**Ambling Through Alberta’s Aspen Parkland**

“Umm … how do I steer?”

Merle Fox, a born and bred Alberta farmer and the operator of Sunset Guiding & Outfitting, craned his neck to look back at me from the back of Spirit, his registered quarter horse. “Have you never ridden before?” he asked with a grin.

“This is both our first times on a horse!” answered my seven-year-old daughter helpfully. Kate was mounted on Patches, a chestnut coloured horse of her own while I brought up the rear, mounted on Lady. I had been assured this 900 pound creature wouldn’t throw me to the ground, a critical point when I was attempting my very first trail ride with my right arm in a cast (due to an unfortunate walking incident in Vancouver).

Merle vowed that not only would the ride be gentle, but that I wouldn’t actually need to direct my steed along the trail. “She’ll just follow the horse in front of her – she’s done this ride hundreds of times,” he explained. Saddles checked by Merle’s wife, Lori, we set off from the stable, slowly making our way through the low bush, our horses stepping nimbly along a rocky path where the Red Deer and Panther rivers met.

We were staying at the nearby Red Deer River Ranch, a working cattle farm with beautifully appointed cabins, and enjoying a number of side trips from The Cowboy Trail. This 735 kilometre stretch of highway winds through traditional ranching settlement areas from Cardston to Mayerthorpe, and still a place where the old west is very much alive in the art, hospitality and culture of the area.

Horseback riding is undeniably a cowboy experience, and I found myself simultaneously experiencing a new landscape and mode of transportation.

An adopted Albertan, I thought I knew the landscape of this province well. I was married in the shadows of the Canadian Rockies in Alberta’s rolling foothills. I’ve explored chilly lakes in the north with my angler husband. And I’ve taken my kids camping in the windy south near the border and the dry and unforgiving badlands to the east. Here though, in Alberta’s aspen parkland 120 kilometres northwest of Calgary, was a landscape I had never stopped to explore.

The aspen parkland ecoregion reaches across the prairie provinces in a thin band, with a larger section encompassing Edmonton and a narrow strip reaching down into the foothills. It features high mountain meadows, crystal clear rivers and lakes, and groves of forests with dense understory vegetation.

We made our way through stands of trembling aspen, balsam poplar and towering jack pines. While my daughter’s horse plodded dutifully along behind Spirit, my horse seemed determined to scrape me off by knocking my knees into said pines when trying to avoid the muddy centre of the trail.

My daughter exclaimed over the brilliant green moss cover and dozens of uniquely shaped and coloured mushrooms, low bush cranberries and prairie roses adding pops of colour on the forest floor. After a steep climb, we emerged into a wildflower meadow created by logging, startling a white tailed deer in the process.

Near the end of the trail we creakingly dismounted by a man-made lake, which our guide explained had been created in the 1950s for use in forest fire suppression. My daughter chatted with a noisy chipmunk, while I had a serious discussion with my steed about her bone-jarring habit of falling behind and trotting to catch up every three minutes.

After a short break, we remounted and followed a winding path along the lake, hooves crunching on a fall leaves and passing by a large patch of beautiful but invasive Canada thistle. Kate was captivated by the fragrant blooms, which shot skyward as high as her mount. We followed a path that crossed the gravel road, and ended back at the Sunset camp a little over two hours after embarking on our ride.

As we took the scenic route home to Calgary on Highway 40, a windy gravel forestry trunk road with beautiful foothill views, my daughter regaled my husband with her day’s adventures. I asked her what her favourite part was, expecting her to answer with detailed stories of the flowers, wildlife or her mount.

“I loved it when my horse farted!” she replied.

City kid.