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## Saddled up in the High Sierras

**Wanna-be cowboys forsake their desks for a horse's back and the camaraderie of the trail, but thanks to a California company, they needn't leave behind all of the comforts of home.**

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Published August 14, 2005

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[Photo: Steve Haggerty]

A pack train fords the Merced River in California's High Sierras.

BISHOP, Calif. - As the violet twilight settled over the Marie Lakes and the Ritter Range, a bunch of us would-be cowboys relaxed after a day in the saddle by lounging around a campfire . . . sipping Sierra Vista white.

We'd spent the day on horses that knew to follow the John Muir Trail through the High Sierra wilderness. Now we were swapping tales and basking in luxury. We could hear the 12 horses and nine pack mules cropping nearby clumps of grass. Their steady chomping made a comforting sound. Our host/guide, Dave Dohnel, looked on with satisfaction.

Life was good, indeed. What once was rough adventure pursued by men - and pretty much only men - of Muir's intrepid bent, now is a pleasurable experience geared to city folk.

In fact, until our five-day horseback ride through California's highest mountain range, those at the campfire - a banker, a civil engineer, a Realtor, a teacher, a nurse, a police officer, a store manager and two journalists - were mostly tenderfoots, unskilled in the ways of the horse.

Now, traveling near timberline in the remote Ansel Adams-Minaret Wilderness, we had been climbing into the saddle with savvy. Our knees had stopped aching. And we were beginning to bond, with each other and with the horses.

Ralph Hitchcock, a native Californian, told us he had never forgotten camping in the Sierras as a Boy Scout nor the top-of-the-world views from the Western Divide. He remembered the scouts' mess-kit meals and makeshift sleeping arrangements.

"We camped with homemade bedrolls and pup tents," he said, admiring the brown-and-tan dome tents around us now, and the folding cook table still loaded with fried chicken, a vegetable casserole and fresh fruit. "This is amazing."

### **From freeway to pack trail**

How has this sort of roughing-it-made-easy come to the Sierra Nevadas? Like most everything in the Golden State, on the wings of change.

In 1981, Dohnel, then 26 and working in urban Southern California, decided to take a week's vacation with his grandfather, the co-owner of a horse- and mule-packing business near Bishop, on the Sierra's eastern slope.

Used to driving freeways, Dohnel quickly came to appreciate the fresh air and wide-open spaces.

"I went home and thought about it," Dohnel related to us, "and the next year I bought out my grandpa's share of the outfit and moved to Bishop."

When Frontier Pack Train, which operated out of June Lake in the summer, came up for sale, Dohnel took the reins. Today he's part cowboy and part business owner.

"We're never going to be rich," he said. "But I thank God every day we can make a living with horses and mules.

"There's no better place to live than the mountains. And no better place to raise kids than up here at June Lake, at the pack station."

In the early days, most eastern Sierra pack stations offered one service, "spot trips" that carried campers, fishers and their tents, sleeping bags and

stoves to high-country campsites, usually near a lake.

When the visitors' vacations ended, the packers returned with horses and mules, to carry everything back out.

But by the 1990s, the customers had changed. Few had wilderness skills or the time to learn them. What they had instead were more sophisticated tastes. So most of the outfitters switched to leading guided, all-inclusive, soft-adventure trips.

Our five-day ride (and most of Frontier's High Sierra trips) started at Dohnel's pack station at June Lake, 10 miles north of Mammoth Lakes. We arrived at 7 a.m. to drop off our personal gear, which would be packed by Dohnel's employees onto the mules. We met the other guests and our horses.

### **Learning how to steer**

"Hold the reins in one hand over the horse's neck," said Bill, the wrangler who hurried from horse to horse checking saddles and adjusting stirrups for this set of guests.

"You pull left to go left, right for right," he said. "You should be able to stand up in your stirrups and lean slightly forward, to help the horses climb uphill" by shifting weight more over the horses' front legs.

Each rider will have the same horse the entire trip, so it behooves you to learn its habits, such as stopping to eat tall weeds.

Dorothy, the nurse in our group, discovered immediately that her palomino, Mister Ed Trigger Sir, had learned a trick: On command, he reared on his hind legs.

My husband and I rode Smokey and Duke, respectively, horses selected from Dohnel's stable of 70 horses to suit our intermediate abilities.

At mid morning the first day, we dismounted to stretch our legs, and at noon we stopped for a bag lunch of a sandwich, fruit, canned drink and candy bar. Then it was back in the saddle until 3 p.m., when we reached the Clark Lakes campsite.

The mule train, which had left earlier, was already there. We arrived to find our tents pitched, duffels unloaded, the privy tucked behind a clump of trees, camp chairs in a circle and cold drinks in the cooler.

After exploring the lake, we gathered for crackers and cheese around the campfire. Dinners varied from marinated chicken breasts to vegetarian lasagna and included salads, side dishes, fruit and cake. Wine is not included, but you can bring your own.

"We try to cater to individual tastes," said Dohnel. "Most important, we make sure everyone's got plenty to eat. If you want people to feel good,

you can't scrimp on the food."

Frontier Pack Train mails out forms asking about food choices, riding skills and other personal information. The answers determine the menu, who shares a tent and with whom, and the likeliest horse for each guest.

Some riders want to learn how to saddle a horse. Some want to hike, not just ride. Others are anglers looking for trout streams. Everyone's a photographer these days, and in the High Sierras, you can't go wrong.

Our five-day trip was the company's Tuolumne Meadow ride. After spending the first night among the trees at the Clark Lakes, the second and third nights were at the Marie Lakes, above the timberline. On the fourth day the horses took us up and over 11,050-foot Donohue Pass, and into the upper valleys of Yosemite National Park.

On our fifth night, we camped in the trees near the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River, and on the sixth day we rode out to Tuolumne Meadows. There, a horse trailer and passenger van picked us up for the ride back to June Lake. Felt odd just sitting in a van . . .

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance travel journalists who cannot stable a horse at their home in Marina del Rey, Calif.

#### **If you go:**

**GETTING THERE:** Frontier Pack Train is based in Bishop, Calif. From Tampa Bay, Delta Air Lines flies nonstop to Los Angeles; other carriers offer connecting service to L.A. From there, United flies to Bishop.

**THE PACK TRIPS:** Frontier Pack Train leads three- to eight-day guided trips in the Sierra Nevada range. It also leads themed trips, including fly-fishing, wild mustang tracking, photography, horse drives and deer hunting.

You can all review all the offerings, including a Horse Roundup, on Frontier Pack Train's Web site: [www.frontierpacktrain.com](http://www.frontierpacktrain.com) To talk with the staff about the trips, call toll-free 1-888-437-6853 in summer, 760 873-7971 in winter.

U.S. Forest Service regulations limit trips to 12 persons a day on the trail, so Frontier limits its trips to nine guests, plus three wranglers. Trips are priced at about \$150 to \$200 a day and include everything but alcoholic beverages, personal gear and sleeping bags. Pack light; the weight limit per person is 40 pounds.

The company is a member of the Eastern Sierra Packers Association, a group of 16 horse outfitters that runs trips into the Sierras; that Web site is [www.easternsierrapackers.com/members.htm](http://www.easternsierrapackers.com/members.htm) Or contact the Bishop Chamber of Commerce toll-free at 1-888-395-3952; [www.bishopvisitor.com](http://www.bishopvisitor.com)

**WHAT TO BRING:** In addition to casual clothes, including something for cool nights, consider bringing Spandex bicycling shorts or pantyhose to wear under your jeans; this stops rubbing that causes blisters.

Cowboy boots are not mandatory, but shoes with heels are. The heels keep your feet from slipping through the stirrups.

[Last modified August 12, 2005, 12:14:21]

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