

Saddling Up at 9,100 ft.

By Anne Groebner

It's been a few years since I climbed on the back of a horse so, when I drove out to Hannagan Meadow Lodge to meet wrangler Robert Pablo of Chuck's Trail Ride Adventures, I wasn't sure if I would remember what to do. I was invited to check out their horseback riding trips and, before I even had a chance to think about it, I was on the road and heading toward Alpine. About an hour and a half later, I was sitting in the stable office signing their liability release forms. I have to admit I was little nervous, you know, wondering which horse I would be riding. Would it be gentle or stubborn, 20 hands off the ground or 15, all the questions that you think about when you go into survival mode. Of course, I didn't say these things out loud because, if I am going to check something out, I want the full ride. The whole enchilada. I don't want the edited version.

I pulled into the Lodge and found the stables behind the main building and down a small road to the right. I couldn't miss it. It was a large red barn with three horses saddled up in front and Robert Pablo standing out front to greet me. Pablo is tall, slim and young but I found out later that he is probably one of the most experienced wranglers that I have ever met. He works at Hannagan Meadow at Chuck's Trail Ride Adventures which is an extension of his father's business, KOLI Equestrian Center in Chandler. It is a huge change of climate for him but he has adapted very well. After I finished signing the necessary paperwork, Pablo quizzed me on my riding experience. I told him I was pretty familiar with horseback riding and he led a horse named Midnight over to me and helped me climb into the saddle. Midnight is a 7-year-old horse who Pablo started training when he was about 2-and-a-half years old. Pablo broke and trained him himself. "He was stubborn, didn't know how to turn, stop or go," said Pablo. "Now I rope off of him, I herd cattle with him and I put guests on him. He will do anything I ask him to do including swimming and crossing streams which is very unusual for a horse. To me, he is pretty calm, with a little residual stubbornness, which is perfect. We were taught the basic rules of the reins; pull the rein to the right to turn right and to the left to turn left...pull back to stop and keep the horses' heads up so they don't snack along the way and then we hit the trail.

Pablo's horse is an eleven-year-old Clydesdale mix they call Clyde (because he is only part Clydesdale so he just gets part of the name). Clyde is much bigger than the other horses and is their wagon horse but he is very well-trained and led us toward a tree-lined trail to begin our hour-long ride. The trail is narrow so the other horses fall into line. It is also rocky terrain and is the main reason they will not run the horses. Midnight falls in right behind Clyde so I can question Pablo and find out some information about the trail rides. As it turned out, I learned so much more than I expected. Pablo is very knowledgeable about horses. He has spent a lifetime studying them and most of it from real-life experience. His job isn't just wrangler -- he is a trainer, a farrier, and a roper. He does poop-patrol and keeps the horses fed and clean. He studies their personalities and knows their temperaments and knows how to match up riders. "We train the horses for the inexperienced rider," Pablo told me, "someone who hasn't ridden much or is afraid to ride.... We just wouldn't have crazy horses out here for our customers."

"Today training is different," said Pablo. "We study the minds of horses instead of just getting on them and trying to make them do something. Wild horses are scared of bags, ditches and holes because of their depth perception. They're prey animals and want to run away from anything that threatens them, rather than stand there and face it. Because we understand this, we have created newer methods to train horses." He told me there are many ways to train a horse...and none of them are the wrong way as long as they get to the same point but, if you get negative

results, obviously, you may be doing something wrong. One problem, however, is that if you break him in the old cowboy method, chances are you will have to be an old cowboy to ride him. "At least know what you are doing," he said. "We break horses — we un-train them to fix bugs and then train them our way."

No matter how well a horse is trained, you still have to be careful around them and just because you know the horse, you still have to be cautious. Pablo explained that you learn what you can and cannot do around a horse. "We stress to riders, 'Do not walk behind the back of a horse.' But, when we saddle them, we walk around the back of the horses. We know these horses aren't kickers but we will never say, 'Oh, he's fine,' and then someone walks up behind him and startles him and he kicks." When Pablo saddles a horse, he will walk right up against the back of the horse because he says a horse's kick generates more power and strength the farther away from the horse it gets. If it gets a chance to extend its leg out, the kick is going to be harder. I figure it's just best to let them saddle them from the back...I will climb up from the side.

Age restrictions for riding start at 6-years-old but there is no limit on the other end of the spectrum. Last year, Pablo had a couple call him about riding. He could tell they were an older couple. "I do not ask how old people are," he commented, "I did, however, tell them that we do not have a mounting block. We don't have a weight limit but you have to get on from the ground. The older gentleman said, "Oh, I think I can do it." So, he got them short horses. They went for a ride for over an hour. When they got back, the gentleman told him he had been scared to tell him how old he was because he thought he wouldn't let him ride. He asked Pablo to guess his age but he didn't feel comfortable guessing. As it turned out, he and his wife were in their late 90s!

The ride is amazing. The trail travels through a dense forest and then opens up into a meadow and then heads back into the forest. There are ruins of a cabin on the other side of the meadow that remind me that others have been riding through this area for over a hundred years and their mode of transit was either by foot or a horse. There are a couple of areas that show the residuals of the Wallow Fire that burned through the area back in 2011 but the forest is regenerating and the new growth is even newer and greener than before. The area is just above the Blue Range Primitive Area and the scenery is incredible.

Pablo guides 60- to 90-minute rides and, with that in mind, make sure you can sit that long on a horse. Knee and back problems could pose a problem. It is a lot of work to get horses ready for a ride so they would prefer to ride at least an hour. He can take up to six riders out by himself because they have seven horses at Hannagan. Note: Once the monsoon season hits, it's better to schedule early morning rides to beat the thunder and lightning. Their season spans from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

For more information or to book a trail ride, go to:
www.fareharbor.com/chuckstrailridingadventures, email info@chuckstrailridingadventures.com
or call 928-387-1981.

Their parent company in the Valley is very popular especially in the winter and can take up to 25 riders. They are located on the Gila River Indian Reservation which is located at the Wild Horse Pass Development Authority in Chandler.

Robert Pablo Talks about History and Horses

About 100 years ago, Spanish Mustangs were shipped to America but the ship sank so the horses swam to Assateague island off the coast of Virginia. Now they are considered feral animals; meaning that they are descendants of domestic animals that have reverted to a wild state. Horses tough enough to survive the scorching heat, abundant mosquitoes, stormy weather and poor-quality food found on this remote, windswept barrier island formed a unique wild horse society. Eventually, horses made their way to the desert. Robert Pablo has spent years studying the wild/feral horses on his reservation. He believes that the horses we see out in the wild were domestic horses at one time, dropped off because their owners couldn't take care of them or horses that had escaped.

"The Spaniards brought horses to the Pima Tribe, back in the late 1600s," Pablo explained. "In fact, the Spaniards are the ones who gave us the name *Pima*. When we came in contact with the Spaniards, they told us who they were and what they were here for...and we told them "pi 'añi mac or pi mac" which means "I don't know." We didn't know who they were or what they were saying, or what they were doing. We just couldn't understand them and they assumed we were introducing ourselves as the Pimas." They were the ones who brought horses and the horses were traded and sold to the Native Americans. "We had our mode of transportation set already," Pablo said, "which was our feet! We walked around everywhere we needed to go. So, if we had to get somewhere, it was on foot, which was more reliable than riding a horse and falling off. If you had to deliver a message from one village to another, it was faster on horse but we could run the distance — 20 miles without stopping. It might have taken us a little longer than riding a horse but we were just as accurate and efficient. We didn't want our messenger falling off a horse and breaking his leg. Then only the horse would make it to the next village and our guy is stuck out in the desert without a horse and with a broken leg. The horse can't deliver the message...So, we used them for plowing because we were farmers. Now there are horses that live out on the reservations that have adapted to the desert lifestyle...similar to the horses off the east coast of Virginia or up in Montana and Wyoming. The horses that survive in Montana in their natural environment wouldn't survive down here in the desert. Likewise, the horses that have adapted to the heat wouldn't survive up in the cold. People are like that and so are horses."

Horses in the wild have adapted bone structure, muscle structure, hoofs, height and size. They had to adapt to survive. Some folks assume that, just because horses survive out in the wild, that any horse can survive out there so they put their horse out there. "Our horses get fed morning and evening, have water around them all the time and, when I ride them, we probably only go about 3 - 3.5 miles tops," Pablo remarked. "Horses in the wild may walk about 20-30 miles a day. Our horses couldn't survive in the wild without food and water every day. There are some that may adapt if they are put there at a young age because they grow up walking every day; they grow up saving water and they get used to doing those things. They can survive if they are given time to adapt. If a horse is older and his body tells him that he's being fed every morning and every evening and has water whenever he wants, he won't do well in the wild. Then there's winning over the head stallion of the wild herds. If it's a male horse, he will have to accept him and, more than likely, the females will have to accept him as well."

Pablo continued, “A herd of horses can run anywhere from two horses to 50 horses. The head stallion is the only one who can breed, and is the only horse that has true territory. The other horses just follow him around and know their place. They are most likely his kids. If a new stallion comes into the herd, he has to fight the head stallion. If they find out that they are equally matched, they may actually team up and take care of the herd together but may fight over individual girls. For example, a herd can have seven girls and one stallion. As long as the stallion can take care of them, he can keep the girls. If another stallion comes and says, ‘I’m going to fight you for three of them’ and he wins... those three girls are his and the other four stay with the original stallion — they work together. The herd is run by the females. They are always at the watering hole, the feeding lot or the shelter. The stallion has to take care of them until he gets kicked out by a younger, stronger stallion. The new horse may have come from 50 miles away and he has no idea about the area. He may tell the girls, ‘Hey, I have water 50 miles away’ and the girls will tell him, ‘No, we have water, shelter and food right here. As long as you take care of this, we can stay here and survive here.’ He just protects them and they show him around. His reign may be as short as one day. They also have a bachelor group of young males. Before they reach breeding age, they are allowed to stay with the girls. After that, they have to stay out with the other bachelors.”

“Horses are pretty cool — the horses that are out in the wild...when they get to water, they drop their heads down to drink, but can see 180° out of each eye. They have a blind spot directly in front of them and behind them but their ears make up for it because they can move their ears individually. If they hear something off to the left, at about 9 o’clock, their left ear is straight at 9 o’clock. The other ear is doing its own thing, listening on the right side. If the sound hits 3 o’clock, it will take over and follow the sound. When it comes to “fight or flight,” A horse will choose flight. If it comes down to something dangerous, a horse will run unless it gets cornered and then it may seriously injure you to get away.”

Pablo studied the lives and times of wild horses by watching the once 12-1500 wild horses on his 372,000-acre reservation. While riding, he would come across a herd of wild horses.

“Watching from a distance, you can tell which horses are which,” he said. “I can tell you which one is the stallion and which ones are the females, mostly because of attitude. They work in a hierarchy system so, if one horse is standing away from the group, most likely he is not friendly with the stallion. He may not like him because he is a threat and makes him stay away. He can stay close to the group but he has to know his place. Once a new stallion takes over, he will kill the other stallion’s young and the mare will go back in cycle so she can have his babies. The reason stallions fight over dominance and breeding is because the only ones that survive out there are the strong. So, the only ones that get to pass genes down are the strong ones. This helps keep these horses alive. In a way, they have their own population control and it keeps the gene pool healthy.”

Hannagan Meadow Lodge

In less than 10 years, Hannagan Meadow will be celebrating its 100th year as a popular rustic and historic Lodge nestled in one of the most beautiful areas in Arizona. It has survived sheep

and cattle ranching (at one time there were 30,000 horse and cattle and 56,000 sheep grazing on the surrounding U.S. Forest Service land), outlaws and a variety of outdoor enthusiasts and tourists. It sits on the Coronado Trail, the trail that the Spaniards are thought to have traveled in their search for gold and the Seven Cities of Cibola. It was built in 1926 by Dewitt Cospers, a member of one of the largest ranching families in the area but it was named after Robert Hannagan, a Nevada miner turned rancher in the early 1890s. Toles Cospers liked Hannagan and, on a ride one day, they came up to a meadow and decided to name it with the toss of a coin. Hannagan won. Later on, others wanted to rename it Cospers Meadows but being true to his word, Toles wouldn't let them. Hannagan, on the other hand, ended up tied to a tree because of a bad debt and his son had to wire the money. Once released, Hannagan moved to Deming, New Mexico and died early in the 20th century.

Hannagan Meadow (the proper name) is surrounded by a large variety of hiking trails and, in the winter, hosts some of the best cross-country skiing in the area. With an altitude of over 9,000 feet, it has some of the coolest temperatures in the summer and piles of snow in the winter. They have cabins as well as hotel rooms in a cozy, warm, rustic setting and awesome food.