

Riding in the Canadian Rockies

Alexandra Ferguson turns horseriding cowgirl on a trail ride across North America's Great Divide.

By Alexandra Ferguson

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High on the ridge, a lone rider hoves into view, hunkered down in the saddle, hat pulled low. All around, the snowflakes dance and whirl. He pauses to scan the horizon. To the west, regimented stands of pine march towards British Columbia, but the mountain ranges are spectral in the dying light. With a nudge of his spurs he pushes on, his packhorse and dogs bending to the wind. "Help your horse," he hollers, and we stand in our stirrups, grabbing handfuls of mane as we climb higher, hooves clattering in the scree.



'We ride on through a shifting kaleidoscope of mountains and forest'

Later, warmed by the fire and a good feed, the horses corralled beneath the trees, Dewy eases his accordion from its velvet-lined case and, like some dime novel legend, begins to play. His callused hands caress the keys, conjuring the chords of the cowboy song. Above the crackle of the fire and the murmur of the forest, the notes rise into the sharp night air.

Kananaskis Country — near Banff in the Canadian Rockies — straddles the Great Divide: the high terrain between the Pacific and Atlantic watersheds. It is still a wilderness where moose and elk, wolves and bears roam. Dewy Matthews has been leading trail rides here for more than 20 years, hitching his teams to the chuck wagons and striking out along alpine tracks like the pioneers of old. Assisted by wranglers from his Anchor D ranch, he offers guests a taste of the Old West.

It is June — the first trek of the season — and the weather is changeable. The morning dawns crisp and clear, the jagged peaks reasserting their presence above the tree line. Over the next week, we will trace a circular route through the mountains, the wagons trundling from camp to camp, while we take to the high passes.

We saddle up and set out through the trees: Dewy and Serena, the cook, in front, Justin and Leonard, both wranglers, to the rear. It feels good to be alive this morning, with nature flooding my senses: the forest floor flecked with flowers, the gentle creak of leather and the sweet smell of horse. Dewy stops to clear the path — his

horse untroubled by the chainsaw — then we are off again.

My horse, Cool — a lively grey — is slowly ridding me of my uptight English ways. My stirrups are longer and I am rolling in the roomy saddle, but the loose, left-handed grasp of the reins is a challenge. Sue from Marlborough — an accomplished horsewoman — and her husband, Bill, a financial adviser, have no difficulty adapting, while Robert — the other member of the group — is a veteran of Western riding trips.

These horses are conditioned athletes and quicken the pace as the gradient sharpens, vaulting tree trunks and breaking into a canter. The dogs follow on our hooves, chasing a thousand smells through the undergrowth.

Slowly the canopy thins as we emerge on to a high col. The timber has fallen here — the result of some ancient forest fire — and litters the ground in strange, tortured shapes. We pick our way through the petrified bones of the forest, the valley unfolding below, the clouds racing by.

Dewy spots movement on the far hillside. “Everyone down!” he whispers, and we dismount, squinting at the sea of green. With its outsized body and spindly legs, the elk could have been spirited from a child’s painting. It is not alone, bending to nuzzle a calf at its feet. We track them for a while, but they catch our scent and bolt for cover.

There are signs of wildlife everywhere: beaver lodges on the river, grizzly tracks in the mud, and moose antlers on the trail. But as we press higher, we face a barren wall of rock. We tether the horses and head for a notch in the skyline. Polished by mountain streams, the boulders are greasy underfoot, and we haul ourselves heavenward along a series of chains.

When finally we flop over the rim, we land on the shores of an alpine lake, suspended in a high basin. Its waters — a supernatural shade of turquoise — flash with fat brown trout, and while we snatch 40 winks in the sun, Serena casts her line. She is soon squealing with joy over her catch, but returns each fish to the water.

Justin’s talents lie in roping horses, not fish, and that evening he demonstrates his skills. “When we booked this trip, we didn’t realise it would be with real cowboys!” says Sue. It looks easy: creating the loop, setting it in motion and lassoing the target, but I cannot even catch a tree stump. The others are no better.

Our poor wrangling skills exposed, we muster all our energy for the next task: eating. Serena produces a fine steak supper, and we crack open the beer beside the fire. “What a perfect day,” sighs Bill, stretching his aching legs.

The conversation turns to bears. Adult grizzlies will not enter a camp guarded by dogs, but the juveniles are inquisitive. I ask Dewy if he has ever had a problem. “Well, I’ve never lost a guest yet,” he says, with a grin and a twitch of his moustache. Snug in my sleeping bag that night, I dream I am being chased, and wake at 3am to ferocious barking.

The next morning there are muddled tracks, but no bears. The smell of pancakes wafts through the camp. The wranglers are up, the horses saddled. Dewy sits by the fire, lacing a new pair of boots; dandy fringes grace the toes. Leonard fills his mug from the coffee pot. “That’s a fancy pair of snake-kickers you’ve got there, Dewy,” he murmurs, breaking into a low guffaw. Leonard — a gentle man with a broad, barrel chest and Grizzly Adams beard — doesn’t do “fancy”. He might just have been born wearing his hat. It never leaves his head and, having lost all form, clings to his scalp like an affectionate creature.

Soon we are all suited and booted — chaps slung low, neckerchiefs knotted, hats on heads — and ready to move camp. The wagons are loaded, the draught horses harnessed to take the strain.

With a click of the tongue and a flick of the reins, we rumble through the forest. The wagons pitch wildly as we cross the creek but the wranglers gather the reins and push the teams on. When the trail divides, we quit the valley floor and the wagon train for loftier heights.

We ride on through a shifting kaleidoscope of mountains and forest, meadows and streams. The weather flits between summer and spring. One moment I am in fleece and slicker, the next, short sleeves. We see no one, but we are far from alone. Each day brings new delights: a glimpse of a grizzly and her cubs, or wolves running on a high ridge.

In the evening we collapse by the fire, Serena sating our growing appetites with robust country fare. Our education in all things Western continues, with Dewy on accordion and Serena on guitar.

By day three I am saddle sore, regular hacks at home no preparation for the rugged terrain and long hours in the saddle. But Cool and I reach an understanding: he eats my apple cores and I cling on, grabbing the "panic button" — the horn at the front of the saddle — whenever necessary. The world's worst cowgirl, I even take to parking him on an incline to get on. My antics do not go unnoticed. "So, are you getting shorter, Alex, or is the horse getting taller?" asks Dewy to raucous laughter.

On our final day, we ford a river and climb through drifts of buttercups to Old Baldie: a high, treeless pass. Dewy traces our route with a finger. We have travelled a long way — some 70-odd miles — and not one of us wants to leave.

We dismount and tether the horses, pulling a final picnic lunch from our saddlebags. There is little conversation. The peace rolls over us in waves. Sitting there — the warm wind on my face, flowers at my feet — I try to drink it all in, to fix it in my mind, while all around the cowboys and cowgirls snooze in the long grass.

- Alexandra Ferguson travelled as a guest of American Round-Up (01404 881777, www.americanroundup.com), which offers the seven-day Anchor D "Great Divide" trip for £974, plus £89 service charge, per person. She flew with Air Canada (0871 220 1111, www.aircanada.com). Returns from Heathrow to Calgary cost from £704, including taxes.

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