

Mineola to Montana: A Cowboy Crash Course

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When I learned I'd be going to Montana this summer on a genuine ranch vacation – at Runamuk Guest Ranch in Roundup - I went into what you might call “method acting” mode. I immersed myself in all things western, like listening to songs such as “*Little Joe the Wrangler*”, “*Red River Valley*”, and “*Along the Navajo Trail*”, and watching Westerns such as “*They Died With Their Boots On*” with Errol Flynn, “*Fort Apache*”, starring Henry Fonda and John Wayne, and every other western by director John Ford I could find. I also “visualized” myself doing things such as riding horses and sitting around the campfire. Finally, I visited the Babylon Riding Center on Long Island for riding tips, and talked horses with a friend, Bob Stubblefield, former CEO of a Midwest AAA club and a Nebraska ranch-owner.



I did a lot of daydreaming too. Would they give me a nickname – like Pistol Pete, the Brooklyn Buckaroo or the AAA Kid? Would I run into tough hombres or rattlers, or rope and brand a calf? And would I call out the first person that called me a city slicker? I also had a nightmare, about getting up on a horse. Could I? Those creatures are pretty tall, and I spent more time worrying about that than what would happen after I got up on one. Donnie Sexton, the Montana tourism publicist who arranged my visit, assured me that they had step-stools if I need help mounting, but I thought “no way” am I doing that. I'd rather be trampled in a stampede than look like a, well, city slicker.

Well, I needn't have worried. Everything went smoothly, except for Day Two, when Hammer (scary name, isn't it?), my first mount, got to stopping and snacking on grass all along the trail, and Day Three, when Jack, my second mount, got a little headstrong instead of following my lead. (As my host/instructor, Toby Dahl, told me, “A horse has to be told what to do. He shouldn't tell you what to do”. But it seemed like Jack was doing most of the talking.) At one point, in front of a whole slew of local wranglers and other guests, he kept going around in a circle and I couldn't get him moving forward. I blamed him, but later considered that I might have been mishandling the reigns. Nevertheless, he made me look ridiculous, and like Jack Walsh, the movie producer in “*The Godfather*”, a man in my position can't afford to be made to look ridiculous. Then, to add insult to injury, Jack also had a habit of unexpectedly taking off in a trot. I didn't mind the thrill of it all – after all, what fun is moseying along all day, - so much as the fact that inexperienced riders can't help bouncing up and down in the saddle when a horse is moving that fast. Unlike bicycle seats, saddles aren't padded.

But Toby prepared me well for riding. He spent about an hour teaching me how to mount, hold the reins, get the horse moving forward, stopping him, turning him and the like. Hammer had been his horse for three years, so I felt I had a quality steed. I also got some great advice before I left home from Lauren Filiberto, a 16-year-old instructor at the Babylon Riding Center. She told me:

- Every horse has a personality; get to know it
- Let him sniff you to see if he likes you; if his head turns or his ears fold back, stay away
- Horses detect fear and some may react to it

- Hold the reins loosely and keep your hands forward
- Don't pull back to stop; gently pump each hand back and forth
- Don't walk behind a horse or make loud noises or sudden movements
- Keep your legs straight, and wear boots with heels to keep your feet locked in the stirrups

Bob Stubblefield reinforced some of these points, and had a few of his own, such as, stay on the horse's left side, condition your legs and wear the right gear – “so you don't burn the hair off your legs”.

The only advice I didn't get was how to mount a horse from behind, like screen cowboys do it. I guess that isn't a wise move for a beginner.

But even if I never got near a horse, the visit would have been one of my best trips ever, thanks to Toby, and his wife, Jody. They are first-rate people, who literally open their home to strangers, and feed them like they are visiting royalty. Toby, a fifth-generation rancher who says “land is in my blood”, but who never wanted to run a ranch, is a serious man – apparently the West does that to people – who nonetheless has a biting sense of humor, is well read and talks freely about philosophy, social and spiritual issues, ecology and the like. He also keeps a journal, and I imagine that someday his two sons will read it and understand the heritage that their father had prepared for them. He prefers hunting to ranching, and has a side business that allows him to take guests out on his 18,000 acres for elk, mule deer, turkeys and other wild game. But he is a realist too: “Selling calves is where the money is”.



Jody, who never stops smiling, is a ball of energy who cooks up a storm for her guests and serves them in her own dining room instead of in the guest houses in which they stay. The Dahls prefer the “family “ approach, and it works: I felt as welcomed in their home as anywhere I've been. Even their neighbors, like Jane Evelo, are welcoming, or as they say in the movies, “right neighborly”. When she learned that I was leaving town before her Friday night chili party, Jane promised to send me a batch, which she did the following week, along with a jar of her famous salsa.

I had another encounter with this unique brand of western friendliness. On the night before I was to leave, Toby and I visited his father and mother, who live on the ranch. When the conversation got around to General George Custer and the battle at Little Bighorn in 1876, I mentioned that I had planned to visit the [Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument](#), but that my flight delays into Montana had killed the trip. Instantly, the Dahls offered to drive me there – about two hours away – early the next morning, and then drop me off at the airport. I was flabbergasted at the offer, and only later that night did I change my mind so that I could spend my last hours in Montana at the ranch. But I'll never forget their kindness.

The day before I left we had our first of two “gathers”, or cattle roundups. There were about 250 head of cattle out there that had to be brought in, and there were about a dozen of us, led by Toby and his neighbors – J.C., Wade, Dave and Pat. The guests were assigned to Kate Matheson, the photo editor for the British edition of *Glamour* magazine, who'd come to Montana for the summer to work at Runamuk. She'd turned down a “dream job” in London to make the trip, so anxious was she to work the ranch. (But being a photographer at heart, she'd taken an amazing 4,000 photos in the first few weeks she'd been there.)

We stopped at a cabin for lunch, where Jody was to meet us with the grub. One of the female guests asked Toby where the restroom was, and he pointed at an outhouse, just outside the cabin. She looked at him as if she expected him to say that he was kidding. He wasn't.

Jody arrived with the food – heavenly homemade rolls stuffed with ham and cheese – sort of ranch “hot pockets” - and bottles of “pop”. We were invited to “dish up” – and I did. Ridin' and ropin' has a way of working up an appetite. Then it was back out to finish the “gather”.

As we meandered back toward the herd, I heard a high-pitched whoosh - once, twice – which I couldn't identify. I thought maybe someone was throwing something at me from behind. I turned and looked and it was, of all things, Hammer swishing his tail. Obviously, I still had a lot to learn about horses. One thing I did learn, from Toby, is that, at least on a ranch each horse has a purpose, and that a horse without a purpose is just a horse. That may be okay when your livelihood isn't at stake, but in an area that has gotten only about 12 inches of precipitation a year for the last decade, farming is not an option and a well-trained horse is instrumental in helping put food on the table. As Toby said, “You can't be sentimental” about a horse. Maybe Roy Rogers can feel that way about Trigger, but ranchers don't have that luxury.

But lack of rain and snow or not, Toby isn't worried about feeding his family – or his guests with their voracious appetites. He says, with a measure of pride, “If the stock market crashed I couldn't care less. We're totally self-sufficient”.

To those of us with stock portfolios and 401Ks, that's a scary thought. So is the idea, as Toby says, that “the West is hard on women, horses and pickup trucks”, and tenderfeet, no doubt. Nevertheless, after what I experienced at Runamuk, if Toby offered me a job as a wrangler, I'd really be tempted to take it.

After I learned a little more about horses, of course.

LINKS

Runamuk Guest Ranch www.runamukgustranch.com

Babylon Riding Center www.babylonridingcenter.com

Montana Travel Information www.visitmt.com

National Park Service www.nps.gov/libi