

Horseback Travel – Getting Started.

The longest journey begins with a single step
Lao Tsu

Do you dream of adventures with your horse?

Packing your saddlebags and riding off towards distant hills?

Whether you want a nice weekend trip with comfortable B&B stops or have aspirations of packing your tent and riding an old pilgrim route across Europe both are equally attainable with the right preparation. Hopefully the information below (gained mostly through years of my own trial and error) will give you some ideas to get started.

I do most of my trip planning in the depths of winter when it's cold, wet and dark outside. I can lose myself for many an evening in maps, dreaming of long, (occasionally sunny) days with a good horse beneath me, and new country ahead of me.

Pick a route

Decide where you want to ride. This could be a local ride starting from home if you don't have horse transport, a National Trail (NT) www.nationaltrail.co.uk or literally any destination you wish to reach. My first rides were 2 or 3 days across Exmoor & Dartmoor where there is lots of choice of routes and plenty of accommodation options, they also aren't too far from my home should I require rescue. I think it's a good idea to start with a couple of days and build up ride lengths as you become more confident in your own and your horse's abilities.

Once you have an idea of where you want to ride buy the OS maps for this area, I use the OS Explorer 1:25 all weather maps and if I'm riding a national trail I also carry the national trail adventure series official map. Trust me when I say it is worth spending the extra money on the waterproof versions, when I started doing long rides I tried skimping and bought the paper maps and a waterproof map case, 5 days and 120 miles on a trail in pouring rain meant a map case full of paper mache!

Once I have my maps I use a highlighter to mark my route, I have found this useful on a number of occasions, it saves making silly mistakes at the end of a long day, wet and tired, that can potentially land you on busy roads or taking a wrong turn, adding more miles to your day.

Once I have my route I then start to break up the mileage so I can see roughly in what area I am going to need accommodation for that night. There are several ways of measuring mileage, the NT website has a handy mileage calculator on each route, you can buy a special digital, wheeled tool or I just use a piece of string cut to my required length. You need to take into account the terrain and your average speed (you can download a free app to your phone called Equilab which will help you calculate your average speed amongst other things). If it's steep and rocky and you are restricted to walking for long sections you may not want to plan a 30 mile day as you'll be in the saddle for 8 hours plus, equally if it's mainly flat springy grass you can easily eat up the distance. I find around 20

miles per day over varied terrain is a comfortable distance for me, allowing time to stop and 'sightsee' and take pictures (and the odd pub lunch). I follow the pattern of ride for 2.5/3hrs, stop for 1hr, I find somewhere with grass and water for my stop, putting a head collar on my horse and allowing her an hours grazing. Depending on the length of trip I would factor in a rest day(s) if possible at around 5 days, so a pattern of ride 5, rest for 1 or 2.

Finding accommodation

The National Trail website has a list in the equine section of horse b&b's along each route. It is a really useful tool although I have found some to be out of date and there can be areas with large gaps without accommodation. I do a google search for horse accommodation in that area and call local hotels/pubs, campsites and equestrian centres looking for leads, usually someone will be able to help. There are several good facebook pages including 'Horse B&B and long distance routes' & 'saddle tamping UK' also some of the national trails will have their own page, for example the Ridgeway has a fb page called 'Ridgeway horse riders and carriage drivers access group'. You can also post accommodation wanted requests on equestrian pages specifically for the local area. If it is a well-known route the likelihood is many people will already have ridden it and will (usually) be willing to share their accommodation contacts and route info with you.

Gear

Panniers, I have collected many over the years and my favourite are still some nondescript nylon ones I picked up from Kramer equestrian for about twenty pounds! I also have some large trail max panniers, which are great for longer rides where I am carrying more gear.

When loading packs it is essential you distribute the weight of your load evenly. I carry a small hand held luggage scale that I use every morning when re packing to ensure each pair of panniers has the same weight on each side. I've also learnt through the experience of a sore-backed horse to load the heavier gear on the front of my horse, over her shoulders where she is stronger, and the lighter but bulkier items in the rear panniers and behind the saddle. Ensure there are no hard or pointy items on the inside of the pannier where it makes contact with your horse. Check your horse thoroughly at the end of each day for any sign of rubbing or swelling under saddle and packs. I ride in professionally-fitted western saddles with high quality natural felt pads underneath. I prefer the western saddle as, although heavier, they distribute the lb's per inch over a much greater area, making it more comfortable for the horse and I also find them comfier over long distances. Whatever your personal preference in style of saddle please get it checked to ensure it fits the horse well, you won't get far if it doesn't and you could cause long term damage to your horses back.

The rule of thumb is that the horse should carry an absolute maximum of 20% of his bodyweight; this includes yourself and your tack.

My standard gear list would look something like this:

1 Spare set of clothes (for me usually a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt or long sleeve thermal, depending on the time of year)

Couple pairs of socks and knickers
fleece jumper
Lightweight down jacket
Waterproof jacket
Waterproof trousers.
Wash stuff – small shampoo/conditioner, toothbrush, miniature toothpaste, deodorant, hairbrush.
1 pair sandals or flip flops if space (nice to get out of boots in evenings)
Basic horse first aid kit – I cut 2 large squares of gamgee, 2 rolls vet wrap, a sterile dressing, mini bottle of hibi scrub (or similar), antiseptic cream, electrolyte powder or salt, couple sachets bute
Basic human first aid kit - tweezers, antiseptic wipes, bandage, variety of plasters, arnica, paracetamol/ibuprofen, suncream.
Leatherman/Swiss army knife
Water bottle
Snacks
1 brush (I use plastic lightweight)
1 hoofpick
Sponge
Small amount of baler twine for repairing pack straps/mending gate latches/tying up or one of the other million uses for baler twine!
I carry a farriers multi tool in case I need to pull a shoe that has spread, (I've never needed to use it but my farrier husband insists I take it.)
High Vis vest
Halter & lead
Collapsible bucket (used a lot on some trips but wouldn't bother to take say on Exmoor or Dartmoor where there are ample water sources)
Maps and waterproof map case (handy for hooking over my saddle horn.)
Notebook and pen for daily diary, also I write in it all my accommodation info inc address and phone numbers incase something happens to my phone.
Phone charger, I use a portable solar powerbank for recharging.
Small hand held luggage scales
Head torch
If camping then include tent, bedroll, sleeping bag, stove, food and horse 'corralling' gear, i.e. electric fence tape, collapsible posts, energizer, earthing (steel tent) peg.
If camping you'll also need human food.
Horse food - depending on time of year (grass quality) and which horse I'm taking, if I have pre-planned accommodation I can post food parcels ahead to save carrying.
I have a dog tag on my saddle ring with my name, address and phone number on should my horse and I ever part company

Horse preparation

Fitness is an obvious consideration. I build my horses fitness slowly over several months until they are easily managing several consecutive 20 mile days with full packs. This will also give you a good idea of whether your tack or packs are going to rub or cause issues.

Is your horse shod or barefoot? If barefoot I'd seriously consider investing in

suitable boots to take along with you. Don't forget to wear them in a little to ensure they are not going to rub, just as you would not want to start a long walk in a pair of brand new walking boots! I often ride with a friend whose horse is barefoot and without her boots she would not have completed a couple of really stony trails, like the South Downs Way, which is really flinty in places.

Another consideration is how prepared for what you'll meet on the trail is your horse? It is definitely worth putting some time into preparing your horse for the various obstacles you are likely to meet, these could include:

Traffic of various speed and sizes, different types of livestock, cows, sheep, pigs, geese, alpaca, herds of wild ponies, deer, I've even ridden through a field full of emu! Dogs, cyclists, runners, walkers with large backpacks on can often cause a horse concern, gliders, kites, drones, different terrain, steep ground, loose shale, water crossings (sometimes deep), boggy ground, bridges of different footing materials (metal, wood, rubber, concrete) all have a different feel and sound when walked on, tunnels, gates, narrow paths, flapping haylage wrap stuck on fences. The list is endless. I would also ensure my horse can back up confidently and calmly both in-hand and under saddle in case you get stuck on a narrow trail where you cannot turn around.

If you are planning on camping It is also important your horse respects electric fence (if you plan to corral) and ties well (if you plan to use a high line or picket) I would absolutely get my horse used to ropes around his legs (especially if you plan to picket) he needs to learn to give to any pressure he feels down there, that way if he gets wrapped up in ropes or (god forbid) gets caught up in wire he will wait for rescue and not panic and cause himself injury.

The other thing you need to get your horse use to is carrying weighted packs. A young or green horse can get worried about carrying bulky panniers the first few times so practise carrying them on training rides, first empty at all speeds and gradually loading them up until they are the equivalent of what he will be expected to carry on the trip.

I think every horse and rider should have a go at a 'long ride'. It is amazing the difference even a few days on the trail can make to a horse, and how liberating for the soul horseback travel is for the human! I promise it will take your relationship with your horse to a new level.

Happy (long) riding!
Emma x

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