

Horseback Trip-San Rafael Swell

Señor Rojo, Meet Caballo Clyde Fun and Games in Outlaw Country by Señor Rojo Sinbad Country, Fern's Nipple, Horsethief Canyon, Robber's Roost, Moonshine Spring and Cohab Canyon conjure up wild tales of cattle rustlers, bank robbers, their saddle mates and their women in this, the heart of the San Rafael Swell, Utah's Outlaw Country. In mid-June, much of southern Utah begins to experience the scorching mid-afternoon heat of the desert summer. Much of Outlaw Country, at elevations of 600 feet and higher, is considerably less torrid this time of the year. And, ah, the desert in bloom! Señor Rojo and Señora Karina, his esposa of many años, joined by their amigo Jeff, amigas Debbie and Daneile explored the myriad of outdoor recreation opportunities in Outlaw Country during this magical time of the year. Our saga begins. We head over backroads toward Hondoo Country in the heart of the Swell. This is Emery County, and Emery County is proud of their backcountry roads. Interstate 70 splits the Swell and Emery north and south. I-70 is only slightly better than the road to Hondoo Country, so the 40 miles that would normally take 3 to 5 hours in other parts of the state takes us but 1½ hours. Our adventure is a horsepack trip with Pat Kearney, an outfitter from Hondoo Rivers and Trails out of Torrey. Pat is waiting for us at basecamp. Plenty of scenery, very few people - Señor Rojo Pat is amazing. An enigma. A dental hygienist weekdays, a rough and tumble cowgirl running a successful pack trip guide service on weekends. A truly beautiful lady, inside and out, with horseshit on her boots and a smile on her face. Cook, wrangler, historian and storyteller, the self-proclaimed tooth fairy all wrapped up into 120 pounds of rompin' and stompin' hell-bent fury. She has promised Señor Rojo that she will teach him to be a horseman. Señor Rojo has worn out many hiking boots. And many mountain bike tires. Rojo has flipped river craft in many rapids, rappelled many canyon walls, skied the steep and deep of Utah's Greatest Snow on Earth. But get on a horse? Is Rojo frightened by a horse? Caramba! Not frightened. Aterrorizar!! Pat knows this in advance. She also knows that the rest of the party does not share Rojo's abject fear. Rojo's throat is as dry as desert cacti as Pat leads him toward the steed she has selected for him, Clyde. From fifty feet away, Clyde appears to be so big that he should be named Clydesdale. He's feeding and tied up to the high line. Rojo asks Pat if he might break the line and charge. She laughs a deep laugh, takes Rojo by the arm, and quickens her pace. Huge anxiety attack. Must trust Pat. We get to Clyde, Pat gives Rojo a carrot, says "give it to Clyde." Rojo thinking, "If I do this, will I end up being able to count only to eight on my fingers?" Pat demonstrates, Rojo offers carrot, Clyde eagerly accepts. Rojo and Clyde begin tenuous friendship. The setting here is fabulous. On the Muddy River with Tomsich Butte as a backdrop with Hondoo Arch looming high above. Hondoo is Spanish for the loop in a lariat, and damn! That's what it looks like! The arch can be seen for miles and is an impressive landmark. At dinner, Pat tells about the time a group of young adults camped near their spot, had perhaps too much whiskey or beer that evening, played loud music on their blaster, set off firecrackers, spooking the horses. Pat's wrangler wanted to put a forcible stop to the offenders of the tranquility. Pat said, "No, we won't get mad, we'll get even." The drunken clamor died down at about 4:00 am. At 4:15, Pat woke up the wrangler and said, "I think we're just about out of firewood. Better fire up the chainsaw!" Early the next morning, Rojo, alone, went out to talk with Clyde. They were now, if not the best of buddies, at least communicating. Pat soon arrived with saddles, harnesses and all sorts of gear completely foreign to Rojo and went about her job quickly and efficiently. Soon, time to ride. After the basic course in horsemanship, 101A, i.e. how to mount, what to hang onto, how to steer, stop and get off, Pat stated that now is the time. In his defense, Clyde was very gentle. And Rojo mounted! Red's Canyon - San Rafael Swell - Señor Rojo Off we go into Red's Canyon, obviously not named for Rojo, but for red-bearded "Red" Blackum, who lived and mined here. Pat knows all the stories, tales, lies, half-truths and legends. We never tired of hearing the next. The ride is wonderful. The highlight comes near the end when several mountain bikers pass us. One is wearing a Mother Karen's Powdershirt and we tell her that Abuela Karina is, in fact, the real Mother Karen. Back at camp later, Rojo discovers soreness in places never before known. Tired, hungry and happy. Pat whips up a great dinner; we break open a bottle of fine wine, and savor the day. Sleep under the huge, clear, starlit Outlaw Country sky. Next day, we're off for another adventure and destination, Poor Canyon via the Merry-Go-Round, where Pat says we may see a herd of wild horses. What a treat it would be to see these impressive animals in their wild habitat. However, Señor Rojo is getting along just fine with Clyde by now, and has no desire to change horses in the middle of any stream, including the Muddy River. Which is exactly what we are doing today. Many crossings of the Muddy. Clyde is sure-footed going down the bank, and mighty powerful going up. Like shifting into granny gear and laying the hammer down. Jeff on Joker, Deb on Sassy, Daneile on the spirited Roy and Karina on Rosie are all riding smoothly. Pat on Rascal is like one with the horse. Rojo bounces a lot and hangs on for dear life. The Merry-Go-Round is a huge island of rock, over one hundred feet high and probably 2 to 3 miles around. The river winds around one side, a large meadow wraps around the other. We ride through the meadow, meet up with the river on the other side, and take a break for snacks for riders and mounts. No sign of a wild herd yet, but we're on the lookout. Poor Canyon is great, prettier than Red's. Much more varied terrain, foliage, and texture on the canyon walls. Poor is a box canyon, so we ride up and up, following the stream. We break for lunch and hike the area, exploring, enjoying the ride, the company, the experience. Rojo likes being a horseman. Riding again, we spot a coyote, but still no wild horses. Pat says sightings are rare, but do occasionally happen. We get to the end of the box, re-trace our route and head for home. Believe me, the horses know we're headed home! Back at camp, Rojo and Karina have the same idea. A skinny-dip in the Muddy, which is actually very clear today. How refreshing! Get rid of the trail dust, put on some clean clothes, savor a cerveza or dos, get ready for another of Pat Kearney's fine cuisine. Fine it is, until we're suddenly interrupted by an intruder. A wild stallion is checking out Pat's mares feeding in the meadow down by the river! A short distance away, the rest of the wild herd, three mares and a colt, wait for their leader. He's magnificent! Tall, strong, dark, head held high, long tail flowing. Bet he can run like the wind. What a sight! He lets us get to within 40 feet to snap pictures. Almost like

he's modeling. Finally, we return to the dinner tent. The herd ultimately walks virtually through our camp, crosses the Muddy and makes its way downriver to whatever destination they desire. We're staying here a few short days. This is their home. In the morning after breakfast, we break camp. The four horseladies, Pat, Deb, Daneile and Karina mount up to transport the horses and gear up to the top where Pat's husband Gary waits with the horse trailer for their return to Hondoo Outfitter's base in Torrey. Jeff and Rojo drive the trucks through Red's Canyon for another photo shoot, particularly for the impressive Family Butte. The ladies say the two-hour ride was an adrenalin pumping rush. We say our goodbyes to Gary and Pat. Rojo is no longer a cowboy tenderfoot, but he has aching feet, a genuine fondness in his heart for Pat, and a real soreness somewhat half way in between. Thanks, Clyde.