butts was a hard log. Later, after some chitchat by the campfire, we retired to sleeping quarters from the pioneer era: a musty canvas tent that had a bare dirt floor.

We rose at dawn and spent a relaxing morning at camp before embarking on a grueling ride that took us to the high reaches of Cougar Mountain. The group now numbered 13, including three guides. In single file, nose to rear, the horses carried us up with heavy panting and beads of sweat rolling down their necks. The phrase "help your horse" was called out frequently by the guide; it was an order to stand up in our stirrups, lean forward and clasp the mane.

After climbing above the tree line, the horses broke into a thunderous gallop to the large meadow, where a cool breeze brought relief from the intense heat. We stopped for lunch amid the clover and lichen-covered boulders and took in the breathtaking landscape.

To the south stood Rae and Tombstone, a pair of gray saw-tooth mountains formed about 75 million years ago. To the east, the vast expanse of the Sheep River Valley was surrounded by a stunning array of over-thrust mountains. According to Dewy Matthews, who with his wife, Jan, owns Anchor D, the ride up Cougar Mountain is especially popular in late September and early October, when the larch needles turn golden yellow.

The descent from Cougar Mountain was fast and, at times, frightening. We had to lean way back as the horses first navigated their way down a wide slope of scree, then along the edge of a cliff.

We rode a total of eight hours on the second day, arriving back at the trail head around 6 in the evening. There, my dusty, bowlegged frame appreciated the soft seat of our **Toyota** van like never before.

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX / INFOGRAPHIC)

#### GUIDEBOOK

##### Horsing Around Canada

Getting there: From LAX to Calgary, Air Canada and Canadian Airlines fly nonstop; United and Delta have connecting flights with one change of planes. Fares begin at \$402 round trip.

Most major car rental agencies are represented at Calgary International Airport. From Calgary, take Highway 22 south to Turner Valley and turn west on Highway 546 to the Anchor D Ranch. Total driving time is about one hour.

Booking a riding trip: Anchor D Guiding and Outfitting Ltd., P.O. Box 656, Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada T0L 0H0; tel. (403) 933-2867, fax (403) 933- 2255, Internet <http://www.anchor-d.com>, e-mail [anchor-d@anchor-d.com](mailto:anchor-d@anchor-d.com), offers an array of guided horse rides, from full-day excursions (\$73) to weekend trips (\$237, including two nights at a wilderness camp) to three- to six-day rides (\$99 per day). The seven-day Great Divide ride crosses the Continental Divide into British Columbia and back (there are still spaces left on the Sept. 5-11 ride, \$872 per person), and the six-day Lost Trail ride explores the high country of Kananaskis (July 26 to 31 and Aug. 2 to 7, \$766). For more information: Canadian Tourism Commission, 550 S. Hope St., 9th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90071; tel. (213) 346-2700, fax (213) 346-2767, Internet <http://www.canadatourism.com>.

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