

# Enlarging the Trail Ride Experience<sup>1</sup>

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The quality of the trail ride experience inexorably begins with the quality of the relationship between the horse and rider. Incompatibility, a lack of sense not only of acceptance of each other, but also enjoyment of each other, lowers the potential for an enjoyable ride. Compatibility and a sense of mutually in enjoying a change of scenery and the curiosity of what lies around the next bend or just over the rise raises the potential for a high quality experience.

So what else is there to appreciate and enjoy? The “what else’ lies in part in the aesthetics of where you are. A part of the aesthetic is in the appeal of trail wildflowers from the simplest that beg empathy for their seemingly low station in the scheme of things to the most overwhelming explosions of color and form. A part is in the stimulus for reverence when passing through park-like stands of big trees where the shade is so continuous that shadows are exiled to places of lesser majesty, to forests so aglow in autumn colors that one falls in love with the idea of being in a place so lovely. A part is in the giggling of a small stream running through rocks and roots and that delivers cool refreshment to our horse who slurps and swallows so heavily that we smile as we wonder about his etiquette at such a delicate table. It is in the roar of a waterfalls that our horse heard before we did and told us so with ears pricked forward, shortened stride, and tightening muscles. But he trusts us as we ask for forward movement and impart a confidence that all is okay – a spectacle is ahead; it is beautiful to behold; not a threat of death.

The aesthetic may be on a shoreline where our horse keeps an eye on waves lapping at the beach. We may think about endless turbulence of water, rock, and sand, sometimes gentle, sometimes violent. It may be where the prairie rolls to the horizon to encounter the sky. Here the grass may move like waves on the sea, and we smile as we think back to grade school days when we learned that the covered wagons moving West were called “prairie schooners.” It may be in the desert, where cacti ancient and stoic demonstrate a biotic imperative for life in some of the most life forbidding situations.

From the crests of mountain ranges to the valley floors, from seashores to prairies, from forests to deserts, we ride the land –our horses and us. We see our silhouette gliding along with us, and it conveys the aesthetic of the mystique of something unexplainably spiritual, a numen within us when we are in this place.

Our sense of the aesthetically beautiful is a step up in the climb to the full potential of the recreational trail ride experience. Our next step is to think about how it got to be this way. The geological process of continental drift heaved up the Appalachian

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**chain in what we call the Allegheny Orogeny hundreds of millions of years ago. That slow process of natural carnage today offers beautiful waterfalls, granite domes, craggy talus slopes, and alternating ridges and valleys that accommodate both the domestic landscape of farms and the wildness of unfarmable slopes and soils.**

**In the northern plains and prairies, great glaciers heaved up moraines that became covered with grasses and would be described by some early explorers as looking like “haycocks.” Millions of years before that, the Paleozoic seas left a limestone substrate loaded with nutrients that would in time nourish plants, that would nourish animals, that would eventually nourish people.**

**In the northern Rockies, geologic growth is slow but continuously thrusts bedrock upward as layers of rock are exfoliated and tumble down-slope to challenge horse and rider to know their business if they are to enter this land. To the south, the black basalt is evidence that great volcanoes once roared here and created new landscapes before there were people to appreciate them – but now we do.**

**In the southern Appalachians we ride where the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw roamed in the thousands in a culture that integrated agrarian and hunter-gather processes into a one civilization. We picture them looking across these same hills. What did they think about when they did so?**

**In the prairie country we envision Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow hunters peering over the edges of the glacial moraines to plan the hunt of grazing bison below. Their ponies are stationed down wind and out of site of the grazing herd. Most are likely conditioned to the hunt, but some must be new to it. Anticipation of both the expected and the unknown fills the air. What they were living, we are dreaming with misty eyes as we ride on the very land on which they rode into a life and death adventure.**

**Across the Missouri landscape and into the Yellowstone country we can dream of the Voyage of Discovery. America’s “Preview of Coming Attractions” as men of incalculable strength pushed watercraft and rode horses into the lands and the lives of indigenous peoples that had to be experienced to be believed. We think how the horses of these people enabled much of the journey of the explorers. We cannot smile as we think how the “winning of the West” was in part a destruction of these people and horses as well as the herds which supplied the people with food, clothing, and shelter.**

**And perhaps in these times of plenty of most things material, we should think even three centuries before the Lewis and Clark expedition when Spanish explorers inadvertently brought a silent death sentence to millions of indigenous people that would succumb to small pox, measles, and other European diseases with which they could not cope. Whole civilizations, and consequently landscapes, changed as populations of people plummeted for reasons that no one could understand at the**

**time. Perhaps the horse was a token of atonement unwittingly left to the survivors of a great atrocity.**

**Why should we constantly whet our sensibilities of these ecosystems in which our recreational trails are embedded? Because they are the consequences of processes so extensive and complex in time and space that we can only try to imagine them. Even our science is inadequate to develop a full appreciation of the wonder of it all. To ride these lands with insensitivity to their beauty and meaning is no more than racing chariots through the world's great cathedrals, museums, archeological sites, mausoleums, and cemeteries. As our appreciation of this fact grows, we shall grow closer to the full potential of the recreational trailride experience**