



Saddle up like the stars

TRY HORSE RIDING IN THE GORGEOUS GLENWORTH VALLEY, WRITES **VANESSA KEYS**

How much experience have you had?" With one riding boot successfully pulled on and the other wedged uncomfortably between toes and heel, red dust in my eyes and an army of flies competing for prime real estate in my open mouth, I garble a long-winded answer. It starts with the smattering of pony club lessons I had when I was 10, journeys through my pre-teen obsession with *The Saddle Club* book series and concludes with a recent Blue Mountains trail ride that ignited within me a passion for horse riding I didn't even know I had.

The horse trainer standing in front of me with a clipboard looks startled. "How much experience have you had?" she repeats, slowly. "How many times have you ridden a horse?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry. About a dozen," I reply abashedly. It all started innocently enough: "Would I like to learn to ride like one of the *Wild Boys*?" was the question posed to me from the team responsible for promoting the release of the DVD of the Channel Seven drama series. "Sure," I replied, entertaining visions of myself embracing my inner pioneer settler woman. "Why not?" So with heeled boots in hand, tight jeans zipped on and a few nimble stretches to get the quads working (not really), I make the hour-long drive from Sydney to the Glenworth Valley. Nestled in the hinterland region of the Central Coast, the 1215ha lush valley is the home of Australia's largest outdoor adventure centre, boasting a range of adrenalin-racing activities like quad biking, kayaking, abseiling, team-building activities,

bushwalking and camping. Being the non-camping, non-biking, non-team-building type, I opt for a two-hour guided ride that would take me through the same bushland that *Wild Boys* was filmed in. While I did briefly consider exaggerating my horse riding experience (I swear *The Saddle Club* taught me everything I know), I was lured into telling the truth by *Wild Boys* horse trainer and master Grahame Ware, who lectured me sternly about the safety risk of being placed on the wrong horse for your skill level. "The key to having an enjoyable experience is being matched with the right horse," says Ware, who's spent the past 25 years working on films and TV like *The Lord Of The Rings*, Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* and *McLeod's Daughters*. "Be upfront. The worst thing you can do is lie and say you've got

heaps of experience. You put your trust in your trainer, so honesty is the best policy." After renting a helmet and signing away my life, I'm paired with a stallion called Pluto. We enjoy a brief bonding moment (mainly me brushing flies away from his poor little hot face) before I'm given a lesson on mounting. "Stand on the left side of the horse, facing towards its hind legs, put your left leg in the stirrup, engage your stomach muscles and... lift!" says the chirpy horse trainer, effortlessly demonstrating on her own horse. "Oof!" I manage to get up without too much straining — silently thanking my pilates instructor in the process. The rules of the ride are pretty straightforward: follow the trainer's lead, walking and trotting only and



essentials

GETTING THERE
Glenworth Valley is a one-hour drive from Sydney and Newcastle CBDs, 15 minutes from Gosford or 20 minutes north of Hornsby.

WHAT TO DO
Weekday guided rides depart 10am and 2pm daily; weekend guided rides depart 9.30am, noon, 2pm. \$80/pp. Double the fun by combining horse riding with another activity, like quad biking (\$160/2hr ride and 1.5hr bike), abseiling (\$145/2hr ride and 2.5hr abseiling) or kayaking (\$140/2hr ride and 2.5hr kayak tour) Wear: Full-length pants and flat soled shoes.

WHAT TO WATCH:
The DVD of *Wild Boys* season one out now, \$39.95.

Making it look easy: Horse trainer Grahame Ware from the TV show *Wild Boys* and (inset left) a scene from the show



Incredibly, he used telepathy to guess one word from around 600,000 in the Oxford dictionary. Then the escapologist (sounds like a sneeze when you say it quickly) came out, stripped off his gear, and plunged into the water torture cell. "Is he going to die?" Taj asked. "I hope not. He's very good looking," I replied without thinking. But the highlight was the lady being cut in half. I have no idea how they did it (then again, I'm not real bright). Obviously the entrails were fake, unless we're all filled with packs of Coles sausages (at least there are "no added hormones"). The top half could have been the performer with her legs tucked beneath her. But the bottom half wandered off by itself. "See Mum? If I cut Taj in half, he would still be alive!" Grace exclaimed excitedly. Mental note: Hide all the sharp knives. We agreed it was the best show we'd ever seen. And it provided me with a repertoire of new threats to use against the kids. "I'll put you in the corner" is nothing compared with "I'll cut you in half/submerge you in water/make you disappear". After all, the performers lived to tell the tale. All's well that ends well.

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keep a firm grip on your horse. We're shown how to hold the reins (loosely and down low, near your lap), stop the horse (pull firmly on the reins) and start the horse (kick 'em sharply with your stirrups). Holding your hands too high and pointing your feet down towards the ground are no-nos. "If you push your heels down in the stirrups it gets you sitting down into your saddle and makes you sit up straight," Ware says. "If you put your toes down you tend to lean forward, which ruins your centre of balance." Despite having a million commands swirling around in my head (hands down! head up! back straight!), I am instantly smitten with the infallible feeling of being atop a magnificent beast while navigating the unspoilt corridors of Australian bushland. As Pluto and I trot over crystal-clear creeks — occasionally stopping when he insists on having long drinks — I can't help but think about some of the stories Ware told me about his *Wild Boys* days. "Michael Dorman, who plays

Dan Sinclair, had never ridden a horse but he was such a natural, I couldn't believe it. Daniel MacPherson (Jack Keenan) had ridden a bit but he was a bit rusty. He progressed very fast, though. A lot of the riding was galloping while firing guns, so it was pretty hard work. They both did a bloody good job." In the episode with the big horse wagon accident, Ware stood in for MacPherson. "We had to jump out of the back of the carriage on to the horses, just before the carriage broke away and did a big rollover sequence. It was fun, but we were very fortunate in filming that we had minimal incidents," Ware says. On the guided rides you're not allowed to canter or gallop, and guns are strictly banned, so it's a little hard to picture myself as a tough-as-nails pioneer woman chasing bandits through tangles of low-lying trees — but hey, that's what the imagination's for, right? keysv@dailyleggraph.com.au twitter @vanessaakeys

Picture perfect: (left and above) The pretty Glenworth Valley is an ideal spot to explore on horseback