

Equestrian Exploration

Gorge tours on horseback offer unique adventures

Story by Tracy Beard • Photos by Sarah Heany

Numerous wonders in the Columbia River Gorge await exploration by visitors. You can investigate the area on foot, by boat, via car and even on horseback. Take an unforgettable horseback ride — through local orchards and vineyards, up to cascading waterfalls and to peaks overlooking spectacular views of Mount Hood and Mount Adams — with Margo Vankat and her team at Double Mountain Horse Ranch, based in Hood River, Oregon. Don't worry, they offer several different rides for all ages and skill levels (see page 36).

For my recent adventure, I met Margo on a back road in Cascade Locks. She arrived with four athletic horses and two riding photographers. The temperature was in the 60s, perfect weather for a day of riding. Margo saddled up the steeds, we chose our horse for the day, and soon we were en route to Dry Creek Falls. Due to her expertise with horses and her stellar ranch management skills, Margo has secured exclusive permits with the U.S. Forest Service, allowing her to guide for-profit riding tours in selected areas of Oregon not otherwise available to the public.

The well-cared-for horses at Double Mountain Horse Ranch are suitable for riders of varied skills. The four horses on our journey were eager to go, unlike horses you find at many riding stables. In the past, I've owned several horses and lived in a place where I could ride for miles through the woods and along logging roads behind my house. After moving away, however, I have participated in various trail rides around the world, but none mimicked those incredible experiences of my past — until my ride with Margo.

Reese Witherspoon rode here

We wandered off the trail and through the forest. We crossed rocky creeks and fallen logs, finally stopping to savor a delicious lunch while sitting in front of Dry Creek Falls. The horses stood quietly as we chatted together and watched the waters cascade down the falls into a majestic pool. The waters then continued down the mountain in the form of a babbling brook that the horses willingly crossed. Margo pointed out where a scene took place in the movie "Wild," with Reese Witherspoon.

Margo's herd is a combination of horses she selected along with ones she rescued. She scouts for additions to the team



by finding horses in their second or third career. These horses were well-cared-for but have become like forgotten lawn ornaments. Margo often receives messages or emails alerting her to a horse in need. Margo says, "When I rescue a horse, there is something that leads me to pick him or her out. Some of my horses come from divorces, foreclosures, teenagers off to college or elderly people that can no longer care for their trusted steed." Margo loves her job.

"My favorite thing about guiding horseback rides is that it's a pure gift from my staff and me to others," she said. "We allow people to unplug and unhook from their routine. I love the magic that happens between the rider and the horse and the fact that I have a portable office out in nature."

Working horses

Margo told me about her passion for finding secluded trails with the most incredible views and sharing them with other riders on her trips. She is dedicated and finds joy in giving her horses a "job" that helps provide food, shoes and healthcare for them. She wants riders to experience nature and witness fantastic terrain.

Double Mountain Horse Ranch provides a variety of tours, lessons and a kids' riding camp. Riders on the two-or-more-hour trips are encouraged to bring water, snacks, a camera, sunscreen and a sack lunch to savor while experiencing the great outdoors. Each trip is led by experienced guides and lasts a minimum of 90 minutes. Riders should wear closed-toed shoes and long pants. Hats, boots and helmets are available for use during the ride. Participants can choose from one



By Tracy Beard

PROVISIONS ALONG THE TRAIL

A Twisted Summer Pasta Salad

6 ounces fresh or frozen green beans
2 Tbl. butter
½ tsp. herbs de Provence
Water
½ Tbl. salt
½ pound dried gemelli pasta
1 Tbl. extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper
3-½ ounces mild goat cheese, crumbled
½ cup chopped toasted walnuts



Cook green beans in salted water until crisp-tender, drain and put into an ice bath.

Place chopped walnuts in a dry pan and cook on the stovetop until toasted. Set aside.

Boil large pot of water with ½ Tbl. salt. Cook gemelli as directed. Drain. Add olive oil and butter to the large pot with the drained gemelli. Add salt, pepper, herbs de Provence, green beans, goat cheese and walnuts, mix until combined.

Serve the pasta hot or at room temperature.

Serves 3 people.



Photo by Christal Angelique

Tracy Beard writes about luxury and adventure travel, fine dining and traditional and trendy libations for regional, national and international magazines and is a regular "Out & About" contributor to Columbia River Reader. She lives in Vancouver, Wash.

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Gorge horseback rides

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of the following preplanned trips, customize their trip with Margo, or sign up for lessons or camp.

“Wild Adventure” takes riders to a waterfall near the Pacific Crest Trail running from Mexico to Canada.

“Columbia River Gorge” begins in a meadow on the west side of the Hood River Valley. The trail climbs through the forest along fern grottoes and cascading streams. Weather permitting, riders journey to the Teepee Trail, a private pathway

traveled by early Native Americans. It boasts views of the Columbia River Gorge, where Lewis and Clark came out to the Wild West, and showcases a spectacular view at Mitchell Point Overlook.

“Oregon” whisks riders to a viewpoint overlooking five awe-inspiring peaks: Mount Defiance, Mount Hood, Mount Adams, Mount St Helens, and Mount Rainier. Due to the high elevation, this ride is weather dependent; but those lucky enough to experience

Mother Nature in a good mood will be blessed with picturesque views and a landscape peppered with wildflowers.

“Fruit Loop/Sunset” takes place later in the day, and the route meanders through orchards and vineyards. Riders have an opportunity to view the sunset and evening stars from a new angle via horseback.

“Orchards” explores vineyards and fruit orchards with views of Mount Hood and Mount Adams. Riders 21+ may do a little local wine tasting along the way (extra fees apply).

Private lessons are available from 1.5 hours and up for all ages and skill levels. The kids’ program is available for a week or just a day and teaches kids about compassion, empathy and overcoming challenges. Youths learn riding and horse care skills while developing an appreciation for the animals and the outdoors.

Don your cowboy boots and book a ride this summer to view the gorge from a new perspective, via horseback. Rides range from \$90-240. Call Double Mountain Horse Ranch at 541-513-1152 or visit www.ridinginhoodriver.com.

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