



"There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

- Winston Churchill

Vol. 4: Happy Trails

BY BECKY BAUER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY SCARLATI

Boots, saddles and soft muzzles are the ways and means for our latest venture on the Natchez Trace. The Garrison Creek Trailhead (Milepost 428) begins a 24-mile section of the National Scenic Trail, which lays the path for horseback riders (and hikers) to the Great Escape from the battle of everyday life. I have taken these trails before on my own horse, discovering time and again the tranquility of the cedar trees and creek beds, and, just a short distance in, a beautiful overlook. History resides on this trail; and so do friendly equine

and interesting people.

The trail crosses the original Natchez Road at Old Trace. The dirt path was carved out in 1801 among ominous wilderness that saw traders, soldiers, outlaws and Native Americans. Further down is Burns Branch, where there is a perfect spot to tie up and empty the saddlebags for lunch by the brook. At trail's other end are Highway 50 and the Tennessee Divide, where the watershed exists among territory once surrendered by the Chickasaw Nation.

For this trip, we befriended the horses at Natchez Trace Riding Stables in Fly,

Tenn., just three miles off the Trace and Highway 7. We cruise down a winding, pastoral lane and arrive at the 80-acre spread that is home to Regina and Darren Haman and their daughter, Sedona. (We share a mutual love for the mystical Arizona spot, as this is also the name of one of my horses.) A feisty little terrier named Bisquit greets us along with a big white bundle of love called Willy the Great Pyrenees. Keeping them company are 18 horses and Bambi the goat.

Life is simple here. Days are spent guiding visitors on horseback. Home is a comfortable apartment above the barn.

"We haven't gotten around to building a house; it's difficult in deciding where to build, there are so many pretty spots out here," says Regina. "We're here because of the horses, and when you have horses, you tend to live around them."

For the last 24 years they have been together, this spiritual couple has taken a "wholesome" approach to laying down roots. Before settling here 10 years ago, they owned a bed and breakfast in the rural, cultured Massachusetts Berkshires.

Darren and I head out for a ride, while Anthony explores the land through his camera. I'm aboard Apache, the Hamans' Spotted Tennessee Walker. Riding up to the top of a large hill, a cold wind hits my face and the sun shines bright in my eyes. I fall into the rhythm of Apache's smooth gait as we move over the vast landscape, and the world is forgotten. The fresh air is invigorating and I am kept warm by my leather chaps and wool.

Darren entertains me with stories from past rides. Wedding engagements are popular around here. Just the previous weekend, two sisters took a ride down to the picturesque Lick Creek. A soldier, who had flown in unannounced, surprised his sweetheart by surfacing from the woods with roses in one hand and a ring in the other; and a blanket, music and champagne was set for the happy couple to enjoy their romantic union before riding off together. The other sister joined her husband, who had come along with his buddy that proposed.

Back at the barn, Regina shares some comical memories with us, like the time the "Sunset Tan" reality show filmed an episode on their farm. She describes them as "the young, beautiful girls, half dressed, with their wet t-shirt contests, falling off horses and whining about manure." The Hamans have hosted everyone from film crews to diplomats to country stars out here.

Therapy and rehabilitation groups find refuge among the horses, as well.

"We had a blind person come out and ride who just loved it; he needed no help getting around. Holly (his horse) took care of him on the trail," Regina says. Meeting all walks of life and all levels of riders, the Hamans are most surprised when someone admits that it's the first time they've been to the country.

The area is alleged to host supernatural visitors. Legend has it that there is a ridge close by that is haunted.

"We'll hear voices in the woods," claims Regina. "You can hear growling and whispering at night, especially when there's a full moon out."

Still, they enjoy their rides up there. There are hundreds of acres of creeks, swimming holes and hollows to ride through before ever entering the Trace's Scenic Trail. It's a family operation that promises a great experience on friendly, well-mannered horses. "They love their job," Darren assures of their equine friends.

And every good ride must be followed by a good meal. After our stop on the farm, we land at Nett's Grocery in Bethel for some comfort food: a hot bowl of chili and grilled cheese sandwiches. This country market - housed in a century-old building - is as authentic as they come. Barbara Annette Dodson, aka "Nett," treats us right with her southern cooking and friendly conversation. What a delectable day.

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