

# Wild Ride at Wild Deuce

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

The pavement turns to gravel, causing the tin-can rental car to swerve around the bend like a toy car on marbles. Towering trees open up momentarily, granting a quick glimpse of the mountains. A few deer bounce across the road.

Just shy of the base camp, I pull over to snap a photo. Before my foot hits the ground, a waft of pine surrounds me. Eyes shut tight, I draw in a deep breath; a sense of peacefulness and tranquility takes over.

Wild Deuce Retreats & Outfitting is only 45 minutes from Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, and just over three hours from the metropolis of Calgary. Wild Deuce has it all, from day rides to week-long wilderness pack trips, from women's retreats to horsemanship clinics to the Working Mountain Horse Competition and Sale. Its scenic trail



system encompasses more than 340 square miles, which take in the picturesque Clearwater and Ram Rivers.

But from right here, right now, there's nothing — yet everything.

## Another World

I drive a few more miles down the road and find Wild Deuce co-owners Brenda Murdock and Terri McKinney busy shoeing horses and organizing tack.

I introduce myself to the eight other women who'll be riding on the five-day Women's Retreat Ride. As I do, Terri springs upon us, demanding our watches and cell phones.

"Anything that connects you to the real world!" she demands, pocketing our belongings. "Rule number one: There are only two times out here in the bush, daytime and nighttime."

Then Taylor, Terri's 8-year-old home-schooled daughter, leads me to my horse.

"This is Slim," she announces. "He is a Belgian/Quarter Horse cross. Everyone likes Slim."

Towering over me at almost 17 hands high, Slim, a chestnut with a huge white blaze, looks like a gentle giant. Placing his massive head between my arms for a cheek rub, I wonder how I'm going to get up on him.


We assemble in the staging area, load up the saddlebags with lunches, and mount up. Our sleeping bags and clothes will go in a wagon pulled by Mike and Arvid, a pair of Norwegian Fjords, driven by Chuck, Terri's husband, and young Taylor.

I strategically place Slim at the low side of a hill to mount up. Wrangler Scott




Above: Wild Deuce co-owners Brenda Murdock (left) and Terri McKinney. Left: Shawn Hamilton and her Wild Deuce mount, a 17-hand Belgian/Quarter Horse cross, Slim.

For more photos from this adventure, visit [www.myhorse.com/trailrider](http://www.myhorse.com/trailrider).



***Our intrepid photojournalist heads to Canada's Rocky Mountains for a five-day Women's Retreat Ride at Wild Deuce Retreats & Outfitting in Alberta.***



"Climbing above the tree line, the view gets wider and wider until the entire sky opens to 360 degrees," writes Hamilton of the ride to 40-Mile Ridge. Views include the border of Banff National Park.

chuckles as he watches me struggle to get my legs around the beast.

### **Riding into Camp**

Golden trees glisten in the backlit sun. Brenda tells me they call this the enchanted forest. We wind along the shores of Beaver Lake in the Upper Clearwater Area of the Bighorn backcountry, crossing crystal-blue rivers rushing over stone beds.

Every corner rewards us with a glimpse of vast valleys and painted-mountain backdrops. The pace is slow and steady as we chat and get acquainted.

Five hours in the saddle brings us higher and higher into the mountains. As we near the camp, Slim picks up speed. Scott and I stop to talk to a few other campers, allowing the others to pass. Turning to catch up, Slim kicks into high gear.

"It's like riding a couch!" I yell to Scott, galloping beside me.

Camp consists of six canvas tarps draped over tree-limb frames, each equipped with a small wood-burning stove in the corner. At the camp's center are two large tents, one for cooking and another for tack.

We unpack our sleeping bags and gear to the clanging of bells hung around the horses' necks as they make their way to the field to free graze. Then we head down to the river to wash up.

Back in camp, a chair carved from a stump is perfectly placed for watching



the evening sun turn the mountains a purplish glow. Taylor appears, toting a water bucket. She probably doesn't realize how lucky she is to live out here in the bush, riding horses all day.

Hot soup and homemade bread warm

our innards. As we sit around the fire, Terri and Brenda explain a bit more about the retreat.

"This trip is for you," says Terri. "You get up when you get up; you ride when you ride. Rule number two is, you don't lift a finger. If you do, there will be a penalty." (I'd discovered this rule for myself when I attempted to untack Slim.)

We relax by the fire sharing stories, mostly horsey ones.

The sky is laden with stars as I make my way to the efficient, fully equipped outdoor facilities. Three blue-plastic walls surround a toilet seat on a built-up base over a pit. In the walkway, a telltale tin can sits. If the can is on the branch, the outhouse is occupied; off the branch, you're good.

Back in my tent, I drift off to sleep to the sounds of the horses in the nearby

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"We wind along the shores of Beaver Lake [shown] in the Upper Clearwater Area of the Bighorn backcountry, crossing crystal-blue rivers rushing over stone beds," writes Hamilton of the ride into camp.

## Wild Ride at Wild Deuce

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meadow, wondering what the next day will bring.

### A 'Chilaxin' Day

You know right away this isn't an average mountain ride when waiters disguised as cowboys serve champagne and orange juice at breakfast, then give each woman a Hawaiian lei.

In a serious tone, but with a big smirk on her face, Brenda explains the rules. "Each of you must have the lei exposed at all times. The key is to not let it be stolen by any one of us. Losing a lei means a penalty, and some of them will be fierce."

What have I got myself into?

This would be our first "Chilaxin" day. This is a term coined to describe the unique mixture of chilling and relaxing.

We're split into four teams of three and sent off on a scavenger hunt. This is no ordinary scavenger hunt, though — three of us are tied by a string to a beach tube as we make our way around the woods to find the items on our list.

It's hard enough to run with two other people and a flotation ring attached to you. Add in constant laughter, and it can be a most difficult feat. Each person's character begins to reveal itself, from reserved and



The group poses in front of Lost Guide Lake, a pristine glacial lake embedded in a circular valley. "I'm not really sure if I want to know the significance of the name," notes Hamilton.

quiet to outgoing and bold to downright competitive. What fun!

After lunch, we hop on our horses and head out to the meadow for a wonderful ride that includes a good gallop. Terri spots me holding Slim back a little.

"Just trust your horse — he will give you wings!" Terri belts out, riding off in front of me without holding the reins.

Looking down at Slim, I draw in a deep breath and commit to putting my full trust in him. My arms stretched out to the side like wings, Slim floats me across the golden meadow at full speed. His surefootedness gives me full confidence.

My stress drains down my neck and shoulders, through my arms, and out through the tips of my fingers.

I belt out my best cowgirl "yee-haw!" Possible tears well up as my face, sporting an ear-to-ear smile, is windswept by the mountain air. Slim propels me forward with each stride. This is heaven!

As the pace slows, the blue sky turns dark. Within seconds, it's pitch black.

Then the heavens open, and rain pours down, drenching us from head to toe. There's no time to stop and put on our slickers. My entire body is shivering, but I'm still smiling!

Sipping coffee by the fire in dry clothes at camp, Chef Rachel greets us with a dinner of roast beef and macaroni salad, followed by a scrumptious berry angel food cake topped with whipped cream.

"I guess no one plans on losing weight on this trip," I comment while stuffing another heaping spoonful of dessert in my mouth.

I snuggle into my sleeping bag and drift off to sleep, thankful that Brenda and Terri went on that ride together eight years ago and, on a whim, decided to start an outfitting company.

### Lost Guide Lake

At first light, down at the river, the sun turns the mountains a vibrant red as it burns the mist off the water. Scott comes through the trees to give his horse a drink after rounding up the rest of the herd. I wonder how a West Jet pilot becomes a part-time wrangler, and which job he prefers.

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Wild Deuce owners Brenda Murdock (left) and Terri McKinney take a break on the trail. Eight years ago, the friends started the outfitting company on a whim.

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We're greeted by a heavenly sight: Fresh coffee brewed over an open flame, accompanied by an omelet of tomatoes, broccoli, cheese, bacon, and mushrooms served between two slices of an English muffin.

Today, we'd have a new game. Three trinkets are issued to each team. Our team's novelties consisted of a kaleidoscope, a slingshot, and a sheriff's badge.

Each team is to come up with an interesting story involving these items to be told at the fire that night.

Where do these girls dream up this stuff?

We hop up on our tacked horses (don't dare try to tack up your own!) and ride up a valley with stunning views. A few deer watch us as we ride through a burn. The blackened, haunting stumps of half-charcoal trees are twisted into bizarre forms. The stark black against the blue sky is stunning, yet eerie.

The energy feels strong here.

Just above tree line, the most incredible turquoise color slowly comes into view. Slim climbs the ridge, revealing a pristine glacial lake embedded in a circular valley.

"This is Lost Guide Lake," Brenda announces.

I'm not really sure if I want to know the significance of the name.

We dismount, tie the horses, and lunch on the banks of the lake. Diamonds dance



on the water as the sun bounces from ripple to ripple.

The hike to the waterfall on the other side of the lake heats us up enough to strip down to our bathing or birthday suits and plunge into the ice-cold water. With loud screams, we run out of the lake faster than we got in.

"There was snow on the ground surrounding this lake just last week," Terri says with a chuckle.

"That puts a whole new meaning to the word refreshing," I chatter.

During the ride into camp, the group got acquainted riding through the Bighorn backcountry. On this portion of the trail, "golden trees glisten in the backlit sun," writes Hamilton. "Brenda tells me they call this the enchanted forest."

After Chilaxin by the lake, we mount up to head back for camp. Terri calls me into the woods. After some pretty serious bushwhacking down a moose path, we stop at the cliff's edge to watch the setting sun turn the mountain walls to gold.

The trail back follows a narrow ridge sloping straight down to the river. I have full faith in Slim.

We dine by the fire on the best Shepherd's pie I've ever tasted, complemented by cookie pudding for dessert. I leaned over to Chef

Rachel, and say, tongue-in-cheek, "If my husband were here and you cooked this meal for him, he'd undoubtedly leave me for you."

As night falls and the moon rises, our trinket stories must be told. The rugby ritual dance performed by one group makes me laugh so hard my belly hurt.

Laughing all the way to my tent, I snuggle in for the night, relishing the fact that all I have to do tomorrow is ride. One

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can easily get used to this luxury living in the bush.

### 'Pure Freedom!'

Today will be our last full day of riding before we pack up and leave camp. Our destination is 40-Mile Ridge. Beginning along the river's edge, the trail takes a sharp left and heads straight up. Climbing above the tree line, the view gets wider and wider until the entire sky opens to 360 degrees.

"This is the top of the world!" shouts Brenda.

The view boasts the border of Banff National Park on one side and the staging area where we started on the other.

Brenda shouts to be heard over the whistling wind. She tells us the wind "is so strong up here, that when you stand on the edge of the ridge, you feel you are flying."

After dismounting, I walk to the overhang. I peer down at the red-, gold-, and copper-colored shale. The gray mountains stare down at me from the far side of the valley.

I raise my arms slowly, and the wind takes them the rest of the way. The sensation is incredible. I picture myself as an eagle soaring through the valleys. Pure freedom!

A sheltered area among the trees provides a good spot for lunch — wraps stuffed with snap peas, rice, carrots, julienne ham, cheddar cheese, and a rainbow of colored peppers.

We all huddle in a circle and simply Chilax at the top of 40-Mile Ridge. Lying on my back staring up at the endless sky, I dream about the possibility of living here in the bush one day.

We follow a mountain stream down. The ride goes much faster than the climb up.

### Fight to the Finish


Back at camp, I change into my lounging clothes and saunter to the fire. A flurry of activity whizzes past me. Terri has pinned my tent-mate, Susan, to the ground and is stealing her lei.

Brenda joins in, and the rugby scrum begins. They're laughing so hard it makes me laugh, but Terri and Brenda won't give in. Tough cookies, they fight to the finish.

They run off with Susan's lei and perform a victory dance.

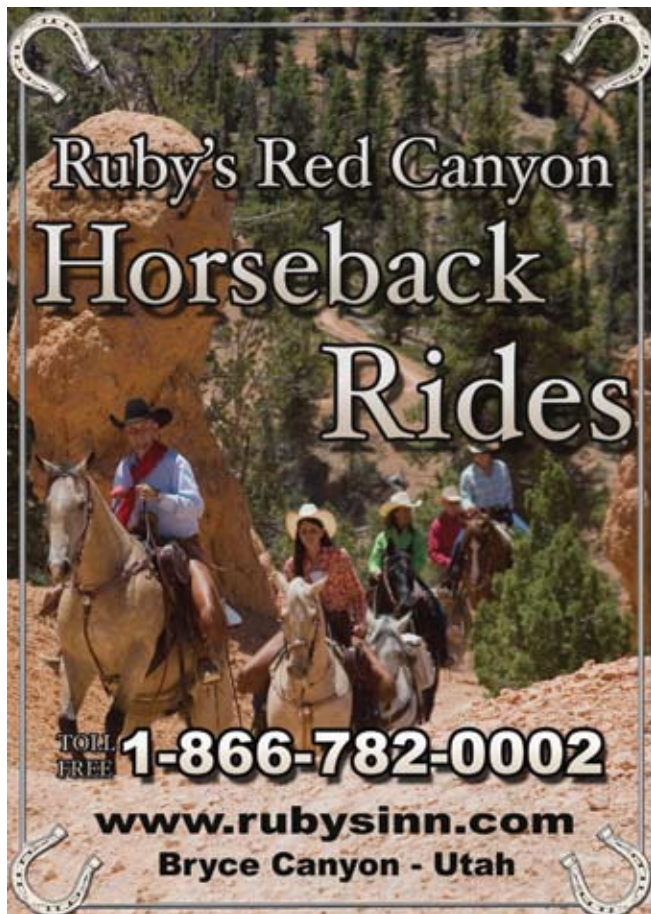
Sipping wine by the fire, I reflect on the past five days. The camaraderie granted each of us a unique mountain experience with memories that will last a lifetime.

Terri and Brenda have a clever way of getting you to open up and simply Chilax. When your belly hurts more from laughing than your butt hurts from riding, you know you've had a wild ride with Wild Deuce Outfitting.

If you're still wondering about the penalties — well, what happens in the bush stays in the bush. You'll just have to go experience it for yourself.  **TTR**

For more information about Wild Deuce, call (403) 651-6142, or visit [www.wilddeuce.com](http://www.wilddeuce.com).

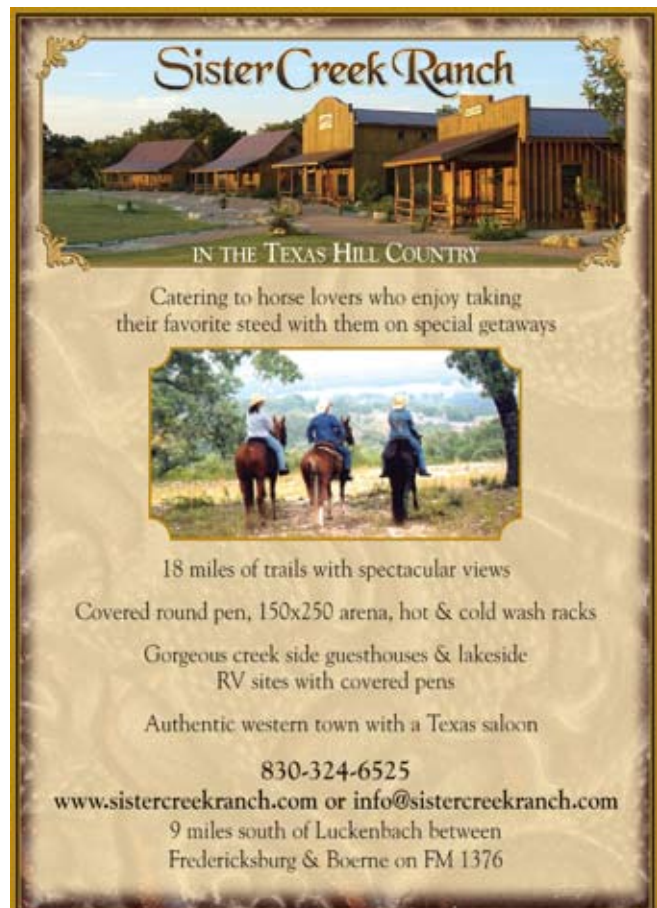
As the owner of Clix Photography ([www.clixphoto.com](http://www.clixphoto.com)), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events and capture images that appear in top magazines, including *The Trail Rider*. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.



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