

## SO YOU WANT TO GO ON AN ADVENTURE?

By Uli Schnabl



The trek began here at the California-Oregon border and ended 560 kilometers north.

The **Pacific Crest Trail (PCT)** is a long-distance mountain hiking and equestrian trail closely aligned with the highest portion of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountain ranges, which lie 160 to 240 km east of the U.S. Pacific coast. The trail's southern terminus is on the U.S. border with Mexico, and its northern terminus is in British Columbia; its corridor passes through California, Oregon and Washington.

The Pacific Crest Trail is 4,286 km long and ranges in elevation from just above sea level at the Oregon-Washington border to 4,009 m at Forester Pass in the Sierra Nevada. The route goes through 25 national forests and 7 national parks. Its midpoint is in Chester, California (near Mt. Lassen), where the Sierra and Cascade ranges meet.

Ever since I heard of its existence, the Pacific Crest Trail awakened my slumbering need for adventure; it became an irresistible temptation. The problem was I could not just disappear from my everyday life to have a good time in the woods. It takes about five months to hike or ride the entire trail and it was simply out of the

question to take that long a leave of absence from work and our farm, so I had to find a more sensible solution to satisfy my inner restlessness. I decided to tackle “only” the Oregon and Washington section of the trail. My plan was to start at the California-Oregon border and ride all the way home to Manning Park in British Columbia - this seemed doable with the two summer months I get off as an educational assistant.

It would be difficult to find a farm sitter for two months, but I was sure I would be able to solve that somehow. The real challenge was to find someone who shared my dream. Even though I was prepared to ride alone, it would be much safer and a lot more fun with the right partner. I have a lot of friends who are passionate trail riders, but for them, a warm camper, a hot shower and a good meal have to be waiting at the end of a long day on the trail. It takes a certain type of person to put up with the inconveniences of a two month mountain wilderness trip and still see the beauty in it.

So one day, reading through the Fjord Digest e-mail list, my heart skipped a beat when I saw THE post. A certain Moira Sambey from Shawnigan Lake, BC had written: “Has anyone ever considered riding the PCT?”

To cut a long story short, Moira and I met twice (once very briefly and a second time for a few days) and decided we had enough in common to make it work. I had to chuckle when I found out that Moira, after our first few e-mail exchanges, thought I was a man because the only other Uli she knew was male. As it turned out, we both had jobs in the school system, we were both vegetarians (which would help with meal planning), we both had Fjord horses, and we both agreed with the “pack light-go far” philosophy. We would not take pack horses.

So we started to plan. Our biggest concern was how to keep the horses well fed and healthy. Taking hay would be

impossible and grazing opportunities had a big question mark attached, so I contacted an equine nutritionist to find out what kind and how much concentrated feed we should take. He suggested 6 lbs of feed per day per horse, so we took 5 lbs a day, knowing Fjords usually need less feed to stay in good condition: 1 lb of beet pulp, 1 lb of high fat concentrated pelleted feed, and 3 lbs of forage, simulating complete feed, also pelleted.

As it turned out, grazing along the trail was sparse, but Fjords are amazing survivors. They browsed on anything they considered edible and never got sick, despite our concerns about toxic plants. Blueberry bushes were their favourites. By the end of our trip they were lean and trim, but with no ribs showing.

As we did not want to exceed 50 lbs total weight for our packs, we had to re-supply ideally every 4 days. I scoured detailed maps and the internet for potential drop off locations. Sometimes this meant shipping our parcels to post offices close by the trail. Other options were ranger stations, campgrounds, resorts or simply horse people I contacted via the internet, like some Back Country Horsemen members, or Fjord horse owners. Without the help of these generous souls we met online, we would not have been able to accomplish what we did.

To cut down on weight, I needed ultra light camping/hiking gear. The thing about ultra light equipment is that every gram of weight you save is reflected in a bigger price tag. So again I visited countless websites, read endless gear reviews, and looked at Craig's list and Kijiji time and again, until I finally owned everything a wilderness camper's heart could desire.

Below is a list of everything we packed for those of you who are thinking of going on a long distance ride. It seems a lot, but most items proved absolutely necessary. We were lucky not to need the majority of

our first aid kit and we also did not encounter any bears. Our basic gear, without horse and human food, weighed around 20 lbs.



Lasse and Oscar, carrying 50 lbs of gear and food, sample tasty lupins at Mt. Hood.

#### **Clothes :**

**Tops:** 1 down jacket, 1 rain jacket, 1 light sweater (fleece or wool), 1 long sleeved base layer, 2 T-shirts, 1 Bra **Bottoms:** 1 pair of riding pants, 1 pair of rain pants, 1 pair of light capris or shorts, 2 pairs of underpants, 3 pairs of socks (one of them warm), 1 long base layer **Other:** hiking boots, gloves, fleece hat, riding helmet, Buff (scarf-like thing that has many good uses), sun glasses **Sleeping equipment:** tent, three season sleeping bag (I recommend down), sleeping mat

**Kitchen:** Stove/fuel (we took one wood fueled and one gas fueled stove), 1 pot, 1 mug, 1 bowl, 1 Swiss army knife, 1 spork, 1 frying pan, 1 spatula, 2 water bottles, 1 water purifying filter, 1 scrubbing pad, fire starter, aluminium foil, and dish soap

**Hygiene:** laundry detergent, camp shower, shampoo/soap, comb, toothpaste/brush, floss, sunscreen, face cream, chapstick, deodorant, feminine hygiene products, towel and wet wipes

**Tools:** hand saw, sewing needle, Leatherman multi tool, fishing line/hook, scissors, tweezers

**Bear protection:** bear spray, bear proof food storage bag **(continued on page 8)**

**Miscellaneous:** trail map, compass, Spot satellite tracking device (extra batteries), head lamp (extra batteries, camera (extra batteries, electricians tape, duct tape, Zip Lock bags, journal, pen, scale

**First Aid Kit:** (horse and human) vet wrap, band aids, triangle cloth, poultice, bandaging material, clamps, 2 pieces of 6 inch long garden hose in case of snake bite, sterile gauze, various homoeopathic remedies (Arnica-gel, Colubrina, Camphora, Apis-gel), Rescue Remedy (Bach flowers), Bentonite Clay, Bute, Ibuprofen, oral antibiotics (for horses), sutures, Penaten cream, Polysporin ointment, electrolytes, 1 syringe

**Horse gear:** (apart from tack) high line (rope and swivel), hobbles, bell, collapsible water bucket, salt (small pieces of salt lick), hoof pick, long lead rope, extra rope, 4 hoof boots, brush, sponge

It took us about a year to get ready for the big day. My six year old stallion, Lasse and I both went to boot camp, me in the gym and Lasse on the trail. We rode through a cold and snowy winter taking every opportunity to become a better team.

Lasse is an exceptionally courageous and self-assured horse: not much can unbalance him. I trust his leadership as well as he trusts mine. I knew he would be the ultimate horse for the gruelling months ahead.

On July 2nd we started our journey. Moira and her gelding, Oscar, had arrived a few days earlier at our Chase Creek farm, where we organized all our trail belongings and packed up our truck and trailer. I would drive us down to the Californian-Oregon border and a friend would follow on his motorcycle, meet us there, put his bike in our trailer, and drive home to Canada. A stack of necessary paperwork in hand, we crossed the US border around noon that day.

## **JOURNAL ENTRY JULY 2<sup>ND</sup>**

*Finally it's here, our big day. With mixed feelings I said good-bye to friends and family, gave last instructions to my dad, sister and niece who will be farm sitting, and then we were off. I still can hardly believe it. After all this time of planning and preparation, I am as excited as a kid on Christmas morning.*

*We made it in time for our vet appointment at the border. Holding my breath I clutched a considerable stack of paperwork that had cost me a lot of money, time, and nerves to acquire. Everything was in order and the vet, a rather laid back lady, was more interested in our ride than checking the horses. Our fears about having to unpack all our gear also turned out to be unnecessary. We could have brought an arsenal of weapons across.*

*We dropped off our first supplies in Twisp with Bill and his wife, park rangers at Hart's Pass. He was doubtful that we would be able to ride the trail, because of the snow situation and told us some horror stories about a girl who had tried and failed the previous year. Arrrgh! Not exactly what we wanted to hear. We thanked them for safe-keeping our stuff, because Hart's Pass would not have been very easy to get to otherwise, and went on our merry way aiming for Twisp River horse campground.*

*We found the camp after a much longer drive than anticipated. There were only a few other users, but a startling number of very tame deer! The horses were happy to touch firm ground after hours in the trailer and started happily munching on the super expensive weed-free hay we had bought in a farm supply store earlier. Both Washington and Oregon have strict rules when it comes to bringing feed into the back country. Pellets or certified weed-free hay only.*

*Lasse was super excited when I tied him to the high line. He started to march in*

*circles as if he was attached to a hot walker. I hope he will settle down eventually. Oscar on the other hand went to sleep right away, as did we after a hasty Kraft dinner and a lengthy set up of our still unfamiliar tents.*

It took us six days to drive to our destinations, dropping off care parcels as we went. On Saturday July 7<sup>th</sup> we were finally able to start our ride at a PCT trailhead close to Ashland, Oregon.

**JOURNAL ENTRY JULY 7<sup>th</sup>** *Today we rode and walked the horses for 12 miles, not bad considering we started around 2 in the afternoon. Moira only walked Oscar: both need a lot of conditioning. I am a bit worried about them already with a few hundred strenuous mountain miles lying ahead. Lasse, relieved that there was something to do other than standing in a trailer, happily performed his fastest power walk, which did not make it any easier for them. Moira is completely new to horse packing and her pack immediately started to shift. I repacked it for her, but did not completely start from scratch, thinking we would soon camp for the night at the first good water source. Big mistake! That unstable pack continued to give Moira a lot of grief.*

*We walked and walked, climbing higher and higher. The sun was merciless even in the late afternoon. The trail wound through oak forest, alternating with the more familiar evergreen fir, spruce, redwoods and pine. Grassland crowned with dry rocky ridges and displaying a colourful arrangement of wildflowers, provided excellent grazing opportunities, and we let the horses have their fill. Snowcapped Mt. Shasta in the distance was a magnificent backdrop.*

*We consulted our map to find water, but every promising possibility was dried up. As it was getting dark a sense of urgency took hold of me. I was walking now too, and*

*frequently had to wait for Moira and Oscar so I would not lose sight of them. It soon became clear they could not keep up with my walking speed, but we desperately needed to find water for the horses before the sun went down.*

*We had almost given up hope when we realized the ground underneath our feet started to become soggy. A few hundred meters further I saw a sign- or did I only imagine it? depicting a water tap with a drinking glass.*

*There it was, a tap in a meadow right in the middle of nowhere. What a relief! A creek babbled through the meadow as well and the horses drank greedily. I put up our high lines in some trees close by; not ideal but would have to do. Lasse and Oscar welcomed their grain, but the instant Lasse had finished his portion he started his "hot walker" routine again.*

*With headlamps on, we pitched our tents and had a meager supper of trail mix and cold tortilla wraps. Completely wiped out but content with a first successful day, we crawled into our sleeping bags. I was too tired to care about my hyperactive horse and almost forgot to send my SPOT message to let loved ones at home know we are ok.*

Finding water was a constant worry in southern Oregon. We had to plan around it. Sometimes we had to go further than we had intended, and other days we had to stop sooner, having to make up for it the next day. We were grateful for the sun, even though it was very hot; camping and packing in the rain is not a lot of fun.

Unbelievably we had sunshine every single day of our month long trip. Even in all this heat though, the snow on tops of mountain peaks ahead of us did not seem to melt much, a concern that was confirmed by hikers we met on the trail. Some of them carried ice picks and crampons in anticipation of snow problems. Hikers on the PCT traditionally stay in contact with each

other via strategically placed trail journals as well as smart phones etc.

Snow in the mountains can become quite dangerous, especially travelling with horses. We soon found out about this when we encountered our first serious snow at Devil's Peak. It truly was a Devil's peak!

**JOURNAL ENTRY JULY 14<sup>th</sup>** *A week on the trail today! We left camp at 11:30. Although I am getting up earlier every day, we still seem to need 3-4 hours in the morning to get ready. Today the trail started out rather benign through a pleasant forest. We were even able to trot some stretches. The higher we climbed, the scarier the trail got- a very narrow path along steep rockslides. The horses did well. I often let go of Lasse's reigns so he could find his balance without me interfering. So far so good until we hit snow at a tricky trail section. Snow slides on top of shale slides. After investigating on foot by myself, I decided not to take the risk. One slip would mean a dead horse 80 meters down. I promised folks at home not to do anything that could compromise our safety, so we regrouped, walked back down the mountain that had just taken us five hours to climb and will try an alternative route called the "Sky Lakes" trail tomorrow. Hopefully we will be able to make it around Devil's Peak that way.*

*We have to keep an eye on our feed and food situation. We can't afford to lose more days before we get to our next supplies.*

We camped at Deer Lake that night where the mosquitoes were bad, but not nearly as bad as they had been at Red Lake the night before. Thankfully there was grass for the horses along the shoreline. I still had to watch Lasse closely with his hobbles. He learned how to gallop with them on. When he was done eating he was always trying to run "home to the trailer". His sense of

direction was amazing. I am sure he would have found his way all the way back to Ashland.

**JOURNAL ENTRY JULY 15<sup>th</sup>** *Today our second attempt to conquer Devil's Peak unfortunately failed. Breakfast was rather unsatisfying, but we need to ration our remaining resources. At least the horses had ample grazing available. We made good time packing up and started our ascent this time along the "Sky Lakes" trail. This trail offers stunningly beautiful scenery, an abundance of small, clear, blue-green lakes like jewels in the woods. It gains elevation fast as it turns into "Snow Lakes" Trail. We thought, oh, oh that does not sound too good. It rejoins the PCT a little closer towards Devil's Peak than we could get to yesterday. Tucked tightly against the mountain slope with terrible footing (walking on shale sounds like walking on broken tiles), the trail became pretty nerve wracking.*



Sometimes the lava flows seemed endless.

*We had to perform some difficult maneuvers across snow patches that got our hearts pounding and adrenalin pumping. We thought we had left the worst of it behind, when suddenly a huge snowfield blocked our way as we turned the corner to the north side of the mountain. Not a huge problem for hikers, impossible with horses. Cursing we turned around, defeated by the*

*mountain.*

After this humbling experience we had to leave the trail and ride out to civilization. We rode all the way into Fort Klamath, where we bought food and spend the night at a ranch. The next day we continued along Highway 62 to Mazama Campground in Crater Lake Park, where a supply parcel was waiting for us.

Oscar and Lasse were amazing. We were passed and occasionally honked or waved at by the scariest rigs, countless motorbike groups, motor homes with boats attached, anything imaginable as this is a popular tourist route. The horses did not even look up after a while. They stoically trotted along, wondering what craziness we would ask them to do next. We rejoined the PCT at Crater Lake.

From then on I watched the elevation gains on the PCT like a hawk. Anything over 6000 feet was questionable and had to be detoured. Snowcapped mountains in the distance were no longer magical: they had become the enemy.

We acquired new maps that showed possible alternative routes. In many cases, we struggled along poorly maintained side trails. Windfalls across the trails made it hard to cover decent daily mileage and it was easy to get lost.

I had calculated our supplies to match daily miles on the PCT. With frequent detouring, we often needed more days to get to our next food parcel drop off, so not long into our trip we realized that our calculation for our nutritional needs had been overly optimistic. With this extensive physical activity, we needed many more calories than we had available. As a result we each lost 10 lbs, something we could ill afford. Pasta in all forms as well as couscous will be off my shopping list for quite a while.

Bill Bryson describes the “Pasta Dilemma” in his book about walking the

Appalachian Trail: “On the first night you are starving for your noodles; on the second night you are starving but wish it wasn’t noodles; on the third you don’t want the noodles but know you had better eat something; by the fourth you have no appetite at all but just eat because that is what you do at this time of day...”

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, we faced our biggest challenge since Devil’s Peak. We had to skirt Mt. Jefferson on the PCT and this time there was NO alternative to chicken out on.



Mount Jefferson presented a dangerous challenge crossing snow and ice bridges.

*JOURNAL ENTRY AUGUST 1<sup>st</sup> What started out a lovely ride through almost tropical lush redwood forest quickly turned into a nightmare when we hit major snow. We were both stressed and on edge leading the horses over and around steep, icy snow banks. A few times we had to walk across frozen creeks, covered with snow. We could hear the water rushing underneath. We were keeping our fingers crossed the ice bridge would hold us. So far this was the worst thing I had to ask my horse to do, pure gambling on my part. Moira, Oscar and Lasse trusted me to make the call. The responsibility to get them across safe sat like a heavy boulder in my stomach. We made it, but the tension between us caused a very silent lunch at Jefferson Park, a fairytale meadow surrounded by glaciers.*

*The snow on the meadow has just left and already wildflowers show their beauty. I could not really enjoy the setting, knowing the worst part of the trail still lay ahead. In fact we couldn't even find the trail. It was almost entirely covered in snow and our means of orientation were our map, my compass, some faint footprints from hikers who had passed through yesterday, and a few cairns some thoughtful person had built for others to follow.*

*It took a lot of navigation skills to locate the trail, but miraculously we did. We conquered Mt. Jefferson. We're completely exhausted and glad we survived a very dangerous situation. We are camped at Breitenbush Lake tonight.*



At break time 2 hobbled, happy and muscular pals enjoy a snack together.

A few days past Mt. Jefferson, we met two young hikers who had walked down from Canada. Unlike most hikers they had chosen to start in the North walking southward towards Mexico. Now we could get first hand information about trail conditions in Washington. What they had to say was devastating news.

They told us that in some areas the trail is still 80% snow covered and strongly advised us not to try our luck. When arrived at the "Bridge of the Gods" in Cascade Locks on August 8<sup>th</sup> our decision was made and we called it a day.

Moira had injured her ankle badly a few days earlier, Oscar had worn out two of his hoof boots (we were riding barefoot with hoof boots) and was starting to look rather gaunt, and I had some family matters to attend to at home. It was the right thing to do, even though I felt somewhat sad about it. My dear husband Gottfried came to the rescue and drove us back into our normal lives.

We accomplished so much throughout our journey, although we did not achieve what we had set out to do. Moira and I are polar opposites in so many ways, as are Lasse and Oscar. We learned from each other and compensated for each other's shortcomings. We worked together as a team. I was the horse wrangler and Moira, the camp cook. Moira helped me to slow down and smell the flowers and I taught her some wilderness skills. We are friends now and still in contact.

Lasse and I became true partners. We have earned absolute mutual trust. Both Fjords were great ambassadors. Many trail users complimented us on our beautiful, brave horses and were eager to find out more about Norwegian Fjord Horses.

Moira and I have every reason to be proud of Oscar and Lasse. We asked them to do the near impossible. They skidded down snowy mountain slopes, jumped over tall logs with a 50 lb pack attached, they crossed raging, murky glacial rivers, trotted along busy highways, endured temperatures so hot it made the asphalt melt underneath their hoofs, and navigated through the Armageddon of endless lava flows. They did not lose their footing along frightening cliff edges, slept on their high lines, night after night, and had to be content with so little to eat. They did it all without much fuss.

So all things considered I would call our adventure along the PCT a huge success!