

California Riding Adventure Arizona, Here We Come!

A two-week camp-out during Arizona horse trial gives students a rare combination of fun, adventure and self-reliance.

by Auburn Excell

The idea started in the spring when I camped with friends at a horse trial. I didn't take any clients along on that particular trip so I decided to camp with a group of friends. I enjoyed the process of waking up on the grounds and feeding my horses in my PJs.

I found I had plenty of extra time that I would have spent packing and driving to and from a hotel. I could do a few additional things and bond with my horses.

I felt that camping out at a competition would be a great opportunity for the students at my eventing barn, Excell Equestrian, and the Coconino Horse Trials in Flagstaff, AZ this past summer presented the perfect opportunity to do so.

The long haul from our stable in San Juan Capistrano paid off for several of our riders. A real adventure was born for those who opted to camp for the first time at a horse show. The camping trip was scheduled in the interest of making the trip economical and creating a valuable experience.

The group left for Northern Arizona from California for the 10-hour drive in the cool evening to drive all night and arrive early the next day. Two volunteer drivers transported the eight horses and six girls. The girls were on their own with coach and horses for two weeks; no parents to do their chores or take them to the comforts of a hotel bed for the night.

Lack of sleep, lots of unpacking and setting up and tent poles flying were all part of the process as the team attempted to make camp and transform the ground beneath the pine trees into a comfortable home for the next two weeks. We just wanted to get camp set up before the monsoon rains came in the afternoon. With two tents ready, one large group tent for the girls and the other, a small more modest tent, for the coach and chaperones, we set off to prepare for the competition.

Breakfast and lunch were taken at the camp and dinner was an outing into town. We had cereal and fruit, juice and hot coffee or hot chocolate, then at lunch we all made sandwiches each day as a group.

At most competitions, the first day is so long and tough we are all just ready to leave and go have a shower. However, staying with the horses in the mountains encouraged everyone to come together as a team. The absence of distractions from well-meaning parents allowed the girls to just relax and enjoy preparing for the show without the pressure of finishing up to leave the grounds.

Into The Forest

The first show weekend was productive and fun and provided a sense of accomplishment. During the week that followed, we rode out into the forest on several fun trails. We hacked out as a group and took different routes each day. It was good practice trotting and cantering and we even got some gallops in. The leader would call out the pace



Having breakfast and armed with our cleaning weapons.

or obstacles coming ahead: "trotting, cantering, branches and logs" were some of the shouts used in telephone-style, pass-it-along relays to the back of the group. It was a fun learning experience for each of the riders to get to know their horses in a different environment. It was also a real confidence booster and the girls developed a better connection with their equine partners.

We also visited downtown Sedona and made our way to our own version of the infamous Slide Rock. We discovered a place off the highway nearby Sedona that we could get wet and bring our dogs to the water below. We got some lunch and made the trip. At first, the water was calm and clear but once you stepped in and sank through the cold, black sludge, the black clouds took over the clarity. It was also a home to crawdads and so the screaming began!

Sometime during the exploration and wading down stream process, one of the chaperones and I decided to start a mud slinging fight. In a matter of minutes a full war was in session. The hair and faces of everyone were impossible to differentiate. Everyone was completely covered in black goo from head to toe, including the dogs. The laughter and screaming was contagious and the whole experience deserved a few good photo ops to share with parents what good, clean fun we had on our trip.

As the second weekend of competition neared, it was time to get serious again about show preparations. Most of the students had hopes to move up to the next division based on their first week performances. Others opted to repeat and take advantage of the opportunity to perfect the previous week's performance. All were successful and pleased with their individual accomplishments. When the parents arrived, they were also impressed with the growth and new-found independence and confidence these girls displayed. Everyone pitched in and made this trip a success and great learning experience.

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Good clean fun!



Putting the horses to bed.



Becky Leisz riding around the Training Level course.