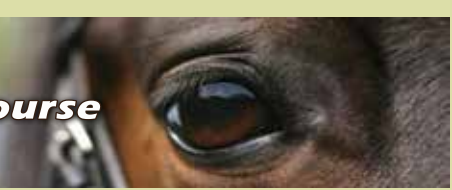




A Horse of Course **by Betty Sharp**



J Jeans, boots, hat, belt buckle, pearlsnap shirt. It's fun to dress the part in the Hill Country but nothing says cowboy like riding a horse. Whether you're a tenderfoot or have your own mount, gorgeous riding areas await. You can use the internet (or those wonderful Visitor Centers) to find every riding accommodation imaginable. Here's a few tips for new riders, and some idea of what's available in the equestrian world.

In my younger life, I wrangled several hundred Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops on rides, using a string of 100 horses. Once I took 23 Brownies, ages 6 to 8, out. No ponies, big horses. The little girls and horses did fine, the troop leaders kissed the ground when we got back. So I know some things about handling Dudes on horseback.

Here's the first thing Dudes should expect: trail wranglers who give instruction before you mount up. Horses are not machines. Even if they follow in a line nose to tail, you need a few basic cues. Horses are sensitive and intelligent creatures, but each stranger's attempts at communication is another foreign language they have to decipher. So listen up and pay attention to your wrangler. Take a good look at your horse, use its name, give it a stroke or too. A stroking motion on the neck is better than a thumping pat. Your horse may or may not like its head or ears gently scratched.

The horses should look well fed, basically content and calm, the bridles, blankets and saddles in good repair. A respectable riding operation will take care with saddle fit for the horses' sake, and will adjust stirrup length for your sake. Remember, the reins aren't for holding in a death grip, their function is gentle guidance. Reins are attached to the horse's mouth, not a post.

As for your gear, leave flip-flops at home. Do dress like a cowboy. Jeans are best, but at least long non-slippery pants even for children. Otherwise you'll be walking bow-legged after the ride. Boots are great, or

hiking shoes with heels. Avoid sneakers or flat soled shoes that might slip through stirrups. Billowing shirts and tops can get caught over the saddle horn. Tie that hat down so the wind won't steal it.

If after your trail ride horses intrigue you, consider booking a clinic. Start by Googling "natural horsemanship" or "whole horsemanship." You'll find clinics for senior adults, families, all girl weekends, corporate retreats, and veterans. If that's out of budget, find an equine therapy group in your area and ask to volunteer. There might be a Police Mounted Patrol "bombproof" clinic you can audit for fun.

For an armchair equine adventure, watch "Buck," a spectacular movie about horseman Buck Brannaman. He'll both break your heart and inspire you, and teach you what kind and thorough horsemanship is like. My book recommendation is "The Revolution in Horsemanship," by Robert M. Miller, D.V.M. and Rick Lamb. They put into words what has happened over the past decades for betterment of horse and human, much of it brought about by real cowboys who knew there was a kinder, smarter way. Horses never deserve cruel or rough treatment.

Most places have a 200 or 225 pound rider weight limit, so hit the gym this winter if necessary. You and the horse will enjoy the ride more. Most of all, do what an old wrangler says: Sit up straight but not stiff, breathe, relax, look ahead out over the horse's ears not down at your hands, enjoy the scenery, and appreciate the majestic creature you're riding. And be thankful this isn't your mode of daily transportation.

