

So you want to go trail riding?

By Steve Nott

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Over the last four years I've covered some 16,000 kilometres on my way around Australia using only a packhorse for supplies, riding horse and one spare. Though often bush bashing where no tracks are marked, I have covered much of the Bicentennial National Trail. Though a few of the following hints and anecdotes may not be applicable or allowed on some sections of the Trail, I have included them for riders who may do other treks as well. Different readers will have different levels of experience and equipment to hand so if some of the following seems a bit basic, read on as there may be something of use.

First you'll need horses. I started with two, riding and pack, but soon found I needed a third. This allows one to be spelled or at least travel without load each day. Should small injuries or saddle sores begin to occur, that particular horse may be able to follow without load until recovered whereas with only two you would either have to stop and await recovery or else abandon saddles and gear. My horses generally do one day being ridden, one carrying pack and one following free. On the fourth day all rest.

Trail users travelling in pairs may be able to get away with a shared packhorse and one spare as at no time will supplies need to be carried for more than a few weeks. By travelling in a group heavy items such as farriery gear and cooking equipment can be shared among the packhorses. Generally for a group, two horses per person sharing the work and loads should suffice and allow all to be under control when passing through town.

While not wanting to debate in too much detail the merits of various breeds I will just make a few observations. Generally thoroughbreds are not a good choice as they are less likely to do well on the varying grass feed of parts of the Trail the rider will encounter. I started with an ex-racehorse – good heart but he proved himself unable to feed himself in southern Queensland and had to be retired. A half thoroughbred I obtained in the south west of Western Australia was retired halfway across the Nullarbor for similar reasons.

A good Australian stockhorse should do for riding and I now have an ex-trotter acquired in Broome as main packhorse. Trotters are generally not a comfortable horse to ride and mine is no exception, however he has proven capable of living in a variety of terrain (Broome to Perth to Melbourne) and being used to having a variety of gear hung off him proved a dream to introduce to the pack.

Another general rule is the bigger the horse the more he needs to eat. My best, obtained early in the trip at Mt Morgan, is a 13hh pony who has gone most of the way around Australia carrying either me or the pack.

Finally if looking to purchase consider the area you intend to travel and possible local sources – saves on transport costs and locally bred would be better adapted to local conditions.

Once you have your horses the next obvious need is saddlery. Most travellers will already have a riding saddle or at least a preference. However what you use for dressage or chasing scrub bulls may not be the best choice for a long distance ride. The first consideration must be comfort for the horse. Simply put – different saddles suit different horses. The Australian stock saddle or ex-military saddle are well suited to a high withered, slab sided horse such as the Australian stockhorse. The Western saddle better suits the broad rounded horse such as the quarter horse. Be sure to use plenty of padding. My own preference is for a single layer of check blanket that can be easily rinsed out against the horse and a 2.5 cm pad between it and the saddle. My own saddle is a hand made Western – hand made for comfort and utility. All fancy decals and such have been left off and in their place utilitarian 'D's' for attaching gear. Similarly the narrowest Western tree was chosen and extra padding for horse and rider applied while endeavouring to keep overall weight to a minimum. Remember the lighter the saddle the more gear you can afford to hang off it.

A friend of mine rides in a reconditioned Australian Military saddle – beware of cheap Indian imitations however as I've heard bad reports on them.

The Army saddle generally fits the horse well and is extremely light. If you manage to find one with a hinged tree you are indeed fortunate. Hunt up a few old photographs of the Light Horse in World War 1 and you'll get an idea of what you can hang off them. Terrey's is outfitted with a large saddle bag at the rear on each side and wallets to hold bush knife and water bottle across the front. Add a light swag tied across the back and roll of spare clothes across the front and you very nearly have an outfit with which you could travel for a week between re-supplies.

With any saddle you should have at least one saddle bag to carry day to day items such as camera, torch and binoculars easy to hand. I use western style double bags, one holds

the above while the other holds current book, diary and writing valise.

Somewhere on your horse you'll need to carry some water. Neck water bags are great in the hot remote north but at the current retail price and difficulties with replacement canvas supplies, the average rider may be better off with alternate containers. You'll need to water your horses at least once a day so if you carry a couple of the army style water bottles and an ordinary canvas water bag to fill of an evening for camp use you should get by. If you can get the original army water bottles with cup attached you have the basics of your cooking equipment. Two of these (one for cups of tea and one for meals) are all I've carried for most of the trip. Add a roll of alfoil for roasts and damper done in the coals and you should be able to handle all your cooking needs. If travelling in a group a compact set of billies or cooking pots can be shared.

Remember the golden rule, don't duplicate equipment as every ounce or square inch – sorry every gram or square centimetre saved can be filled with luxuries such as books or a flask of scotch. My two water bottles have had shoulder straps attached to hang from the swell of the saddle - more comfortable than on the belt. Ross Wallace of Back 'O Bourke Saddlery in Dubbo makes very good and reasonable priced carriers for water bottles, pliers etc that attach the same as single saddle bags.

Generally users of the BNT should not need to get through fences though when I rode the northern part of the then proposed Trail in 1986 I found a few gates so long disused as to require the use of pliers and there is always the danger of a horse becoming tangled in wire. So a good quality set of pliers should be included. Mine travel in a pouch I've stitched to the front of one of my saddle bags. They also come in handy for getting hot cups away from fires.

Pack saddles, at least good ones, are hard to find and/or expensive. Possible the best are the old ex-army ones with the hinged tree. These will adjust to fit any shaped horse and about the right size for the average stockhorse or trotter. Again the lighter the saddle and bags the more you can carry in them. I did away with breast plate, britching and crupper in the flat country but used them all the time in the mountains. As much of the southern part of the Trail is extremely mountainous perhaps better to leave them on if they come with your saddle. Still in over 16,000 kilometres I've only had the pack ride forward twice, both times in country so steep I would not have gone that way by choice and find a water bag across the front of the horse more useful.

When filling the pack bags try to keep heavy items to the bottom to help balance the load and it is best to weigh the

bags to ensure they are even (a small spring scale is handy). As a general rule try to keep weight per bag below 20kg and certainly never above 25.

Swags, tarp or tent can be carried across the top secured by straps. The surcingle should be threaded through a loop on the offside bag and left there on unpacking. When fully packed simply bring the buckle under the horse and through the spacer between the two girths and bring the other end over the top of everything, through a loop on the nearside bag and do up. Do up swag holding straps last to secure the surcingle across the top.

I carry canvas nose bags, waterproof to double a buckets, hung from the front hooks on the saddle. One per horse they are handy if you want to treat your horse to a little grain when you are in town and invaluable if you need to water from a tap or fenced off creek.

One last word before leaving the pack: it is best not to use a saddle cloth under then pack saddle as it can be pulled down by the action of the panels of the saddle and cause trouble on the withers. Rather carry a nail brush or similar and scrub sweat and dirt from the lining of the saddle on regular occasions.

On some campsites small paddocks may be provided, however sooner or later you'll need to hobble or tether. I use two basic tethering means. The first involves tying a length of 10 metre 6mm rope about 2 metres up a tree trunk. About a metre out loop the rope around a 1cm x 15 cm stick and repeat to the other end of the same distance from a second tree. Then use a tightening knot such as the truck drivers use to tighten the rope between the two trees. Simply tie off the horse's lead rope to the line using a loop knot so that he can comfortably put his head to the ground (but no longer) and he will feed the length of the rope with the sticks stopping him becoming tangled around the trees. If you move the rope a few times in the night he should get a good feed.

The second method involves using a single hobble strap attached to the near front leg and chain. To the other end of the chain clip a long lead rope or longer tethering rope and attach to either a 45cm tent peg driven into the ground or the base of a fence post. Move as required.

By tethering one of my plant I find the others in hobbles usually stay close by. Should they wander I have a horse at hand to follow up. For tethering methods and hobbling always try out the horse in a round yard or other safe place at home first (take a good book) and keep a sharp knife handy in case he panics and becomes tangled.

To carry hobbles hold each strap by the tongue with the last link of the chain at the buckles. Now pass the tongue of one strap between the two layers of the other strap and follow with the chain. Slide the chain ring of the second

strap up to the tongue end and you should have a strap/chain/strap length with a buckle at one end and tongue at the other long enough to do up around the horse's neck. Once this is on you can clip the lead rope to it and run it through the ring on the headstall to lead him. Should he pull away the hobbles will prove far stronger than the headstall would have.

My own preference is for sleeping in a swag with a 5mm foam camper's mattress and a couple of blankets. I find good quality sleeping bags too hot for most of the year in northern Australia. However a light sleeping bag attached to the front of the riding saddle and a tent across the top of the pack is another alternative for groups or couples.

I carry all my spare clothing in the swag. It stays dry and relatively uncrumpled. I manage to get by with two pairs of moleskins, two shirts and 4 or 5 sets of socks and underwear. I used to use ex-army shirts and a light jumper but have recently acquired a couple of shirts from Thomas Cook's new line of adventure clothing". Similarly my jumper has been replaced by one of their Mae Vests. With an amazing amount of pockets it has room for everything you want to carry on your person and is extremely water resistant, A point I inadvertently tested when caught in a downpour in Victoria. Light enough to wear on all but the hottest day it still adds that extra warmth on chilly evenings. If it gets really cold then don your High Country coat. As in other gear the key to clothing is versatility win the minimum you can get by with. As well as a wide brimmed felt hat and elastic sided boots I carry a soft peaked cap and either thongs or running shoes for camp use or in case either of the former should be lost or damaged.

I have one set of "good" shirt and trousers which I mail ahead to my next mail drop of approximately one month intervals. Then along with my mail I collect my clean unrumpled clothes, adjourn to the nearest pub or roadhouse for a shower and am again presentable to society.

The most obvious place to carry essentials is on one's belt. My "wallet" of bank book, licence and money used to be a leather pouch on my belt however I now carry same in a plastic cover inside one of the inner pockets of my vest. On my belt is folding knife, watch (much safer than on the wrist), compass and Zippo lighter (the only one that truly works on horseback). By carrying these on your belt there is less chance of leaving them behind when saddling up at first light.

Folded maps tend to disintegrate as I carry mine rolled in a 1 metre piece of 5 cm polypipe with fishing floats cut to size to plug each end and a length of rope attached to each to

hold them in place. Place the map case across the top of the pack with swag or tent.

For food it really depends on the amount of time you'll be travelling. There are a lot of good freeze-dried products available but a bit expensive for 12 months. I carry the basics of rice, pasta, dried vegetables, dried fruit, nuts and muesli bars and supplemented with fresh meat or fish from my rifleⁱ and handline. Generally most parts of the Trail do not permit firearms so check first and also current State laws.

As well as your folding belt knife there are a few other handy edged tools. My own preference is either a World War II Australian Army machete with a hook cut into the top of the blade near the point (handy for clearing thorn bush or lifting a billy from the fire) or the latest issue British Paratrooper knife similarly modified. Both will chop wood or dig holes if necessary. If weight permits an ex-army folding shovel is handy – any NATO country's but don't settle for cheap ... copies. They don't last.

A comprehensive first-aid kit for self and horses can be made up after consulting vet and doctor. Powdered penicillin to which you add sterile water for injections can save a lot of trauma with wounds becoming infected.

A basic leather repair kit of needles, thread and copper rivets saves a lot of worries. Also, even if you plan to use farriers along the way I'd still take a hammer, nails and at least one half-worn front and back shoe per horse size you are using.

That about covers all the main items I carry. A good rule of thumb is to assemble all the gear you consider "essential", then discard one third. I have over the years.

Good travelling.

ⁱ This was written prior to changes in Australia's gun laws in the mid 1990s which regulate the ownership and use of firearms. No firearms are permitted on the BNT.