

The Colorado Outdoor Adventure Guide School - By Mark Bedor

It's a gorgeous July day high in the Rocky Mountains. More than a dozen riders are strung out well above the timberline. Suddenly the man on the lead horse motions for silence. Just 100 yards away lay 6 big horn sheep rams! The rams can't smell us, and for a couple very precious minutes, the animals have no idea we are here. But soon, the sheep jump up and dash off. Photos won't do this scene justice. But what a moment!

Just imagine getting paid to have this kind of experience on a regular basis! That's exactly what most of the people in this group hope to do. For this very memorable day in the saddle is part of the curriculum of the Colorado Outdoor Adventure Guide School (COAGS).

The Colorado Outdoor Adventure Guide School was founded in 1993 by the man who spotted those sheep, 55 year old Gary Jordan. He's been in love with the American West ever since he was a toddler on a Texas ranch, listening to the hunting and outdoor adventure stories of his grandfather. After years of work in the cattle ranching, guiding, and outfitting business in the West, he temporarily traded the saddle for a business suit, where financial success gave him the resources to purchase a beautiful piece of land on the southwest slope of Pikes Peak he calls Gold Camp Ranch, headquarters for COAGS.

While the 150 acre property is the picturesque home of some three dozen horses and mules, it's not a dude ranch. And COAGS is not a vacation. Students pay \$1,000 a week for a four week course, bunking together in cabins that are not primitive, but are certainly not luxurious.

But the focus here is not on the indoors, but guiding guests in the outdoors, especially on horseback. "Horsemanship, orienteering, compass work, map work, survival... just the amount that he throws at you in a day was just incredible", recounts student Bruce Conner. "But fun too! And if you spend as much time as some of us plan on doin' out in the woods, it's definitely helpful."

The 43 year old Conner is one of a growing number of students who come for their own personal growth. Three other students here this week are in their 50's. But most are in their late teens and 20's, looking for a career outdoors. Declares determined 18 year old Brian Christensen, "If I can figure out a way to make a living off of a horse, then I'm gonna do it!"

Whatever the reasons for attending, the first two weeks at COAGS are known as the "Basic Program", with a heavy emphasis on horsemanship. Most people come here with very little if any experience with horses. "Absolutely none", admits 23 year old Nick Slomski. "I was actually pretty horse shy. Then just talking to Jeff, he made me real comfortable around them."

Jeff Miner is Gary Jordan's right hand man. He's spent more than a dozen

years guiding, packing and running his own outfitting business in the Rocky Mountains. Together with Jordan, they'll teach their students not just riding, but also how to bridle, saddle, clean, feed and care for horses and mules, and stay safe doing it. Says Miner, "I'm teaching them what I would expect from them if they were actually going to work for us".

And much is expected. Other tasks include the difficult job of setting up giant wall tents the size of a small cabin, training to become a competent cook, mastering a Dutch oven, and learning how to create the kinds of meals guests paying thousands for a Western vacation would expect. All of that and more is covered in just the first two weeks of the course!

But, the third week is the toughest, when students put all those skills to work on a backcountry horse trip. Before they can do that though, there's another big challenge: learning how to pack all those tents, cook stoves and other gear on the back of a mule, and lead a string of these big, strong and sometimes stubborn animals through the wilderness.

"You see a picture of a guy leading the pack horse or mule, it looks so romantic and so neat", says 57 year old student Al Germain. "But when you try to come out here and do it, you realize how hard it is.

By Wednesday, basic training on tying and packing loads and leading mules through forests and over logs and creeks is complete. Time to load the gear for real, and head out on the pack trip, and set up camp. It's back breaking work. Nineteen-foot long poles are cut for the center beam of the wall tents, which take a big team effort to erect. Huge amounts of firewood must be gathered and cut by hand. An entire working kitchen is assembled. One thousand pounds of feed must be hauled for the horses, plus extra bridles, leather repair tools, horse shoes, fly spray, ointment and all kinds of other stuff most people would never think of.

Those who graduate from COAGS and go on to careers as guides, packers and wranglers will probably never get rich. Starting pay is usually only \$1,500 a month. And hauling tons of gear through the wilderness on ornery mules and leading sometimes cranky clients never gets easy. So why do it?

The answer came on the day we saw those six big horn sheep rams. Riding out in the early morning darkness, through misty meadows, up steep, rocky trails, then high above where the trees grow, spotting a magnificent herd of some 70 elk, and, another herd of 40 bighorn ewes and lambs. Eleven hours in the saddle through some of the most beautiful country God ever created.

"If the last 24 hours seem like a lot of trouble, don't go there", advises Gary. "If it seems like fun, like a nice challenge, and a nice story, memories and so forth... then you may have what it takes.

For information on the Colorado Outdoor Adventure Guide School, call 1-800-714-4864 or check out their website, at www.guideschool.com.