

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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## Fall in the Saddle—Montana by horseback

Jean Arthur / The Spokesman-Review

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The fall colors of Montana, rubicund, sienna and palomino gold, glisten, under the Big Sky, which itself is an atmospheric hue of well-worn denim, stretched over mountains, meadows, lakes and prairie.

A gallop around the Big Sky state churns up more than a bit of topsoil for Montana visitors when they explore the lands in the saddle. Wild horses graze the grassy realms of the Pryor Mountains Wild Horse Preserve, south of Billings, the state's largest city, with about 100,000 residents.

Rodeos, cattle and sheep drives and an annual bucking horse sale dominate arenas and ranches of the 147,000-square mile state. For fall visitors, several outfitters offer trail adventures by horseback during the most colorful season of the year. One exceedingly lovely equine outing departs from just inside the eastern boundary of Glacier National Park to explore the Many Glacier area.

The corral, near the historic Many Glacier Hotel, is a simple rough-hewn log rail, wrapped every couple of feet with cotton lead ropes. Each rope attaches to a snoozing or a yawning or a tail flapping horse. A few flies pester flanks, but the constant breeze cools the soon-to-be dudes and their steeds. "There are two kinds of horses here," says Swan Mountain Outfitters' cowboy H.R. Kanistanaux. "We have one kickers and 10 kickers."

To that, the 15 riders look puzzled. "The horses want to eat grass alongside the trail," he continues, tipping his not-so-gently used black felt cowboy hat back just a bit. "They don't need to eat. They get plenty of hay. So you have to give them a really hard kick and pull up on the reins the first time they try to eat. Otherwise, they'll be trying to eat grass the

whole two-hour ride. And that's a 10-kicker. It takes 10 kicks to get 'em going again."

Soon enough, wranglers in well-pressed, blue-and-white-striped cowboy shirts pick a horse for each guest and help them into western saddles.

From the luxury leather seat with natural air conditioning and a view of park peaks and lake, the riders steer horses into a line behind the gaucho for a saunter around Cracker Flats. The first horse to try a nibble at the native grasses is Roy, a dark bay gelding ridden by novice equestrian Jon Sandler of Las Vegas. Sandler tries the one-kick method. It doesn't work. Ten kicks later, Sandler and Roy come to an agreement of sorts: Roy is a 10-kicker; Joe is a dude. "A two-hour chauffeured buffet," says Sandler of his ride.

Alongside the 5-foot high grasses are huckleberry bushes, heavy with ripe berries in fall. Aspens and evergreens fill the forest, while the peaks, Mount Siyeh, Allen Mountain and Wynn Mountain, scratch the skyline to the south. The trail meanders east, above the shoreline of Lake Sherburne. Riders spot a bighorn sheep, wild rock climbers that inhabit the dizzying heights of these mountains. Another rider, Sandler's wife Sherry, spots a moose. "There in that marshy area of the lake," she points. A massive bull moose feeds on underwater plants along Lake Sherburne.

The wrangler reveals that grizzly bears and black bears frequent the area here too, "but stay on your horse if you see a bear. The horses will just keep moving on the trail. They know about bears. If you stay calm, your horse will stay calm."

After all, a 900-pound horse is taller than a 500-pound grizzly bear on all fours, and therefore, not likely to bother horses and their riders, especially where a large group of horsemen ambles down the trail.

More than 70 native mammal species roam Glacier, including wolverine, grey wolf and lynx. Glacier is considered an "intact eco system" because nearly all the original species live here. This time of year, bears munch nearly continuously—pigging out on huckleberries to gain weight for the hibernation ahead.

More than 260 species of birds reside or travel through the park including golden eagles that migrate overhead this time of year, riding thermals en route to their winter homes in southern climes.

And before most of the human activities shutter for the coming snows, visitors can join numerous guided trail rides inside Glacier National Park.

Swan Mountain Outfitters offer one-hour, two-hour, half-day and full-day trail rides from Many Glacier and from Apgar and the Lake McDonald Lodge area through Sept. 20. Rates range for \$40 to \$150.

The famous and historic lodges of Glacier remain open for lodging, dining and relaxing well into September. At Many Glacier Hotel, visitors luxuriate in the elegant Ptarmigan Dining Room, the vast lobby or the petite bar. While the lodge guest rooms are sparse, the view is sumptuous in any direction: peaks, lake, and forest, rubicund, sienna and palomino gold, glistening, under the Big Sky.

For trail-ride reservations, contact Swan Mountain Outfitters at (877) 888-5557 or [www.swanmountainoutfitters.com/glacier](http://www.swanmountainoutfitters.com/glacier). For lodging and dining information inside Glacier, call (406) 892-2525 or [www.glacierparkinc.com](http://www.glacierparkinc.com).

Several other outfitters offer trail rides near Glacier, including Glacier Gateway Outfitters, (406) 226-4408 or [www.eastglacierparkmontana.com](http://www.eastglacierparkmontana.com), which provides trips led by Native American guides who trail along the eastern edge of Glacier just outside the park boundary and share the history of the Plains Indians.

The corral is just across the road, Hwy 49, from Glacier Park Lodge in East Glacier, where through September, the guides will take one-hour to full-day rides, \$25 to \$175, “Cowboy style” which means guests are not required to ride in a line.

The guides lead trips to buffalo jumps and fantastic geological sites while regaling riders with local folklore and Indian history in the Two Medicine River Gorge area and adjacent Blackfeet Indian Reservation on Glacier’s eastern edge.

In addition to the massive log hotel, Glacier Park Lodge, [www.glacierparkinc.com](http://www.glacierparkinc.com), East Glacier’s lodging, dining, art gallery and recreational activities include humble mom-and-pop places that surprise savvy travelers with the comfort, elegance and variety. Details are available at [www.eastglacierparkmontana.com](http://www.eastglacierparkmontana.com) or [www.visitmt.com](http://www.visitmt.com).

Another outfitter in nearby Whitefish, Mont., about 45 minutes west of West Glacier, is The Bar W Ranch, just 3.5 miles outside the resort village and situated on Spencer Lake. Wranglers treat riders to spectacular trails lined with tamarack dress in fall’s golden needles.

“We have 3,000 acres here to explore by horseback,” says Bar W Ranch owner Dave Leishman. The ranch offers one-hour to full-day rides on the ranch and other locales such

as to Stryker Peak where an old fire lookout provides views of mountain ranges. Riders can choose a beach outing along Lake Koocanusa near Libby, Mont. or other woodland routes. Rates range from \$40 an hour to \$175 day, which includes lunch.

“We have a herd of 60 horses for all ability riders,” says Leishman who said trail rides are available through late fall. “In the September and May, we offer a cattle drive on a 50,000-acre ranch on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. We build a base camp, set up corrals and move cattle.”

The \$1,895 to \$2,450 per week adventure has guests rounding up cattle then moving them through the corrals for sorting, branding, inoculating and other necessary duties of a cow-calf operation.

The Bar W's guest rooms are available for a fall B&B season beginning at \$65 per night per person. For other rates and availability, contact The Bar W at (866) 828-2900 or [www.thebarw.com](http://www.thebarw.com).

Information on Whitefish lodging, dining and recreation is at [www.explorewhitefish.com](http://www.explorewhitefish.com).

Another Whitefish-area facility, Gaynor's River Bend Ranch, offers one-hour to 3.5-hour guided trail rides on the Spencer Mountain trails in addition to lodging. For details, call (406) 862-3802 or [www.gaynorranchatwhitefish.com](http://www.gaynorranchatwhitefish.com).

Additional western Montana trail-riding operations include:

The Bob Marshall Wilderness Ranch near St. Ignatious, (406) 754-2285 or [www.wildernessranch.com](http://www.wildernessranch.com).

The Rich Ranch at Seeley Lake, (800) 532-4350 or <http://richranch.com/>.

Wilderness Outfitters offers trips into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, (866) 218-5301.

For a complete listing of outfitting companies in the region, see [www.glaciermt.com](http://www.glaciermt.com), or in the state, see [www.visitmt.com](http://www.visitmt.com).

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