Canada – Kananaskis Explorer – A pack trip in the wilderness

A pack trip in the Canadian wilderness

Finally, it's time to set off. Off to Canada! After a flight of around 9 hours, I land in Calgary. Immigration goes quite smoothly and I take a bus to 'Downtown', where I've booked an extra night before the tour. A short stroll through the city centre brings plenty of new impressions. Advertisements for the 'Stampede' are everywhere – a huge equestrian festival featuring horse shows, rodeo and everything a horse lover could wish for. After breakfast, I explore the many green spaces and the Stampede grounds until it's finally time to head to the airport, where I'm expected for my transfer. From Calgary, it's about a 1.5-hour drive north to the ranch, where we're welcomed. Snacks and cold drinks are ready and waiting. The group is complete: Robert and Robin will be leading the tour, joined by other helpers to handle all the logistics and organisation of a pack trip into the wilderness. We receive a briefing and discuss the itinerary. We are given duffle bags containing a sleeping bag (extra warm) and liner, as well as a self-inflating sleeping mat. Our luggage is already in the room and after dinner – a delicious burger straight from the grill – we get packing. Only what we really need goes into the duffel bag; the rest stays at the ranch. Around the campfire, the group gets to know each other before turning in for the night.

Before setting off into the absolute wilderness, far from civilisation, we enjoy a fantastic breakfast. Yoghurt, fresh fruit, bread rolls, croissants, jam, honey, Nutella, cheese and sausage, plus orange juice, coffee or tea. You certainly won't go hungry here!

Then, at last, we are given our horses, which we will look after ourselves all week. I am assigned Sosci, a pretty Quarter Horse mare. Grooming, saddling up, then mounting and off we go. The group consists of Linda and Kelly from British Columbia, Pam and Mad from Washington, Kim and Mirijam from Germany, Bibi from Vermont and Leslie from Nova Scotia. Plus at least two guides and, of course, the crew along with the pack horses, who are riding separately from the group today.
We set off along a dirt track and, after a period of walking at the start, there are frequent stretches of trotting and the occasional gallop. For the most part, however, we stick to walking due to the terrain. Narrow paths, cross-country through the forest, fording rivers, up and down, across a flower-filled meadow (due to the altitude, the flora blooms a little later here). From the top, there is a fantastic view of the surrounding mountains, some of which are snow-capped. Today, roe deer and a stag cross our path, along with numerous birds. During the breaks, when the horses are allowed to graze, Neal tells us all about the nature of this beautiful region. Then we ride along the edge of a lake with a great view until we finally reach our lunch spot. Today's saddlebag picnic consists of tortillas, which everyone fills themselves – according to their own taste.

Each horse is equipped with two saddlebags, one for the rider, the other for the lunch picnic. After about 5 hours of riding, we reach the first camp. The tents are already pitched, and cowboy coffee is brewing over the fire whilst the potatoes sizzle. Everyone tends to their horse before setting up the tents and having dinner by the campfire. Before dessert, the horses are led to the river to drink, then we have something sweet and everyone goes to bed.

The tempting aroma of blueberry pancakes wakes us up – delicious!

The duffel bags are loaded and strapped onto the pack horses, and everyone prepares their horse for the ride. I'm told to swap horses (Sosci still needs to build up his fitness) and am given Pippin, a former wild horse and a one-of-a-kind. A black horse with a mane streaked with white! He becomes my faithful companion for the rest of the tour, impressing with his sure-footedness.

A ride of about 7 hours awaits us today, with a few stops. To enjoy the view of the Canadian Rockies and eat our packed lunch of sandwiches we've made ourselves. There is a lot of uphill and downhill riding, but the horses master it all effortlessly thanks to their sure-footedness. Forests, rivers, snow-capped mountain peaks in glorious weather with a blue sky, sunshine and scattered fluffy clouds – a dream riding day in unspoilt nature that is second to none!

We reach the second camp, where we will stay for the next three nights. Two large tents and a smaller one, a central fire pit with a solid wooden table and benches, plus a horse paddock. Today we have spaghetti with meat and tomato sauce, freshly cooked over the fire. Afterwards, we sit together and Robin regales us with exciting stories.

Today is a sort of rest day with about four hours of riding. Breakfast is therefore a little later, and we can take our time saddling up the horses. We ride along the Elbow River before heading uphill, partly along a slope with magnificent panoramic views at every turn. Snow-capped peaks, fir trees,

a waterfall and the river winding its way through the valley below. A gallop across the plain and we've already reached our lunch spot, where sausages on skewers are being grilled fresh over the fire. The return journey is over far too quickly; one last river crossing through crystal-clear glacier water before we arrive back at camp and the horses are allowed out to pasture. We riders enjoy a drink, then dinner is served. The horses are led (or ridden – without saddles, of course) to the river to drink before they settle down for the night.

The next morning, a deer sneaks through our camp. I've really grown fond of Pippin, so I'm looking forward to another lovely day's riding with him today. We set off along the river before gradually heading further and further uphill. We even catch sight of a wild horse; there are quite a few of them living here in freedom, far from civilisation.

We stop for lunch in a meadow. What a sight – the grazing horses against such a backdrop… pure idyll! The wrap tastes twice as good.

Refreshed, we now tackle the actual, very challenging part of the day: first over a hilltop, then through lush green forest.
The narrow path winds its way up and down; in places it is muddy and littered with tree trunks (which doesn't bother the horses in the slightest) until we reach a steeply sloping section. Whilst the riders tackle the short stretch on foot one by one, the horses are sent down one by one and met at the bottom by their riders

. You might think these horses have a good bit of mountain goat in them, so sure-footed and balanced are they as they walk.

A drink break is called for by the river before we set off on horseback for a long ride along the idyllic riverbank. At first running parallel to it, the track then leads through the forest, crossing the river again and again until it reaches the confluence with Elbow Creek. We follow the river along a wider path, where there's also the chance to trot and gallop – wonderful! The horses are still in top form and I'm enjoying the roughly 7 hours in the saddle of my wild horse. Afterwards, he's allowed to roll around extensively in the pasture and enjoy the rest of his evening.

After a day like this, dinner tastes twice as good. Today's menu is salad, potatoes, meat and vegetable patties. Then it's back to the river for a drink before we settle down for a well-deserved night's rest.
The next morning, the camp is a hive of activity; everyone is packing their things, having breakfast and preparing their horses. Pippin is still lying down, relaxing. After a few strokes, however, he gets up and is looking forward to returning to his home meadow (of incredible size). The pack horses are loaded, then we mount up and off we go. One last time along the river, then through the forest, always at a relaxed walk – after all, all the pack horses have to come with the group today. After a final river crossing, we reach a car park where the pack horses are loaded and driven back to their home stables. They have done a magnificent job. The riders pack their lunch and we continue on to Kananaskis National Park. Here we encounter other people for the first time again – it feels strange after all these days in the heart of nature.
After a good stretch uphill, we reach the lunch spot below the summit, a fantastic spot with views down into the valley towards the Elbow River, plus snow-capped peaks and the flower meadow – simply magical.

After lunch, we head for the summit with a quick photo stop before we begin the descent (a short stretch on lead, the rest is ridden again). We follow a lovely path that widens out again and takes us down to the plain on the other side. All too soon we reach a car park where our horses and we riders are ‘loaded up’ and driven back to the starting point at the farm. Here too, the horses are looked after first and I have to say goodbye to my wild horse, who will later be released onto the vast pasture to enjoy his well-deserved rest. Pippin, I’ll miss you!!!
Then the rush for the much-coveted showers begins – a real treat after the quick wash in the river during our time at camp.

We enjoy dinner at a large table, featuring regional meat, potato gratin, mushrooms, asparagus, vegetables and a meringue and fruit dessert – simply divine. Finally, we round off this last evening as usual by the campfire, this time with guitar accompaniment. A lovely end to a fantastic trail ride in the heart of the Canadian wilderness!
The bed is already waiting.
After a delicious and very generous breakfast, the shuttle is already waiting to take me back to Calgary airport. As always after a fantastic week, saying goodbye is hard for me. I’ll miss the wilderness, my fellow riders and guides, and of course Pippin!

A travel report by Julia Wies | Pegasus Reiterreisen Further information here: http://www.equitour.com/rtab18.htm