

ON A HIGH

RÓISÍN MAGEE goes way off-grid for a trekking adventure on Mt Algidus Station, a 21,000-hectare cattle station in the Canterbury High Country

IMAGES: RÓISÍN MAGEE

Riding a horse across the river in flood was dangerous and hair-raising even to those experienced in the game. For the inexperienced rider there was also the urge to watch the rushing water, which quickly made him dizzy.

A River Rules My Life, Mona Anderson

New Zealand writer Mona Anderson made the Canterbury high country around Lake

Coleridge famous when she published her classic account, *A River Rules my Life*, in 1963. She arrived at Mount Algidus Station as a newlywed bride in 1940 on a horse-drawn wagon, crossing the river she described as her “Rubicon” – the mighty Wilberforce. At that time there was only one petrol-powered machine on the run and the work of the station was done by hand and often on horseback. It was

a hard, unforgiving life that had sent some previous incumbents packing pretty quickly, but Mona loved it. She was to remain on the station with her husband Ron for 33 years.

The stations that feature in Mona’s 10 books are still working farms, but local James Cagney has guiding access through Mt Algidus Station’s Recreational Permit. James grew up in Hokitika and has worked all over the world guiding hunts, but now puts his extensive backcountry experience to good use running his own free-range hunting and horse trekking businesses with his wife Deb and son Dylan.

Looking through Willow’s ears to the Birdwood Range, across the Wilberforce



ABOVE Riding up the Mathias
LEFT Mistake Hut

ABOVE LEFT Crossing the Wilberforce
LEFT Looking down the Wilberforce
from Manuel's Hut ABOVE Denise
enjoys a break



Our first adventure started when we met up at the Cagneys' house in Lake Coleridge village for our trek briefing. After a quick chat about safety and the route, we loaded our bags on to James' Land Rover and squeezed in to drive across the Wilberforce to the old homestead, now known as 'Mona's House'. James carries a Garmin InReach on all of his treks to guarantee an emergency response; while reassuring, it was a reminder that we were heading off the grid in quite a real way. No mobile reception, no access except on horseback, by 4WD or tractor and, when Mona's "terrible Wilberforce" is running high, no access at all except by helicopter!

The horses were waiting for us on the other side of the Wilberforce and our first day's ride was up the Mathias River to Mistake Hut.

Low-hanging cloud obscured the tops, but the views along the huge Mathias Valley were spectacular. The Rolleston

range is made up of several peaks around 2000 metres and the Mathias Valley is so wide that it felt like we were scuttling up the side like ants, dwarfed by the steep sides and sheer expanse. James pointed out wildlife perched on rocky outcrops above us but other than the sound of native birds and our own chatter, there was just a beckoning silence.

At Mistake Hut we were greeted by Deb, Dylan, cold beers and a platter of cheese and crackers. James cooked an excellent chicken curry and, fuelled by a bottomless supply of beer and wine, the evening quickly descended into stories, some surprising hidden talents and general hilarity.

The next morning, after an enormous cooked breakfast, we continued up the Mathias Valley as far as possible before returning to Mistake Hut for lunch. We had a good look in a pond on the way for a species of Galaxiidae, freshwater fish particular to the area, but they were shy and we only saw ripples as we approached.

After lunch we rode back down the valley to spend our second night in Titan Hut (in case you are wondering, the

classical names – the streams Gorgon, Titan and Chimera, and Mount Algidus itself – were given by the second station owner, Francis Neave, who was a keen classicist).

Titan was much more modern and included a flushing toilet and a shower (which no-one used. We were committed to three days of backcountry grubbiness). There was also a swimming hole, but the water was so icy we wimped out of that, too. James and Dylan cooked another great dinner of venison sausage and mash but after a longer day in the saddle it was an early night for the group.

The third day started grey and chilly. Summer was hanging on at home but up here in the mountains autumn had arrived. We rode through the farm buildings while a crop-dusting pilot pulled off some impressive flying overhead and down a steep bank to the Wilberforce. James paused to explain that we needed to stay in single file to follow him across the river, and to watch for his direction as the riverbed was quicksand in parts.

The horses plunged into the river without hesitation but even with the river running relatively low, the current was quick and the water surprisingly deep in parts. Crossing back, we rode up through

On the Mathias side of the station, about ten miles from the homestead, we came first to Mistake Hut. There was also a Mistake Creek and a mountain almost 7,000 feet high called Mistake Hill. Understatement, as well as repetition, seemed to be a high country trait.

A River Rules my Life, Mona Anderson

English trees and then native beech forest until we suddenly popped out high above the valley floor. The clouds had cleared and we were greeted by spectacular views of the Wilberforce Gorge.

We ate lunch at Manuel's Hut before heading back down the valley to turn the horses out and load the truck for our return trip. The horses disappeared at speed into a green paddock, but we were in no rush to go home and spent our drive home planning our return. Until the next time!

Practicalities

What to expect Epic High Country scenery, privileged views of a working High Country station, river crossings, unpredictable weather, musterers' huts, great food, great company, amazing horses – a real bucket list trip!

Riding ability catered for Any. Our group included a novice rider who had only ridden once or twice before, experienced riders who hadn't ridden for a while, and some regular riders with their own horses. No-one was bored or felt

uncomfortable.

You do need to be confident letting your horse pick its path and giving them their heads over varied terrain, however. A reasonable level of fitness is also required as you need to lead the horses over particularly rough sections of the trail.

How to get there From Christchurch, take State Highway 73, Bealey Road, Leaches Road and Coleridge Road to Lake Coleridge Village (1 hour 15 minutes from the airport).

What to wear The High Country Horse Adventures website suggests you take a rain jacket and some warm clothing, along with walking boots or running shoes, and to be prepared to walk up and down very steep inclines and over particularly rough ground. I would add that walking boots are a better choice than running shoes; it's easy to roll your ankle walking over boulders. Don't worry about fitting into stirrups as James mostly uses Western gear so the stirrups are big enough for even chunky boots.

When it comes to riding clothes, wear what you're most comfortable in. I took my normal Pikeur full seat jodhpurs and ordinary t-shirts, and I took sun screen, sunglasses and SPF lip balm, all of which I was very grateful for even on the cloudy days. I took a windproof jersey, too, just in case the weather turned, and that worked well. There's space behind each saddle for a rolled up jacket and jersey.



LEFT My mount for the trip, Willow
ABOVE James, Deb and Dylan Cagney
at Manuel's Hut



saddle was extremely comfortable and the saddle bags had plenty of room for my big camera, water bottle and sun cream. Watching James tack up and unsaddle reminded me of the cavalry barracks in Hyde Park in London; very neat and tidy with a place for everything and everything in its place. James, Deb and Dylan will tack up for you, and they're happy to help if you'd rather do it yourself especially if you've never handled a Western saddle before.

James is a real horseman and his horses are special. All are consummate professionals; great for beginners or nervous riders because they know their jobs so well, but sensitive and responsive so a treat for experienced riders, too. They know the country and are sure-footed over terrain that many

To some, the mountains call quietly, and they know they must go. To others they command: "Come to me and I shall reveal to you the enchantment of my snowfields"

The Wonderful World at my Doorstep,
Mona Anderson

Feel free to bring your own helmet, but James and Deb have plenty of spares if you want to save packing space, or don't have your own.

Merino tops/leggings are a great idea. Even just one set works well as pyjamas and an emergency base layer. Wool has the added benefit that it will still keep you warm if you get wet (and it won't smell!). Merino socks are great, too.

In terms of rain gear, it's sensible to check waterproofing before you set off if you've dragged last year's outdoor gear out of the cupboard. Driza-bone jackets or similar are the gold standard for riding; they're indestructible, long enough to cover your thighs, the oilskin seems to last forever and you can turn the collar up to stop rain running down your neck. I took waterproof trousers so I didn't need to worry about wet feet. I also took Sealskin gloves, just in case it got really cold or wet during the day (it didn't).

I am not a fan of cold temperatures, so I'd recommend a down jacket and a down sleeping bag for the evenings. It's cold up in the mountains at night, even in

summer. I packed mine in drybags as down is hopeless if it gets wet, but James, Deb and Dylan did a great job of moving it from hut to hut so I really didn't need to worry.

The accommodation is basic, but very comfortable – do take your own pillow case so you can help keep the hut facilities clean. A pair of jandals for late-night loo trips will save you having to muck around with your boots in the dark.

Apart from that, some deodorant, a water bottle for your saddle bags, a toothbrush and toothpaste, ear plugs for the inevitable snorer(s) in the group and you are all set for several days of backcountry heaven.

The horses and tack James uses mostly stationbred horses and Western tack, although he does have one or two stock saddles available which you can ask for in advance if that is your preference.

The tack is all very good quality and beautifully maintained. My (Western)

domestic horses would struggle with. Don't feel bad about leaving your own horse at home!

How to book Be prepared to book way in advance. As a hunting guide, James and his horses are very busy in the hunting season and he manages the horses' workloads very carefully. Most rides are run as exclusive groups (couples, families or groups of friends) and for multi-day rides there is a minimum of four riders and a maximum of six.

You can book through the website: www.horsetreklakecoleridge.co.nz ■

Finally... A huge thank you to Jane and Jamie Smiley and the people of Mount Algidus Station for their hospitality. And a special thanks to the people and horses of High Country Horse Adventures for such a wonderful weekend.