

From East to West by Saddle is Best

Claire Alldritt lives up on the Moray Coast in Scotland working as an Advanced Paramedic Practitioner for the Scottish Ambulance Service she counts herself lucky enough to own two horses and her passion is long-distance riding in the Highlands of Scotland.

After the recent publication of her first book we catch up with Claire to find out a little bit more about her journey to horseback exploring.

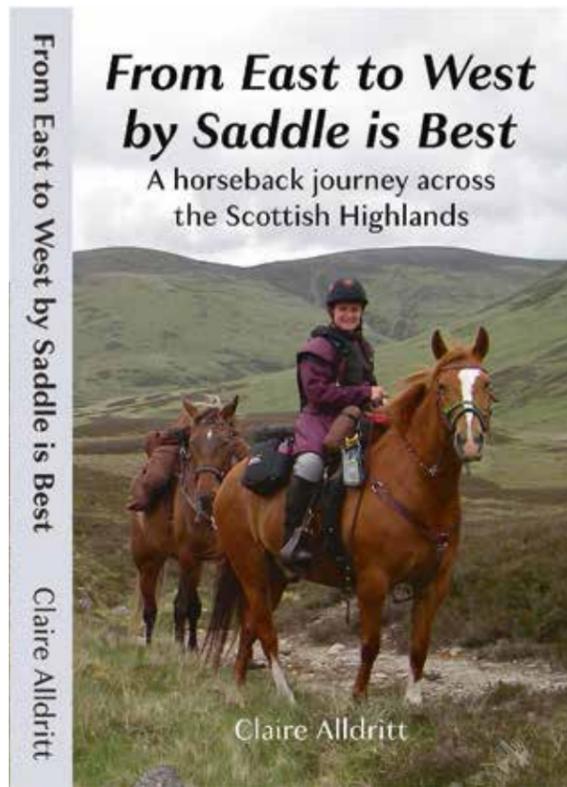
“The first time I remember riding (apart from a donkey on a beach) was on a little Welsh Pony called Penny at the Aberwgynant Trekking Centre near Dollgellau – a holiday treat. I was completely and utterly hooked from that very first ride. I started weekly lessons at a local riding school and did this until I went to University where I found myself working weekends at the trekking centre where I’d first ridden at. Funny old world!

I’ve always been into outdoor sports and just being and living outdoors. My parents were both involved in the Scout and Guide movements so most weekends were spent camping, trying an outdoor activity or hill walking. Once at university, I found a love for kayaking and canoeing and this lead onto a career as an Outdoor Sports Coach. Being outdoors, camping, navigating, analysing risk and staying in wild places just

seems very ordinary to me – something I’ve always known. Combining this with a love of horses seemed a very natural progression but don’t get me wrong, I never take this privilege for granted.

After university I started my working career but it was only when I retrained to work for the Ambulance Service that I felt I had the correct work / life balance to make owning a horse a possibility. It felt like a ‘now or never’ moment and I looked at a wide variety of horses – I didn’t really have a specific breed or type in mind, I just wanted something with a bit of life about them but something that would cope with long days in the hills. I hadn’t considered at this point that the day-long treks might turn into week-long treks!

It was 11 years ago that I found my first equine companion who was / is Yogi. He is now 18 years old and is 15.1hh and



a Highland x Thoroughbred – ginger in colour and very

handsome (he wanted me to add that last bit). When I first



Swift and Yogi near Mount Keen



Swift, Claire and Yogi

met him – I knew I’d found that ‘bit of life about them’ that I was looking for – but when I brought him home I wasn’t sure whether I’d bitten off more than I could chew.



Enjoying the view

I wanted a horse to explore the beautiful Cairngorms with (where I lived then) – I’d imagined serene treks in the hills on my own as well as with friends. What I had instead was a feisty, scared of everything horse who clearly didn’t want to be separated from other equines and would protest by bucking and / or

jogging on the spot as soon as they were out of sight.

Claire’s top tip for people who want to try exploring on horseback.

“Try camping out over night with your horses somewhere close to home and somewhere familiar first.”

To connect with him, I needed to start again and in searching for a trainer to help me, I discovered a different way. I learnt a new way to listen to the subtle cues a horse always offers and a new way to mimic ‘horse language’ back to communicate better with my horse. I found two fabulous people who helped with Yogi’s behaviour – or rather helped my behaviour change, in order to shape his. I learnt that it was better to be a good leader – and for them to choose to follow.

This created a relationship built on mutual respect, improved communication and thus a better team. The

new way of training and communication made me question every little bit of horsemanship I’d ever learned. I now ride western, bitless, treeless, barefoot and keep my horses on a track system that limits grass, maximises movement and provides a wide variety of ground conditions and natural plant self-selection. To learn about the why’s and how’s – you’ll have to read my book!

My second equine companion was / is Swift. She is now 12 years old and I first met her when she was two year. She grew bigger than expected – to 16’2 and is an Appaloosa x American Quarter Horse – with a spotty bum and a diva attitude (she thinks that last bit makes her sound like a movie star). She was a bit of an ‘accidental acquisition’ and soon taught me just how little I knew but I have emerged at the other end with a horse that is amazing to ride. She never takes her attention off you for a moment and

is so light to move in any direction that it appears that she reads your mind.

They are both extremely bonded and through their determination to never be separated, the long-distance riding was born. Before Swift was backed, she would be ponied out behind Yogi – to keep both of them calm – and to show Swift the world. From this beginning, she started carrying a saddle, then the saddle plus picnic, plus tent! Prior to riding the east coast to west coast journey I’d worked up to this with numerous experimental and experience-gathering long-distance rides. Starting small with just a one overnigher, building to a 5 day trek with friends, then several 4 day



On the trail

treks on my own. As the length and the challenge increased, I learnt what worked and what didn't and the learning curve was steep

To contemplate and plan such a trek, is easier in Scotland than in other places because of the 'right to responsible access' or as it's more commonly referred to - the 'right to roam'. This means that you have the right to access the countryside by foot, cycle, horse or boat. In a sense - it is difficult to trespass here but your responsibilities, however, to maintain this right include not causing any damage by your passage or stay. I like to think of this as 'leave no trace' - as best you can. With horses - you have the same rights as wild campers - in that you can stay in the same place for a night or two but after that should move on. I do try my best to talk to each landowner (if I can find their details) before setting off on a long-distance ride - even if only planning to stay one night at a time on their land. It's better to communicate up front and it can often lead to benefits such as a safety check, a wee drink, a suggestion of a more sheltered camp or a better route.

Long-distance riding in the mountains is a long way from the picnic I started out with. The routes can be challenging and harder work than you thought. Scotland often offers four seasons in one day (or over-night) and what might have been an easy trail in the dry suddenly becomes



Wild camp Glen Tanar

a slippery, boggy nightmare crossed by raging streams to negotiate.

We possibly make it harder than it used to be in times gone by when Drover's used similar by-ways through the hills - by wanting additional comforts such as a dry tent to sleep in and a hot meal at night - similarly with the amount of care and comfort shown to our horses. However, I personally wouldn't enjoy it as much if all I had at night was a bit of oats to eat and had to shelter under a cloth blanket!

There are different way to long-distance horse ride - you can make life easier by dropping down to accommodation at night, but I'm talking about dobbinering here - a mixture of riding, mountaineering and wild camping!

It's not just myself and my horses, there's the support behind the scenes too. I'll often need to be dropped off and picked up at destinations or met half-way with a restock of food (a necessity in places without shops) and clean clothes (a luxury when everything smells of sweaty horse). It's knowing also, that you have people on high alert - willing to drop everything at a moment's notice to come to your rescue when things haven't quite gone to plan. I'm lucky to have a husband and friends who are supportive of my exploits and are willing to put themselves forward onto the emergency contact list.

When getting into solo expeditions of this nature - the first question you should ask yourself when considering a route is - What if I need to get out fast - who will help and how?

When considering that route - it's also important to recognise the capabilities of yourself and your horse(s). Only you know the answer to this, so only you can decide if a route is safe and suitable by walking / running or biking it first.

You have to know when to change plans too - particularly if the weather has played it's

part. I once had a huge storm come in on a particularly hilly route - I descended as fast as I could and went further that day than I'd intended to - to get down off the hills to the shelter of a glen. The storm continued the next day and the shelter wasn't good enough for the horses. I didn't care about me at all - I just needed to get Yogi and Swift out of the driving rain and hail (it was mid-June by the way). I cried (with relief) when we were all taken in by a complete stranger. I learnt from this, the importance of an extra day or two of time, to allow an alteration of plans, rather than put additional pressure on yourself and the team.

I generally try to avoid others when out in the hills, as I enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the sounds of nature mixed with the munch of the horses grazing next to the tent. However, the kindness of complete strangers has sometimes created the most memorable days and nights on the trail - unexpected company, suggestions of better routes, help and luxuries offered - even in the most remote places. I particularly remember the kindness of one stranger plucked from his garden to help us along a fast road as the intended route over the hills was blocked by a newly constructed stile. He jumped on his bike and rode ahead of us for several miles to wave down and slow down the traffic to keep us safe."

During much of her journey for the book Claire was ill and was eventually diagnosed with Lyme Disease. In next month's issue Claire explains more about this debilitating disease and her plans for the future.

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The day job