



RIDING THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Article photography © Medina Brock

Experienced trail riders Medina Brock and Karen Roberts explain what it takes to ride for six days

'Stand on these wild rangy hills and you can feel like the world is yours alone'

We ride our horses hundreds of miles over the year but it is the first ride of the season that takes the most preparation. The key to success really is in the preparation of your horse, yourself, your kit, the route and choosing who you ride with. A ride of five days or more requires a different level of fitness than a one day long hack, fun ride or competitive ride. You and your horse need to be able to continue day after day, with no opportunity for time off to recover from the ride before. The beauty of it is that when you get it right, the horse finds a rhythm. He gets stronger and fitter as the days go by and feels as if he could go on forever; he has purpose.

We regularly ride our horses for five or six days without a break and have done ten days across Wales from the English border to the coast, and back again. It is such a great way of developing your relationship with your horse. There will be times when

you need to rely on him and he on you, true partnership. Get it wrong and he comes in more tired, breaks down physically, gets a sore back, goes lame or drops weight. So, to make your experience a good one, there are lots of things to consider.

PREPARING YOUR HORSE

Our horses need to be able to cope with hilly terrain and anything up to eight hours out on the trail for several days. We have found that it pays to build their fitness slowly with steady work using lots of indirect and direct rein to help with their self-carriage and suppleness.

What I find fascinating is developing two horses according to the needs of their different personalities. Dusty, who is a Right Brained Extrovert, likes to move his feet but still seems to be happier moving with a hollow back and not using his abdominals. I spend a lot of time in walk helping him to find

relaxation through stretching exercises. Shukki is a Right Brained Introvert. She has taught me that if I just take things as slowly as she is happy to give them to me, she will give her heart. She uses herself well and is physically much more robust than Dusty but not so centred emotionally. I am continually striving to do my best by them and put the relationship first. They are now both solid partners on the trail, individually and together. I often take both horses with me when I am recce riding, which means that I can alternate the riding and packing which saves on a luggage ferry and does wonders for our herd dynamics; the two of them and me! An old horseman who had years of experience on Canadian dude ranches once told me that for the first year of working, the young, inexperienced horses are used as pack horses. They learn to be responsible for where to put their feet, to carry weights and balance

themselves and they learn about carrying something wider than they are. In the early days we spent a lot of time driving over difficult ground and now taking one horse on line has really developed their confidence on the trail.

When you trail ride you are asking a lot of your horse. He may have to deal with obstacles, wild ponies, cattle, farm vehicles, difficult terrain, standing to wait for you, coping with you reading the map, carrying flapping and awkward bags, and staying in different places with different field companions than normal. You ask him to be calm no matter what happens, to think his way through difficult ground, to scramble up hills, to ford rivers, the list goes on.

PREPARING YOURSELF

It should go without saying that you need to be fit enough to do a long ride. You need stamina and to be emotionally fit enough to cope with long days, varied weather and, inevitably, the odd diversion. In preparation for that first ride of the season we go running or cycling to build our own fitness.

You need to be happy that your equipment is going to be fit for purpose and that it works for both your horse and you. What is fine for a couple of hours may well rub after five. We carry spare girths and saddle pads too so we can adjust things day by day. We recommend that you have done some full day rides of four to six hours with the tack you intend to use in preparation for your ride. This should include the saddle bags you intend to carry.

PREPARING THE RIDE

Many may dream of taking a map and a packed lunch into the hills with their horse but it's not as easy as it might sound. Clear green dashed lines on a map

PRINCIPLES WE HAVE ADOPTED

- Never ask too much of yourself or your horse
- Be a good leader at all times, even if you are hungry, tired and have been on the trail for eight hours!
- Ride in at the end of the day on a horse that you can ride out on the next day
- Stay true to your horse no matter what's going on. We keep our responsibilities and we expect our horses to keep theirs
- Keep fit and healthy - horses and humans

aren't so visible on the ground. You may find a fence crossing your tracks that isn't marked or ride into a farmyard that feels eerily like it's straight out of a Hitchcock movie and you're not sure if you should be there!

There are holiday companies, like Your Horse Adventures, who offer planned and tested routes with or without guides. Planning your ride is fun but there is lots to think about and it is time consuming. We study OS 1:20000 maps and satellite imagery through Google Earth before visiting the area, talking to locals and checking out accommodation. Then we recce our routes on foot and mountain bike before we take our horses anywhere near them.

If you are not using a holiday company then please only take your horse when you know

the route is passable. What is on the ground does not necessarily relate to what is on the map! Riding established routes with pre-marked maps that are complemented by clear route directions certainly does not detract from the sense of adventure and feeling of achievement on completing the ride. Indeed it gives more opportunity for you to relax and enjoy your horse, take in the scenery and look with anticipation towards your evening's accommodation.

LOGISTICS

Whether you are riding an organised ride or planning your own, you will need to think about which part of the country you want to explore, how to get to the start, whether it is a circular or linear ride and if you're going to ride self-guided or employ the services of a local guide. If using a guide, make sure he or she is insured, first aid trained, knows the way, has ridden the route before and will respect your riding style and pace.

We would always recommend making an early start in the day, even if you have a shorter day planned; you never know what is going to happen. It's better to get in early, with plenty of time to settle your horse in his new environment and have a beer

RECOMMENDED KIT TO CARRY

Water	Route plan and maps in a waterproof map case
First aid for human and horse	Compass
Spare clothes, layers and waterproofs	Camera
Shoof boot if you're shod in case you lose a shoe, or boots if you are barefoot	Lunch for you and your horse
Bolt cutters	Energy bars and dried fruit
Saw	Spare ropes
Secateurs	Cable ties for mending anything broken!
Money	String
Phone and emergency numbers	Knife
	Head or hand torch

Prepare thoroughly or employ the services of someone who will do the route preparation for you, and enjoy the ride!

before supper, than to arrive in the dark with headtorches. Mind you, riding by moonlight can be fun, it just depends how many hours you have been on the trail for!

Make arrangements for whatever backup you need; farrier, vet, luggage ferry, feed, horse transport back to the beginning if needed. Ask yourself if you need to carry a satellite phone if mobile signals are poor.

There really is nothing better than spending time with your horse on the trail. Of course we are biased because it's what we do, but take a moment and ask yourself, when else do you spend so long with your horse, where you both need each other and can develop a rhythm and shared purpose together? You eat together, you rest together, you help him out and he helps you out. This is the ultimate point to point pattern in terms of developing impulsion. We find that our own relationships with our horses just get better and better, but we see relationships develop to new levels for the people we ride with. Of course, if you haven't trail ridden before we wouldn't recommend starting with a huge ride. It would probably be more savvy to think about a two or three day ride first, or a one centre holiday, and build up to some of the longer rides out there, waiting for you to discover.



Medina riding Shukki with Dusty acting as pack horse



THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING YOUR OWN ROUTE

- Choose your area
- Choose your companions; do you all have the same approach to riding together?
- Study the 1:2500 mapping
- Plan your route and accommodation
- Accommodation: Can you stay in the same establishment or close by to your horses? Are your horses going to be safe, are the fences OK? Is there other livestock around? Is there hay or feed?
- Are you going to have a luggage ferry, a pack pony or carry your own kit and feed?
- Route: Your route needs to go between your accommodation in sensible chunks; we would recommend 12 – 15 miles a day, depending on the terrain. Plan short cuts should you need them to take account of weather, fitness and fatigue
- Recce your route thoroughly before taking your horse there
- You need to have ample mapping with you so you can divert if necessary
- Sounds silly, but make sure you can read a map, know how to use a compass and what to do with your first aid kit

Medina Brock and **Karen Roberts** have a wealth of experience trail riding and designing routes with world class scenery, varied terrain, rivers, mountains, valleys, long grassy trails and miles of sandy beaches
www.yourhorseadventures.co.uk