





HORSE PACK TRIPS IN THE

Bob Marshall Wilderness

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SWAN MOUNTAIN OUTFITTERS

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE “CROWN OF THE CONTINENT”, STRETCHES ACROSS THOUSANDS OF MILES OF SNOW-CAPPED ROCKY MOUNTAIN PEAKS IN NORTHWEST MONTANA. THE GLACIER BACKCOUNTRY IS A LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS, SWEEPING ALPINE VIEWS AND AQUAMARINE GLACIAL WATERS YOU SIMPLY HAVE TO EXPERIENCE. AND, WHAT BETTER WAY TO DO THAT THAN ON HORSEBACK?

BY LINDA ROSWELL

LAST YEAR, my husband Jim and I booked our dream vacation—a five-day summer pack trip in Northwest Montana with Swan Mountain Outfitters. Jim and I live in upstate New York, own horses and ride as often as we can, but it never seems to be enough. So, we knew the best way for us to celebrate the beginning of our retirement would be to get away from it all on the back of a horse.

Then the unexpected occurred. I was trail riding in the forest near our home when my horse spooked and threw me. Immediately I knew something was wrong. I had broken my clavicle, several ribs and dislocated my shoulder. I was in excruciating pain, but what hurt most was the thought of not being able to go to Montana in August. I was

so determined to get to Montana that I scrounged together every ounce of willpower I had to make a full recovery in time. After three months of constant therapy and rehabilitation, the doctor cleared me to go on the trip.

We arrived in Kalispell, Montana, on a beautiful August morning. As part of our pre-trip package, we were greeted by Pat Tabor at the airport and taken directly to Swan Mountain Guest Ranch, about an hour away. Northwest Montana is one of those places where every turn gives a better view than the last. I was absolutely blown away by just the drive down to the guest ranch.

The ranch itself looks like something you would see in a magazine, a classic log home with a green metal roof situated on 40 acres of private land

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The horses and riders enjoy a lunch break at the Palisades. RIGHT: Trail riders head on rugged mountain trails to Upper Camp. All photos courtesy of Swan Mountain Outfitters.



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surrounded on all sides by State and Federal Forest. It's the kind of place where the absence of so many aspects of your normal, everyday life makes everything that remains that much more pure and intense...the colors are brighter, the air is cooler, the water is sweeter, and the noisy silence of the forest is fascinating. Joanne Tabor grilled several tenderloins from the whitetail buck that Pat had hunted the previous fall and topped off the delicious meal with homemade huckle-

berry pie—a Montana specialty.

The anticipation I felt the next morning was reminiscent of the way I felt as a child waking up on Christmas Day. After months of hard work and sacrifice, I just couldn't wait to get on the mountain! We ate a hearty breakfast and then drove to base camp, which was bustling with activity when we arrived. It seemed there were horses, mules and people everywhere, but before I knew it, the crew had all of our horses saddled along

with a string of six mules, packed with all the food and gear we would need for five days. My horse, Fox, was a sweet sorrel Paint that waited patiently as the crew readied the rest of the guests. When all was said and done, we were eight people (including our guide, Charlie; and the cook, Steve) on eight horses followed by six mules. What a sight!

We headed out on the trail from base camp and entered a noticeably cool pine forest. I was nervous at first but began to loosen up as I realized how calm and relaxed Fox was as he impressively picked his way across the red and grey stones magnified by the crystal clear waters of Lion Creek. As we climbed on, Charlie pointed out Alder Mountain and Swan Peak in the distance. They were 9,000 feet tall and we were going up to meet them. My insides fluttered with excitement. It was really happening! I had made it to Montana.

We stopped for lunch at a breathtaking mountain waterfall that crashed through the rocks as snow melted above it. After lunch we rode three more hours before we reached High Camp, which consisted of five wall tents nestled along upper Lion Creek. After we'd settled in, Steve called us to the mess tent for a dinner of barbecued chicken, macaroni salad, grilled corn and brownies for dessert. I drifted to sleep that night, listening to the swift rushing of the creek, with a full belly and satisfied smile.

The next morning we headed for Palisades Lake. The ride over Lion Creek Pass boasted terrific views of the Mission Mountain Range to the west. Charlie's trained eye caught a black bear scrambling up a mountain 300 yards away. We watched with binoculars as he turned over rocks looking for grubs. Then we entered a steep canyon and descended onto the lake. Towering cliffs framed the beautiful turquoise waters.

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I swam out to a flat rock to stand waist deep in the cold water while my husband worked to master his fly cast.

It was like one of those summer days you remember from your childhood—truly taking the time to enjoy your surroundings because you haven't a care in the world. When we were finished playing, the horses hurried us back to camp—just as eager to eat as we were! That night Steve made steak and mashed potatoes with Dutch oven peach cobbler for dessert. Then, we gathered around the campfire beneath Tiara, the mountain above High Camp, named after its resemblance to a queen's crown. I smiled as I watched the sun cast its final, but most brilliant, splashes of pink and orange across Tiara's kingdom.

On the third day, the rest of the group decided to stay in camp and relax, so it was just Charlie, Jim and I that headed to Swan Peak, the highest mountain in the area. The steep, winding switchbacks were surrounded on all sides by the most abundant rainbow of wildflowers we'd ever seen—purple, green, yellow, pink, blue, orange, red, and white; in all sorts of shapes and sizes—wild and delicate, short and tall.

As we crested the ridge, we found ourselves at the base of Swan Peak. Montana's famed big blue sky stretched out before us and I was overcome with emotion. I instantly welled up and begin to cry as my eyes took in the majesty before them. Jim rode over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He knew better than anyone what bad shape I had been in and how hard it had been for me to get here. He understood that standing on top of this mountain, taking in this view together, made it all worth it. The ride to Swan Peak took everything I had emotionally and physically, but even that couldn't convince me to miss dinner—pork tenderloin and pineapple upside down cake.

Our final excursion took us to Owl Ridge. As we hiked to the pinnacle of the ridge, Charlie pointed out the wild scallions growing all around. He encouraged us to pick a few for Steve who uses them to stuff the bellies of the native cutthroat trout that guests catch. From the top of the ridge, we could see down the throat of the little Salmon drainage into the heart of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. We stood there for a while taking in all the incredible peaks with fitting names like Silvertip, Pagoda and Pyramid. Standing on top of that ridge, I became acutely aware of how small I am compared to it all—but at the same time, how privileged I am to be a part of it.

When we were done with the ridge, we came back down and made one last fishing stop at Middle Lake, hoping to catch a nice big one to go along with our wild scallions. Sure enough, an hour later Jim pulled out the



ABOUT

Swan Mountain Outfitters is a one-of-a-kind family owned business that offers the only horseback riding trips inside the Glacier National Park. They offer everything from an hour-long ride to overnight horseback trips, accommodating all skill levels. To learn more about what they have to offer:



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biggest trout I had ever seen. A few hours later, we arrived in camp for our last dinner. True to Charlie's promise, Steve cooked up our trout with the wild onions. Jim and I had never tasted anything so fresh.

We spent our last night sitting around the campfire stargazing; you've never seen stars as bright as they are in Montana. We laughed and told stories as we made s'mores for dessert. And, then it was off to our tents to fall asleep listening to Lion Creek for the last time.

On our last day, the guides and wranglers were up early packing the string for the ride home. As we reached the bottom of the trail, Fox's ears perked forward and he glanced to

the right. I followed his gaze to a beautiful white tail buck frozen just a few feet off the trail's edge. His brown eyes fixed on me momentarily before he turned and leapt into the woods, his white tail waving goodbye. And I knew it was time for me to say goodbye too. I had worked so hard to come see Montana, and once I arrived, she was everything I had hoped for and more. Though my bones were healed before coming, it was Montana that truly made me whole again.



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Linda and her husband Jim, are avid trail riders from New York, who made their dream come true when they made it to ride in Montana.

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