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## So You Want to Be a Professional Guide?

Lad D'Angelo and his hiking companions were in the high country, 30 miles out of Cripple Creek, Colorado. "It was a sunny day when we started, but by the time we got to the top of Cow Mountain the clouds had socked in. It started to sleet and snow, and we couldn't see a thing. It was pretty rough; the compass and topo map were useless because we couldn't see any reference points. We were in remote terrain, and we had to find our way back down into the canyon to locate a single fence post in the middle of thick, black timber."

D'Angelo was not lost. He was in the classroom of the Colorado Outdoor Adventure Guide School (COAGS), a school that prides itself on making expert outdoorsmen out of average hunters, anglers and backpackers. Students at COAGS take hands-on classes in such things as mule psychology, elk bugling and fly fishing. They learn to pack a manta and tie a diamond hitch. They track mule deer, put up wall tents, and ride horses in the dark.

On this particular day, Lad was in orienteering class. He and his fellow students used a GPS (global positioning system) to successfully reach a post that head instructor Jeff Miner had stuck in the ground for them to find.

"The West is awful big country. Everybody's fear is getting lost," says Miner. "But our orienteering class gives them a sense of security."

Located at 10,200 feet in the mountains south of Pikes Peak, COAGS has a hands-on attitude towards everything it teaches, from riding mules and leading pack strings to cooking savory stews in Dutch ovens, bugling elk, or putting together an emergency shelter in the teeth of a sudden storm.

The students who come to COAGS are a mixed lot – cowboys, corporate leaders looking for career changes, retired generals and kids fresh out of high school. People from 18 to 65. Mostly men, but some women.

Half of the students come for their own personal self-improvement; half come with aspirations of becoming professional guides. And most of the students are scared half to death of those 1000 pound beasts - the horses and mules.

So, learning how to handle and ride stock comfortably is at the heart of the school's program. "We were wrangling horses and mules every morning by seven a.m.," says Gary Ford, one of last year's students. "The stock would be out roaming around the mountain with a lot of cover to hide in, and sometimes it'd take an hour to find them and get them back to the corral."

Students are responsible for grooming their animals, picking their hoofs and saddling them, sometimes in the dark. “One day we got up at three a.m. to go on a 13-hour trail ride and it snowed. “It was a bad day for a ride, but it was a good experience. We rode up Pikes Peak and spotted 60 elk.”

When working with horses, mules and green riders, instructors don't have to simulate unusual situations for student to deal with. Those situations inevitably happen on their own.

“We were coming out of the backcountry near Sheep Mountain,” says former student Craig Wright. “My friend Russ was on a mule that lost it's footing when it stepped on a round piece of aspen. The mule tipped over; Russ flew off its back. The mule rolled down the mountain to the right; Russ went left. And they both looked up with the same ‘what-the-hell-happened’ expression. We told Russ he had to stop being so rough on his mule,” Craig laughs.

But the incident everyone remembers from last year is “the llama incident,” as Jeff Miner calls it. “We were heading out on our 3-day pack trip. Well, we hadn't gone more than 200 yards when a llama that had gotten loose from a neighboring ranch walked out of a little thicket of aspen. The mules and horses didn't like that at all. They exploded in every direction. Packs slipped down around their bellies and fell off in the dirt. Pots and pans were strung half way across the mountain.”

Miner says it was easy to see who'd tied a good diamond hitch and who hadn't. And the students had to collect the scattered gear, repack it and mantle it up on the mules once again. “We didn't help them with that – not that we didn't teach them – but we let them solve these unexpected problems on their own. If everything went great everyday, students wouldn't learn anything,” says Miner, emphasizing that student safety always comes first and that COAGS has never had a serious injury.

Part of the learning process at the school involves roll-playing. In the Wilderness Outfitters and Hunting Guide program, students are paired as a hunting guide and his client. The instructors are elk. They go off into the forest and use elk calls to bugle like a bull elk in rut. Student guides call back, trying to lure the bull within shooting range while considering wind direction and good shooting lanes for their clients.

“If they're doing it well, the instructor, acting like a bull elk, will be coming into them, the client will be in a good shooting position, and he'll be able to get off an imaginary shot.”

Competition plays a part in the program, too. In the middle of a trail ride, an instructor may stop suddenly and tell students that a huge storm is coming in and they have 30 minutes to pair up, build a shelter, start a fire without matches and get themselves protected. “So, we're standing out there in the middle of nowhere with our backpack and Leatherman, and we've got to figure out how to survive,” says Craig Wright. “That's when you really discover the kinds of things you need to carry in your pack.”

Instructors time the students at their tasks and critique their work. Sometimes students have to spend the night in the shelters they've built. “When we built our emergency shelter, it wasn't big enough for two people,” says Gary

Ford. "So Jeff Miner asked which one of us was going to sleep on top. He had some fun with us, but he also let us know what was wrong with our shelter."

As a "final exam" for the course, students take the instructors on a 3-day pack trip. One group of students is in charge of the horses and mules; a second group handles food and cooking, and a third oversees tents and camp set-up. Each day the groups rotate responsibilities.

"We actually put the instructors in the saddles, lead them into the backcountry, set up the cook tent and their tents, made sure their beds were made and brought them hot soup. It snowed. We had to adapt to the weather and make sure the fires were going. It was the real thing," says Wright of his COAGS experience.

When a COAGS student has finished the Basic Guide Program and one or more of the advanced programs, including the Wilderness Outfitters and Hunting Guide Program, the Advanced Backcountry Horseman Program and the Professional Fly Fishing Guide Program, he has often been transformed from an "avid" to an "expert" outdoorsman.

After attending COAGS, for example, Gary Ford got a job with an outfitter in Alaska. "I was two months in the Alaska Range. No electricity, no running water. We set up and maintained a camp with 14 wall tents. We packed in firewood, packed out game, set up spike camps. It made you realize what you can do without."

Lad D'Angelo went from COAGS to set up his own fishing service, called Ghost Ranch Adventures, in Costa Rica. "My cousin and I take clients down in January and February to fly fish for sailfish."

As for Craig Wright, he has been asked back to COAGS to help instruct students on handling horses and mules.

Whether students go on to take jobs in the guiding business or not, they have developed skills that none of their hunting buddies know. They come out of here being 'the man' that everybody looks up to and wants to go hunting and fishing with.

Becoming an expert outdoorsman lets you pass on these skills to your kids and grandchildren, and take them on special trips. It's a way to create a lasting legacy.

For more information on becoming a guide visit [www.guideschool.com](http://www.guideschool.com) .