

MOUNTAINS HIGH

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In the Canadian Rockies, humans and horses join forces
for an exhilarating trail ride above the clouds.

Story and photography by Karla Courtney





(Right) Guide Sarah Gillies at Allenby Pass





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“Horses need to walk on the edge to see it,” says my guide, Sarah Gillies, all leather and calm. She tosses the comment over her shoulder as if she’s reminding me to zip my jacket. We’re on horseback, picking our way across a tilted band of shale where the trail narrows to a single track, high enough that the mountain seems to fall away in a sheer drop. My horse eases outward and lowers his head, reading the ground with his feet. I hold my breath.

It’s day three of a six-day lodge-to-lodge trek in the Canadian Rockies with Banff Trail Riders (horseback.com),

following the spine of the Sundance Range, south from Banff and back again – roughly 80 kilometres return. There are 13 of us, including five human guests – a mother and daughter who ride regularly, a married German couple (one of whom was an equestrian vaulter) and me, the newbie – guide Gillies, six horses and Buggy the mule, who carries the day’s supplies, pausing now and then to scratch his rump on a branch or leave a steaming punctuation mark on the trail.

Banjo (above right) is my ride and companion: milky-white with a gentle face and solid understanding of how to

leverage a snap-happy novice. Day one, we leave Banff and are immediately flanked by the glacial-blue Bow River, with dramatic peaks rising behind it like they’ve been set there on purpose. I lift my phone, which serves only as a camera as there’s no mobile reception or wi-fi. Banjo drops his head into the grass for a snack. We fall behind and the others coax me forward with friendly advice to look where I’m going and pay attention to my horse.

Our first water crossing arrives early. Banjo makes it a performance, kicking his legs, splashing, refusing to

drink. Soon after, as we reach a narrow wooden bridge with a steep ramp, he stops and plants his feet. I realise that if Banjo decides we’re not doing this, I can’t change his mind. “He responds to the pressure of your legs,” calls Gillies. “Give him a squeeze.” I do as she says and to my relief he surges forward in one clean motion. “Banjo knows when you aren’t connected to him,” Deirdre, the sage, straight-shooting mother from the mother-and-daughter duo, tells me. “You’re always having a conversation.”

By the late afternoon we reach Sundance Lodge, a haven in the woods,

where the scents of woodsmoke and bread reach us before we even get our boots off. Nearby sits the original Ten-Mile Cabin, built in 1923 as a rest stop for weary riders. Sundance itself is newer and larger but it sits in the old tradition, where everything has travelled here the hard way. The bedrooms upstairs are cosy and private, with wooden furniture and thick quilts. Mine faces the creek so I leave the window open to the sound of water rushing through the dark.

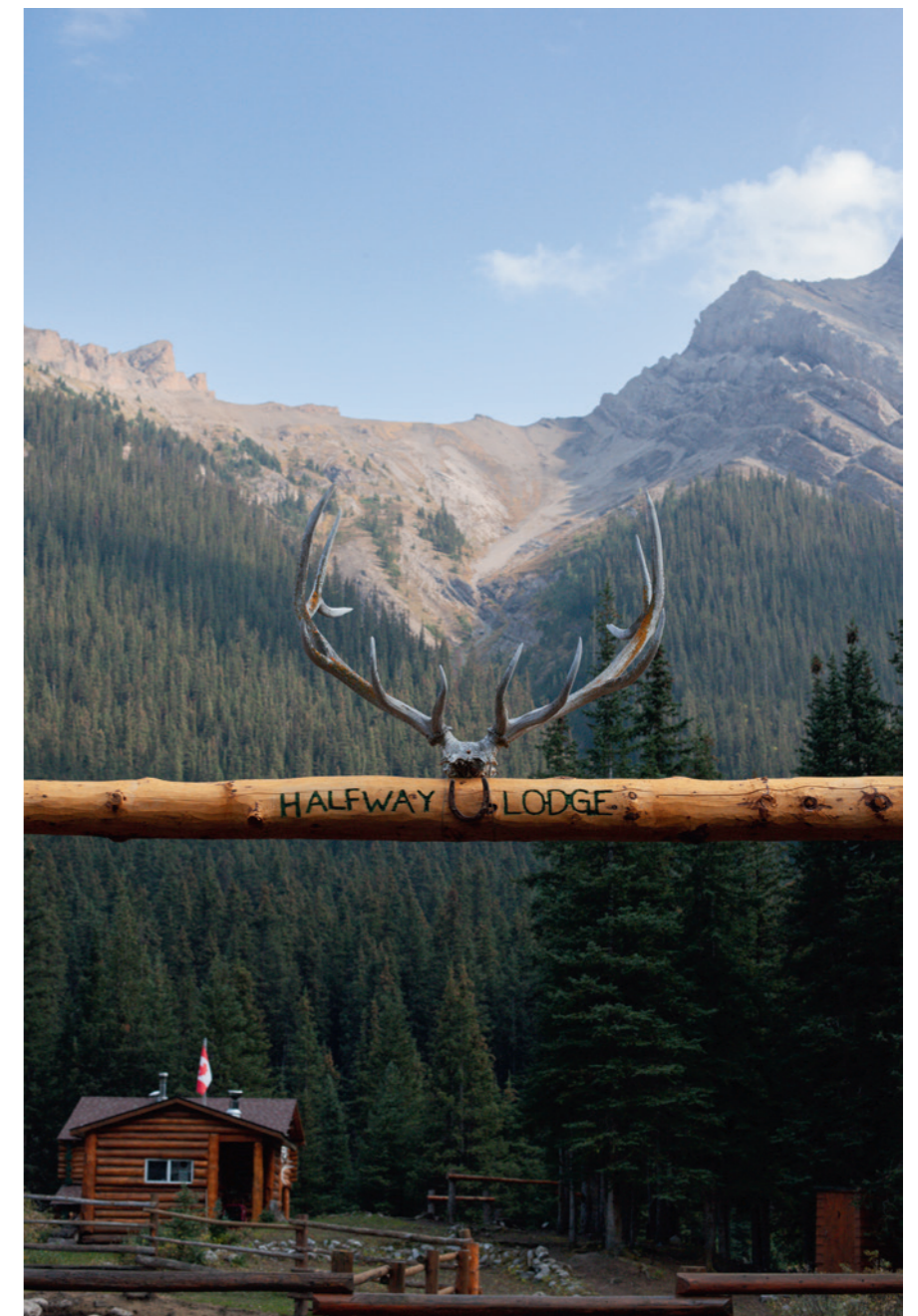
First Nations people once used these valleys as routes and hunting grounds; later, pioneers and packers



followed the same natural corridors. Even today, everything moves on hooves, with packers urging trains of mules back and forth, carrying the infrastructure of comfort: food, fuel, clean linen, beer. Chefs work on shifts, staying at the lodges operated by Banff Trail Riders for days at a time, feeding whoever rides in hungry with hot meals, including steak, ribs, fresh bread, sweet potato mash, roast turkey and molten chocolate cakes, which seem impossible when the closest shop is more than 16 kilometres away by foot or horseback.

Resident chef Matt hums *Wichita Lineman* while he prepares breakfast in a kitchen filled with timber and lamplight – coffee brews, bacon crackles in the pan and buns rise under towels. “You know, back in towns and cities there’s just... so much complexity to everything and so much happening all around. But out here, things are very simple.”

Further into the mountains is Halfway Lodge, our second home, where we spend three nights, affording us one day for a long climb and another for the horses to rest while we hike to





Gillies prepares lunch on the trail (above); Sundance Lodge

a secluded lake. Halfway Lodge has been a stopping point since the 1920s and the cabin, which is on its original foundation with one storey added, is kept deliberately simple and snug. Inside, a wood stove heats candlelit rooms and warms the kettle, while outside among the trees there's the ultimate luxury of a heated shower, the water pulled up from the nearby stream as the mountains glow pink in the late light.

The ride to Allenby Pass on the third day promises a view described in Biblical proportions. But the price of

admission is a steady ascent to nearly 2500 metres above sea level, taking that narrow trail with the steep drop. Only a handful of people make it up here each year – the groups on this trip and some intrepid long-distance hikers. The switchbacks stack up in tight, steep turns that keep you climbing when the mountain won't give you a straight line. My hips start bargaining with me and I stop thinking big ideas and start contemplating small ones: breathe, loosen your shoulders, don't look down, trust the horse.

We arrive and it's more than a view. It's the sensation of being on top of the world – above the tree line, above the routes, above whatever we thought was "high" before. The ridges out towards Mount Assiniboine ripple into the distance in every direction, valley after valley, like the land is unfolding. Gillies helps us dismount and ties off the horses to rest. Everyone naturally drifts to their own outcrop but even spread out, there's a strange, wordless connection between us – humans and horses. We're here together, strong and present. ✨