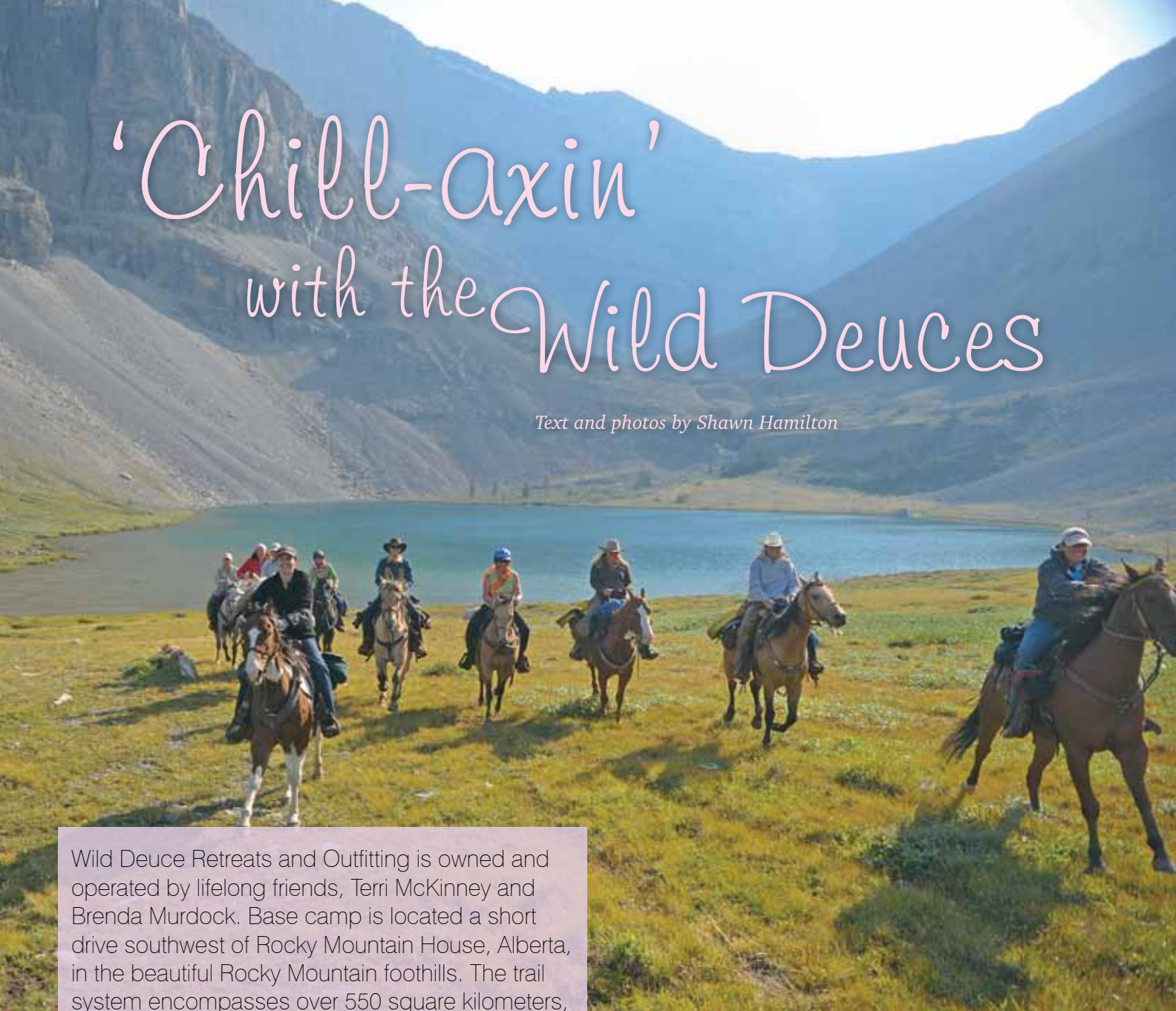


'Chill-axin' with the Wild Deuces


Text and photos by Shawn Hamilton



Wild Deuce Retreats and Outfitting is owned and operated by lifelong friends, Terri McKinney and Brenda Murdock. Base camp is located a short drive southwest of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, in the beautiful Rocky Mountain foothills. The trail system encompasses over 550 square kilometers, which take in the picturesque Clearwater and Ram rivers.

The operation offers day-rides, week-long wilderness pack trips, women's retreats, cattle drives and horsemanship clinics, among other activities. Recently, equine photographer and regular *Horse-Canada* contributor, Shawn Hamilton, attended the Wild Deuces' women's retreat, the only pack trip offered by the outfitters where guests are "not allowed to lift a finger... We want you to wake up to the smell of breakfast cooking – but with the option of rolling over and drifting back to sleep! We want you to go at *your* pace...not the pace of schedules, work and life." Sounds pretty good. Read on to find out how Shawn enjoyed the experience.

The gang goes for a gallop at Lost Guide Lake.



Wild Deuces Brenda Murdock (left) and Terri McKinney (right) show off their smiles and their stolen lei at 40-Mile Ridge.



Wranglers Scott (left) and Chuck (right) prepare to serve the girls champagne and orange juice while offering them their leis.



Writer and photographer Shawn Hamilton gives her mount, Slim, a hug.



Susan (left) tries to wrangle her lei back from Brenda.



Chuck McKinney and daughter, Taylor, drive the wagon pulled by Norwegian Fjords, Mike and Arvid.

Just a short stroll from base camp, glass of wine in hand, my completely relaxed body melts into the carved-out log strategically placed beside the river. Rushing water tumbles over the river stones as the sun descends behind the mountain peaks, casting a pinkish glow on the towering pines. After confiscating our watches and cell phones Wild Deuces' Terri McKinney and Brenda Murdock had led us past a lake, through the "Enchanted Forest" of backlit moss hanging from trees,

and over countless rivers to this fully equipped camp, far from civilization. The four-hour ride in the Elk Creek Conservation area from Wild Deuce Outfitters headquarters, just outside Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, to base camp in the mountains proved that my mount, "Slim", a seventeen-hand Belgian-cross gelding, was as surefooted as they come.

"First rule," Terri had piped up before our ride, "is that there are only three 'times' at camp: day-time, night-time, and time to ride".

It was hard to believe that only yesterday I'd hauled my gear through the busy Calgary airport and now was a world away, anticipating the adventure of a five-day Women's Explorer ride with twelve women, all of whom were new acquaintances. I had no idea what awaited me.

That night, after my tentmate, Susan, a military nurse from Alberta who has served in Kandahar, put a log in the tiny wood stove in the corner of our canvas tent, I drifted off, listening to the bells on the horses' necks as they grazed and pondering what tomorrow would bring.

The next morning, a mist hovered over the stream. The water was cool against my face while washing up and brushing my teeth. Through the cloud of my breath I spotted Taylor, Terri's eight-year-old daughter who arrived at camp later than us on a wagon pulled by two Norwegian Fjords driven by her dad, Chuck. She was coming down the path toting water jugs. As Taylor knelt down by the stream to fill up the containers, Scott, a full-time West Jet pilot and part-time wrangler for Wild Deuces Outfitting, led a horse to the river for a drink. I thought to myself how lucky these people were to live part of their lives out here in the bush.

"Breakfast is ready," Scott informed me. "Pancakes and Rachel's famous cinnamon buns".

In the cook tent, chef extraordinaire, Rachel, was just taking the cinnamon buns out of the propane oven. As we ate, we were greeted by Scott and Chuck with full bottles



The ride back from 40-Mile Ridge.

of champagne in their hands and an abundance of Hawaiian leis.

“It is not every day you are served champagne and then lei’d by cowboys in the bush,” Terri chuckled.

Starting then to get a feel for the Wild Deuces’ personalities I thought that perhaps their company would be enjoyable. It was impossible to predict the magnitude.

“Here’s the deal”, piped up Terri. “These leis that each of you have are yours to wear, and you must wear them at all times,” she stated in a serious tone. “They have to be visible, BUT if any one of us manages to get them from you, there will be a penalty to pay!”

Unaware at that point how important this rule would be throughout the trip, we took the warning in stride.

Brenda then proclaimed that, “today is a Chill-axin day”. ‘Chill-axin’, a combination of relaxing and chilling, is a must with the Wild Deuces. “We will ride this afternoon,” she continued, “but for now we chill. We are going to play a little game so you all get to know each other. We call this the scavenger hunt with a twist”

After grouping into threes and being secured together by way of an inflatable tube, the hunt began. And, after falling over laughing when all three in our group attempted to go in different directions, we realized the only way to succeed was as a team. The scavenger list was a long one with the most challenging item being a digital image of the team in the river. After setting up the camera on a timer beside the river, we dropped our drawers and mooned the camera. Positive we had won the bonus points for best picture, all inhibitions had vanished

After lunch of wraps filled with rice, carrots, snap peas and peppers of all shades we were told to get our riding gear on. Climbing up onto Slim

was a chore in itself. The trail was narrow and winding, following a small riverbed. Upon reaching an open valley Brenda and Terri positioned their horses on either side of Slim. Thinking they just wanted to chat, my guard was down, as Brenda leaned over to grab the lei from around my neck. Giving Slim a squeeze we took off, but I soon realized these girls had done this before. The games had begun and everyone was soon spinning in circles trying to get away from them. Eventually, one lei was lost.

“Penalty to be announced back at camp,” Brenda yelled as she did her little victory dance in the saddle.

The pace settled as we continued along the trail to a look out. The late afternoon sun lit the rocks shearing straight down to the river below at the cliff’s edge. We stopped and just took it all in. The trail heading back to camp opened up to a glorious meadow of tall golden grass dancing in the breeze.

“Come on” Terri yelled at me as she beckoned her horse forward. Slim kicked into high gear, his long strides rocking me back and forth like a carousel horse, but I was nervous, thinking he might fall and land on top of me. “Trust your horse – he will give you wings,” Terri yelled, as she charged ahead of me at full speed with arms wide open, ready to fly.

My heart was pounding but, with a deep breath and eyes shut momentarily, the reins were dropped. Spreading my arms like an eagle’s wings and tilting from side to side in time with Slim’s strides, he floated me through the sea of golden grass. All the stress flowed down from my neck through my arms and out the tips of my fingers. The only muscles in use were the ones holding my smile from ear to ear. Memories of my first canter on a horse as a child filled my head. Tears came to my eyes as the crisp mountain air swept



For more info about Wild Deuces and other rides they provide checkout their website at www.wilddeuce.com. Sign up for their newsletter and blog to watch their crazy antics. Wild Deuces Outfitting RR #2 Kingman, AB T0B 2M0 Tel: 403-651-6142 Web Site: www.wilddeuce.com E-Mail Address: w2outfitting@yahoo.ca

PS. If you are driving in the area, be sure to check out Art in the Range and see the award winning sculptures by Crystal Mosing-Mascano. www.artontherange.com



Brenda leads a horse to the river for a drink near base camp.



Brenda on the trail back from Lost Guide Lake.



Arvid is ridden through the river to base camp.

past. What a ride – and it was only day two.

During dinner of shepherd’s pie and cookie pudding I told cook Rachel, “I will never bring my husband on one of these trips as he is sure to leave me for you”.

Around the campfire the games continued and, during story telling time, the laughter echoed through the mountains, surely scaring off a few of the local wildlife to the next mountain range.

We were informed that the next two days would be full days of riding and to get our rest. Chuckling to myself in the tent, after consuming a bit too much wine by the fire, the pleasant thoughts of the day, including the idea that the only thing I had to do tomorrow was ride, filled my head.

With lunches packed in our saddlebags we headed off early the next day. We had been told to pack our bathing suits as we were heading for “Lost Guide Lake”. Deer were spotted playing in the meadow as we made the gradual climb. Just as we seemed to reach the peak, a beautiful turquoise body of water came into view. With our horses tied to the hitching post we unpacked our saddlebags and lunched beside the glacial lake.

Two of the girls stripped off their breeches and shirts to their underlying bathing suits and jumped into the water. They came out quite a bit faster than they went in. We all took the dare and eventually jumped into the bitterly cold but refreshing water. Within seconds my entire body was frozen, and the feeling lasted a long time even after exiting the lake. We hiked to a waterfall to rest and to simply enjoy the moment. No one wanted to leave.

Crawling into my sleeping bag that night, to the sounds of owls and grazing horses, it was hard to believe how much fun this trip had been already.

The next morning, while breakfasting on sandwiches of egg, cheese, broccoli, ham, cream cheese tomato and mushrooms, Brenda told us that we were going to the top of the world that day.

The progressive climb took us through sections of woods that had been burned by fire. The black charred trees painted the blue canvas of the sky with eerie shapes. As the climb became steeper, we followed a stream that Terri claimed provides the “freshest and purest water you will ever taste”.

Riding out of the woods and above the tree line the ascent was a slow one. The vast openness was breathtaking. The winds attempted to blow me off my horse, and almost succeeded. The ridge, known as 40-mile ridge, provides a 360-degree view enabling one to spot the boundaries of Banff National Park and the staging area that we had started from four days ago.

“If you stand right here” exclaimed Terri teetering along the cliffs edge, “spread your arms and close your eyes, you actually feel like you are flying”.

We had been asked on the way up that day to choose an item from the earth that resembles ourselves. Far from strangers in the short time we had known each other, we now sat on top of the world opening up to each other, explaining the similarities between ourselves and the items we had selected.

We lunched just below a tree line to get out of the wind then headed back down the mountain to camp. No one wanted to face the fact that tomorrow we would be riding out of the bush back to headquarters.

Unable to break the sacred oath of ‘what happens in the bush stays in the bush’, some experiences, along with the penalties for losing one’s lei cannot be revealed. You will have to go on this adventure yourself. You will not be disappointed.

When you have trekked across the Andes on horseback from Chile to Argentina, been wine tasting on horseback in South Africa and chased 500 horses across the plains of Colorado, you would think that another ride in the Rockies would be just another ride in the Rockies. But, from the first time I climbed up onto Slim, to the last hug in the headquarters tent, I was free from all negativity. From the afternoon gallop across the golden grass meadow at mach seven with no reins, arms spread eagled, to the endless laughter around the campfire making my belly hurt, this trip set a new mark for me. Perhaps it was the level of enthusiasm of Wild Deuces Brenda and Terri, combined with their unique personalities that seemed to bring everyone out of their shell. The shenanigans around the camp take you instantly back to childhood, leaving all your adult woes behind. All that, combined with Rachel’s cooking, the quality of the horses and the outstanding beauty of the landscape made this a five-star adventure in my books. 🐾