



Savvy Times™

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A LONG RIDE IN THE WELSH COUNTRYSIDE

Ride among red kites and mountain ponies in the rangy, open hills of Wales.

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A LONG RIDE

in the Welsh Countryside

by Karen Roberts and Medina Brock

On the grand scale Wales is tiny, yet in this small corner of the world, where sheep outnumber people, there is an amazingly large area of unspoiled countryside. With thousands of acres of open hillside, forest, pastures and lanes with grass growing up the middle, it really is heaven with horses. Stand on these wild hills and you can feel like the world is yours alone.

Here in Mid Wales you can travel on horseback for days and barely touch a road or meet a soul. You are more likely to be accompanied by buzzards, red kites and mountain ponies. Indeed, to meet anyone out in the hills is a surprise; rural tourism is still in its infancy. There is more than a lifetime's worth of riding without having to cover the same route twice. This might not be unusual for the roomier countries of the world, but in Britain it is something to be treasured.

Brandy House Farm is nestled at the foot of these rangy, open hills on the Welsh Shropshire border. Richard and Medina have offered a bed and breakfast here for horses for twelve years. The concept of Brandy House was born from Medina's wanting to have a holiday with her horse. There weren't many equine B&Bs, and horse tourism hadn't taken off back then. Brandy House has now become well known as an equine holiday destination, with guests returning year after year, and Richard has earned himself a reputation with his home cooking! Guests can stay on a B&B, full board or self-catering basis. The riding speaks for itself. Parelli students have discovered the delights of holidays with their horses. They have access to a 6,000-acre natural playground and a lovely 40- by 30-foot arena, and no one minds a wiggling rope or waving stick or whether or not you use a bridle. Indeed, other Brandy House guests have become Parelli students after seeing what fun Medina gets up to and how easy her horses are to manage.



Introducing Karen and Medina

Medina's Right-Brain Extrovert Arab/Welsh gelding Dusty brought her to Parelli — he was the little girl's dream who was rapidly taking Medina toward tears and an inevitable accident. She realized after her first clinic that Parelli was the only way for her and Dusty. The only problem was that she was desperate to meet, play with and ride with other students. With the Brandy House business and two small children, attending a clinic was difficult. So thinking laterally, she decided to invite a licensed Parelli instructor to teach at Brandy House. Over the years she has hosted many clinics with a variety of instructors for students of all levels. Needless to say, Dusty is now a perfect gent, left brain most of the time, and a superb guide horse. Dusty and Medina are playing in Level 4, and Medina finds that playing with Finesse is helping to prepare him for his duties on the trail. She never guided guests in the early days — neither she nor Dusty was emotionally fit enough for the challenge. However, she became aware that guests really weren't seeing the best of the hills because map reading in the area isn't easy. She was being asked to guide, but the time was never right. Then she met Karen, thanks to a jacket with the Parelli logo on it. They realized that they had lots in common — their horsemanship and their attitude toward trail riding and exploring.

Karen had been to one of Pat's first U.K. demos, at Hartpury College, Gloucester, and had her mind swept away and replaced by a Level 1 pack. Jade, her Right-Brain Introvert mare, had already taught Karen a lot the hard way. Changes were made and weird looks ignored. Then

they moved to Wales, where their savvy and confidence grew. Jade sadly passed on to horse heaven, and Karen is now in partnership with Mac, her beautiful black Irish-bred horse. Mac came to Karen as a bored horse that needed a relationship and a job to do: most definitely a Left-Brain Introvert. They have been together two years and are playing at Level 3/4.

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Dream to Reality

Karen and Medina began to explore the Radnorshire hills together, and in 2008, after much hard work, they rode the 78 miles from the Shropshire border to the west coast of Wales. Developing trail riding holidays for people with their own horses was the logical next step. Among the skills that Medina and Karen shared was previous experience in the great outdoors as backpackers, travelers and mountain bikers. This meant they had the navigation skills necessary to find, explore and develop safe yet challenging routes. Your Horse Adventures became a reality, and the exploring took on a new pace.

Routes are developed on foot or with bikes (Karen and her husband Rich do that bit) and then with the horses.

Once the horses had a job to do, it focused everybody's mind, both horse and human. Using Principle #8





(Principles, purpose and time are the tools of teaching), Karen and Medina made a deal with their horses that they would never ask them to do anything that was impossible or dangerous. They would keep calm and be great leaders for their horses no matter what! At times this has challenged them. They have shared trust with their horses when finding safe routes through bogs and played extreme Squeeze Game on the trail. Their horses are curious rather than frightened, seeing obstacles as challenges to play with. To ride across hills using a compass in the fog tests their responsibility #4 (Use the natural power of focus).

Route maintenance occurs in winter, when they have more time but the weather and ground are most challenging. Along with the obligatory pack of mints, map and compass, they travel with saw, bolt cutters, and secateurs and would never send a guest (self-guided or guided) on a route that they had not themselves ridden. Once they start exploring, Medina and Karen are truly living their dream!

Leading by Example

To ride over several days this way requires a high level of horsemanship. It was not until Medina and Karen were playing in Levels 3 and 4 with their horses that they could contemplate guiding others. The horses have set the time line of Your Horse Adventures. Mac is a confidence giver for other horses and brilliant at his job. The foundation that Medina has put on Dusty enables him to do his job confidently. Shukki, a Welsh Cob, continues to develop impulsion and will confidently guide small groups of one or two riders. George, a two-year-old Welsh Cob as yet unstarted, relishes learning and loves attention. He has a huge amount of trust in people, and Medina and Karen are excited about his future.

Medina and Karen believe in cross training. Mac has spent the winter hauling wood from Karen's freshly pleached

(braided) hedges, and Dusty has been sledging (sledding) with Medina's children, who realized what fun you could have on a sledge behind a cantering horse. Medina and Dusty merely saw this as Friendly Game on the move on a 45-foot line!

The joy of guiding is taking others and watching their relationships with their own horses develop and deepen. It isn't just about beautiful scenery! And this happens even for guests who aren't following the Parelli program. The guests are not all Parelli students, and while it definitely "never takes more than two days" for the horses, it is the same with people. By the third day guests feel comfortable enough to start to ask about the way the women ride and their relationships with their horses.

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Taking a horse on a long ride is one thing, and guiding is another. There are the additional elements of taking leadership of the group and making sure that everyone is having a good time. A testament to the partners' guiding skills from one of their guests last year: "It was a really fabulous holiday, made perfect by the planning, attention to detail and excellent leadership that you both brought to it. I felt safe and cared for as well as challenged and respected."

Big adventures

The women have developed a variety of rides within the Radnorshire hills, ranging from two days place-to-place to five or more days. These rides are made to suit riders' requirements, such as length of ride and time in the saddle. Experienced trail riders who have map skills can ride self-guided, with detailed maps and route descriptions.

The ultimate experience, the X-Wales ride, is a 78-mile, five-day ride to the beach. The distance is between 15 and 23 miles each day. Though this is nothing in endurance terms, the ride is an expedition that covers varied and hilly terrain through isolated countryside. The ride up the beach is three miles long, with plenty of room and time to sort out any "first time on the sand" issues, and it's a great playground and excellent opportunity to give horses their an introduction to beach and ocean riding.

All the organizing is done for guests. Even one of the horse transporters for the return journey to Brandy House is a Parelli student. All guests have to do is arrive with horse and luggage. There's no need to take much pocket money, as Karen and Medina will laugh and tell them that they won't see a shop for five days. Nor will they be disturbed by their mobile phones, as the signal is sporadic, which is why the women carry a satellite phone when guiding.

So as long as you're ready for pure peace and quiet and endless hours of your horse's company, this is the ride for you. Each day ends at the wonderful accommodation, where guests can enjoy ultimate comfort. The horses have lovely paddocks to relax in, and Karen and Medina have yet to see a horse that wasn't content and relaxed in its surroundings at the end of the day — the ultimate point-to-point impulsion pattern!

What of the future?

This year on the annual ride across Wales to check the route before guests ride it, Dusty and Shukki are taking on new roles — as pack ponies. They will alternate carrying Medina and the luggage. It's a great way to both keep them fit enough to do the trail and give them more variety.

This summer a group of intrepid Parelli students, some of whom rode last year with the women, are planning a ten-day round trip, a distance of 157 miles.

While Medina and Karen are not yet being invited to join the Long Riders Guild (a thousand-mile ride is the minimum requirement), it is a dream. They want to put a ride together from the north coast of Wales to the south, and it is now in their blood to keep progressive, so who knows what they will be doing next?

Fun weekend

The Brandy House Farm, together with Your Horse Adventures, hosted a savvy weekend with a difference in March. It was for Level 3 and 4 students who wanted the opportunity to play and ride in amazing trail riding country with like-minded folk. There were over 6,000 acres of hills and open space on the Welsh Shropshire border, with natural obstacles including streams, ponds, banks and steep tracks to challenge the horse-human partnership and trail riding savvy. It was for advanced students, as it was on the open hillside, and students needed to be happy in a big space with both horse and human emotionally fit enough to walk, trot and canter in the company of others. Claire Spelling, natural horsemanship photographer extraordinaire, joined them with her camera and was able to capture special moments. This weekend was followed by a guided trail ride out over the hills with students and friends who wanted to put some miles on their hooves. It was a fabulous weekend — hopefully the first of many. ➦

