

Camp Canada!

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON / CLIXPHOTO.COM

DESTINATIONS

“Five, four, three, two, one, and off he goes!”

Sipping a glass of wine poolside, I watched the crazy whitewater rafter plunge headfirst into the chilly Ottawa river attached to a bungee cord.

I had just taken a swim, complemented by a relaxing soak in the hot tub. I was singing along with the live entertainment on stage with my travel companion, Laurel.

You’d never know that I was actually camping and that my horse was just a 10-minute walk away, munching on hay in his large corral next to my trailer.

This was an entirely new way of horse camping. Welcome to Horse Country Campground at Wilderness Tours Resort in Foresters Falls, Ontario!

A New Model

In 2007, with the purchase of a 100-acre parcel of land in Washington State,

Canadian Brian Trudeau (a Washington resident), created a membership-based, community equine campground called Cowboy Campsite.

This model allows campers to purchase, lease, or rent campsites for a time period of their choice. The campers may then enjoy all the trails the park has to offer, along with the grounds’ amenities.

The Washington location became a model for a North American-wide camp-

ground system called Horse Country Campgrounds. Along with Brian Trudeau, the system was founded by Larry Davis, Daniel Levine, and Walter Willett.

Their flagship location opened its gates in 2010, when Horse Country Campgrounds partnered with Wilderness Tours

Resort, a 6,000-acre outdoor-adventure destination along the banks of the Ottawa River.


The campground formally opened in July 2013. Six of its 48 campsites have been leased for an average of two years. Many sites are designated for weekend and nightly bookings by nonmembers.

The founders plan to expand the campground to a total of 300 sites within five years.

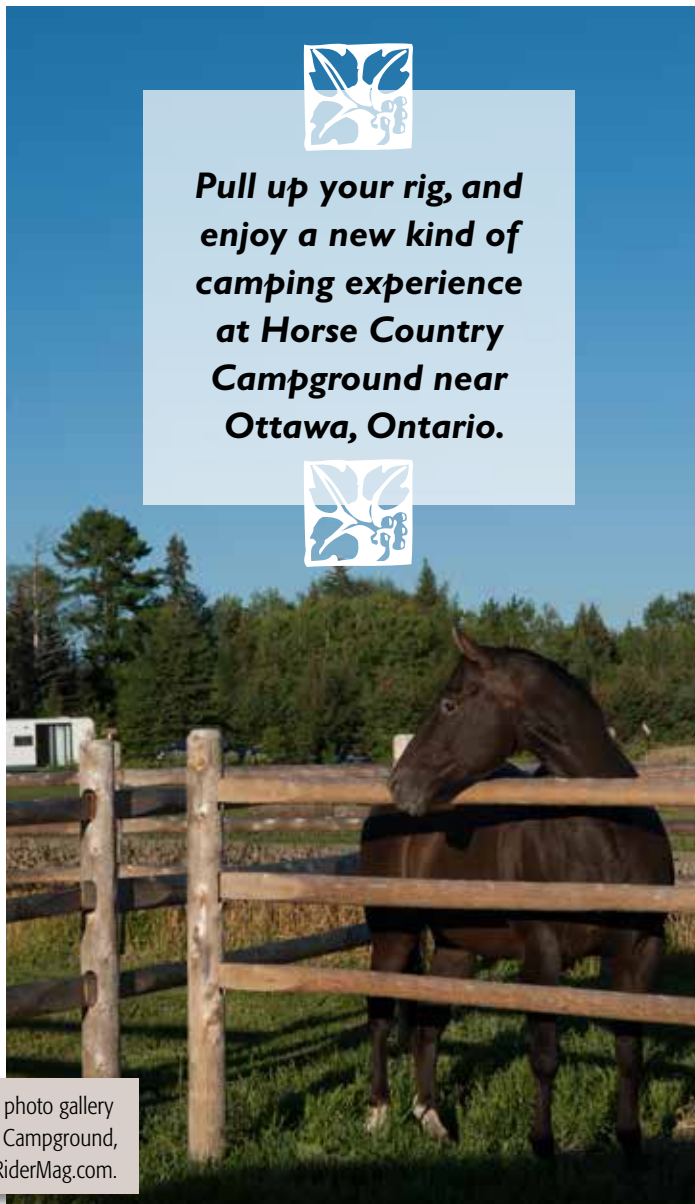

The 48 sites in Canada include eight with 20-by-20-foot corrals. In the spring, an additional 10 corrals (five 10-by-10-foot and five 20-by-20-foot) are to be built, along with five tie-line sites.

If you’d like to bring your own fencing, rather than stay at a corral site, you’ll pay less. However, note that campground personnel will have to inspect the fencing to make sure it’s secure.

Stallions aren’t welcome in
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Pull up your rig, and enjoy a new kind of camping experience at Horse Country Campground near Ottawa, Ontario.



Horse Country Campground at Wilderness Tours Resort in Canada’s Ottawa Valley is a 6,000-acre outdoor-adventure destination along the banks of the Ottawa River. “Our horses were instantly comfortable and relaxed in their surroundings,” says Shawn Hamilton.



Online extra! For a photo gallery of Horse Country Campground, go to TrailRiderMag.com.

**THE DUDE
RANCHER'S
ASSOCIATION
1.5 PAGE
COLOR
1.5
FORWARD RT
HAND
DISPLAY**



Shawn Hamilton and her travel companion, Laurel, settled their horses into individual large corrals. Shown is Laurel and her Morgan/Quarter Horse cross gelding, Lefty.

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the campground. Dogs are allowed, as long as they're kept under control.

'Good Energy'

Eager to sample all this campground had to offer, I pulled my rig into the entrance of the Horse Country Campground, a 1½ hour drive northwest of Ottawa, Ontario.

Driving in, we passed whitewater rafts, canoes, kayaks, and mountain bikes near the main pavilion that houses the restaurant, pool, and hot tub.

We made our way to the main gate. The corrals, children's playground, and even the outhouse are made of wooden poles, creating a true Western ambiance.

Walter Willett, Horse Country Campground president and acting campground manager, took a timeout from cutting grass to introduce himself. He welcomed us to the campground and directed us to our site.

Walter spends weekends in a trailer on the grounds with his wife Brenda, son Tyler, and daughter Hannah.

We unloaded Laurel's Morgan/Quarter Horse cross gelding, Lefty, and my Appaloosa gelding, Bailey Boy. They grazed on lush grass while Walter mowed our site. Our horses were instantly comfortable and relaxed in their surroundings.

Brenda greeted us with trail maps and brochures. She invited us on the community trail ride in the morning and a bonfire that night.

We were then officially greeted by Tyler, who arrived on his bicycle and was quick to strike up a conversation.

We set up our horses in their individual large corrals with water and hay. I opened up a bottle of wine, prepared cheese and crackers, then fell into my chair in front of the trailer with a long sigh of relief. We made it!

Walter and his business partner, Jason Daley, have really put their hearts in this destination. When we arrived, the campground had been officially open only a month. So far, things were looking good. It had a good energy.

As we snacked at our site, trailers begin to roll in, silhouetted

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by the setting sun. Parading in were members who'd leased a site, as well as weekend campers. A real family atmosphere started to take shape as we all cozied up to the fire that Walter had started in the community fire pit.

Laurel chatted with Jason and a few guests, while I sung songs with Hannah, who also taught me some karate moves.

It had been a five-hour drive, so I left the party early to settle into my bed in the trailer.

I woke up at 6:00 a.m., fed and watered the horses, then fell back into bed. When I awoke around 9:30, unheard of for me, I couldn't get over the peacefulness of the grounds.

Typically, when one wakes up at an equine campground, the sounds of pots clanging, horses nickering, and dogs yapping echo throughout the crisp morning air.

But at Horse Country, the campsites are so spread out that you rarely hear the goings-on of your camping neighbors.

After making tea, I watched Hannah enjoy the playground swing as I leisurely prepared a breakfast of sausages and boiled eggs on the camp stove.

Kicking Off

After breakfast, we tacked up the horses, packed our maps and snacks, and headed off to explore the trails.

We came upon a river crossing within five minutes of leaving camp. We saw that we could either ride over the wide, welcoming bridge or go through the water. Lefty chose the bridge. Once Bailey Boy saw him on the other side, he willingly crossed the creek.

We started off on Kicking Horse Trail, a windy, uphill path among the trees. This trail is used by mountain bikers, so it could be a little scary if you were to encounter a cyclist coming down the path. Luckily, we were the only ones on the trail.

If you head out in the afternoon when more cyclists are around, I'd recommend taking Big Climb Trail, as Kicking Horse doesn't give you much room to get off the trail.

At the top of the hill, the terrain flattens out to the Plateau Trail, which is bordered by small yellow flowers and goldenrod.

Heading eastbound, a wide path



Horse Country Campground offers spectacular trail riding in open fields, forested trails, and along the Ottawa River. *Inset:* Shawn Hamilton aboard Bailey Boy.

through an open field is big enough for a beautiful side-by-side canter. Our horses seemed to enjoy finally getting out for a stroll.

We spotted a sign on a tree pointing to Eagles Hill. Laurel and I headed up the hill to Eagles Nest Bed & Breakfast, from which we enjoyed a spectacular view of the river below.

Following Mount Wilderness trail, we found ourselves on Broome Rd., a small gravel road that reminded me of my childhood days riding down the tree-shaded dirt roads of the Ottawa backcountry.

Laurel said she felt she could be back in her hometown in Vermont, where she grew up riding.

Broome Rd. ends at the paved Grant Settlement Rd. Our horses are fairly road savvy, so we headed down the two-lane road, looking for the turnoff to The Ottawa Trail System.

We shared the road with only one car. The next day, we learned that timing is everything when it comes to Grant Settlement Rd. in whitewater-rafting country.

We'd planned on only a short ride, so

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we stopped for a quick snack on one of the trails of the Ottawa Trail System, then crossed the road to pick up the Rafter's to Rapids trail heading back to camp.

We encountered a three- to four-foot river crossing with a small bridge sporting a sign that said, "Not Safe for Horses." The crossing looked safe to us, so we encouraged our mounts to go into the water.

Getting into the river was easy, it was the three-foot jump out that was a little more difficult. However, the water crossing looked safe to us, so we encouraged our mounts to cross.

Note that this trail is better traveled eastbound heading to camp, as we were doing. Going west, the high east bank could prove to be difficult as you go down into the water.

After crossing the river, we stopped to remove hitchhiker burrs from Lefty's hind end, which were bothering him immensely. We then continued along to the Bushwacker Trail.



We crossed the final bridge, and returned to camp to sponge off the horses and have a late lunch.

Walking the Course

In the campground is an extensive obstacle course for riders. Laurel and

This summer, Horse Country Campground will launch several kids' camp theme weeks in collaboration with local stables/trainers and Wilderness Tours Resort. Open to children ages 6 through 16, the camps will offer an introduction to horses in a fun, safe, educational environment.

I watched other campers negotiate the course. Then we decided to grab Lefty and Bailey Boy, and give it a go.

We first led our horses around the course to introduce them to the 20 or so elements. We showed them to the car wash, brush pile, raincoat transfer, mailboxes, and the really scary teeter-totter bridge that, once you pass the halfway mark, teeters downward for the exit.

Both horses managed to make their way through the course with a little encouragement. We even tried kicking the giant soccer ball on the playing field.

We decided that we'd ride through the course before we left Horse Country.

There was a larger gathering at the fire that night than there had been the night before. Laurel and I met many of the guests. As usual, horse talk was abundant.

Best Laid Plans

After breakfast the next day, I headed over to the bike-rental area in the main pavilion to get a map of the Ottawa Trail System. The helpful shopkeeper mapped out a nice loop that included a lengthy part of Grant Settlement Rd.

Our horses had done fine on the road the day before, so I figured it would be okay. However, we later discovered there was one major flaw in our plan!

We began the ride on Grant Settlement Rd., which seemed to be a little busier than the day before. Turning left into the Ottawa Trail, we trotted along the path in the cool morning breeze.

A few low-hanging tree branches followed by a beaver dam didn't discourage

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Campground Events

Horse Country Campground, open from May through October, offers a number of educational clinics. You can combine an educational day or weekend clinic with trail riding and horse camping.

Here's a rundown of several upcoming events; go to www.horsecountrycampground.com for details.

- **One Day Equine Emergency First-Aid Courses** will be held on several dates between May 1 and August 3, 2014. These one-day first-aid courses will be taught by Jenn Burgoyne, who also offers an Equi-Health Emergency Equine First Aid Certification Course at the campground.

- **A Ladies Riding Confidence Clinic** will be held May 16-19, 2014. This course, taught by certified John Lyons Trainer/Coach France Vanier, is designed to help you and your



horse face your fears together to find your hidden confidence.

- An **Extreme Cowboy Racing Clinic** will be held May 31-June 1, 2014.

This clinic will be conducted by Lantz McLaren, the founder of the Ontario Xtreme Cowboy Association and an accomplished competitor. The clinic will focus on mastering obstacle courses, plus the techniques required by Extreme Cowboy Challenge events.

- A **Mountain Trail & Extreme Clinic** will be held July 18-20, 2014. This clinic will be conducted by Mark Boler, three-time United States grand champion in the equine disciplines of Mountain Trail, Extreme Trail, and Trail Challenge. The clinic will focus on competitive trail riding and obstacle-course mastery.

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us. The footing was good, and the water wasn't too high, so the horses plowed right through.

A large blue heron flew out of the swamp, and a red-tailed hawk circled above us. The abundant wildlife combined with the amount of bear scat along the trail told us this area wasn't often traveled by humans or horse.

The footing dried up, and the path widened, allowing us to take a gorgeous long canter up a windy hill.

We found a lunch spot near an old barn and log cabin, which unnervingly resembled a bear-hunting camp.

We untacked the horses and let them graze, while keeping a close eye out for a possible fuzzy, four-footed visitor.

After lunch, we tacked up, consulted the map, and found our trail northward. As we approached the road, we saw herds of cattle grazing along the trail on the other side of the fence.

We were to take Grant Settlement Rd. out to the Broome Rd. entrance of Eagles Nest Bed & Breakfast. The sun, just beginning to lower in the sky, told us we had ample daylight left.

Unfortunately, our timing coincided with the end of the rafting day. We found ourselves sharing the road with not only cars and trucks, but also school buses full of rafters. There were trucks carrying rafts and trucks pulling trailers full of bright blue-and-yellow rafts.

Now, this isn't something every horse encounters on a daily basis. Bailey Boy, being the older, more experienced of the two, was a little more confident as the buses whizzed past us.

But when I asked a truck to stop to make sure we were traveling in the right direction, the 30 or so rafts atop the truck's trailer unnerved my steady mount. In his eyes, the truck was carrying a giant blue-and-yellow monster.



"At Horse Country, the campsites are so spread out that you rarely hear the goings-on of your camping neighbors," notes Shawn Hamilton. Inset: Crossing the teeter-totter bridge in the campground's obstacle course.

Laurel dismounted and ease his nerves. She got in a good lengthy walk by the time the entrance to Eagles Nest came into view. I make a mental note to mark distances the next time I consult a new map.

But of course, this time, our major flaw was the timing. If we

were to do this route again, we'd ride the long road portion in the morning when the rafters and rafts are in the water. Then again, we could simply pick a trail that avoid the road altogether.

We allowed our horses to gallop through the open fields, then eased them into a quiet walk as we headed over the bridge and back into camp.

That was an exciting day for all of us. What a great training ride for producing a road-safe horse. We were very proud of our mounts, and rewarded them with a nice bath and treats followed by a relaxing graze.

Once our horses settled into their corals, Laurel and I headed off to the main pavilion for a swim, hot tub, and dinner in the restaurant. We had all deserved a treat.

Riding the Course

In the morning, I realized that it would be our last day at the camp. After breakfast, I did a little packing. Then we tacked up

and prepared to take on the obstacle course — this time, in the saddle.

We started with the logs and ditch, then moved on to the mail, moving a postcard from one box to another, transferring a raincoat, carrying a bucket, the brush pile, the car wash all which took a little enticing but successfully completed.

Laurel took Lefty to play soccer. I decided to take plunge and attack the teeter-totter bridge. Bailey Boy cautiously stepped his front left foot onto the bridge, and gave a slight snort, something he does when things aren't quite in order.

He put his other front foot on the bridge, and up we went. As we crossed the bridge's center point, it teetered down. Bailey didn't panic, but he did jump off the bridge to the left.

After our second and third attempt, we had it down pat.

What a wonderful place to come and play with your horse, I thought. From road-savvy lessons to extreme cowboy obstacles, this is a perfect playground.

Perhaps I'll see you by the campfire in Horse Country! 

As the owner of Clix Photography (www.clixphoto.com), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events. Her images regularly appear in top magazines. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.

For more information on Horse Country Campground, call (613) 867-0585, or go to www.horsecountrycampground.com.