



Living their *Man from Snowy River* dreams, Spring Spur riders saddle up and explore the beautiful Victorian High Country by day and night.



# Free reins

With wide open spaces and fresh alpine air, a ride across Victoria's High Country is just the way to celebrate the end of lockdown



Writer Justin Meneguzzi found jumping in the saddle to be the perfect post-lockdown antidote when he visited the High Country a year ago and is tempted to head for the hills to do it all again.

**B**ig Baz is in a dark mood. The hulking black gelding is staring me down, sizing me up, deciding if I'm worthy of sitting in the saddle or not. He stamps his feet and, with a swish of his tail, dismisses me.

"Baz is a bit of a bruiser," says Lin Baird, as he helps me thread the reins. The Baird family has been running Spring Spur, their working horse farm at Tawonga, nearly four hours northeast of Melbourne, for 35 years. Of all their horses, Baz is the biggest and they've given him to me – a novice rider. But I know I'm in safe hands. After all, this is a family with horses galloping in their veins. They've even trained Hollywood stars Orlando Bloom and Joel Edgerton. Lin blushes when he admits he'd recently taken a call from Matthew McConaughey.

I'm here to act out my wildest *Man from Snowy River* dreams, embarking on a week-long pack expedition across the spectacular Victorian Alps. While Spring Spur offers day rides and horsemanship classes, matriarch Kath Baird confides it's the pack tours that call true adventurers.

As we saddle our horses, there's a sense of

something momentous in the air that's more than just giddy excitement. "We had to postpone trips in January (2020) because of the bushfires, and then Covid-19 put everyone in lockdown," Lin explains. "This is our first expedition of the year."

With a shout our small group sets off, raising a few eyebrows among Mount Beauty's residents as we cross town, before literally plunging into the bush. Standing in the stirrups and clutching Baz's mane, branches whip past as I urge him up steep hills along Simmonds Creek. Like a gang of outlaws, we burst on to dirt tracks and canter beneath gum forests spotted with wild cherries and white-flowered Victorian mint. We stop to drink by streams and ford rivers as we push ever upwards along a winding trail.

This is a hands-on expedition, so when we eventually arrive at camp we unbridle, wash and brush our horses. At first Baz pulls back from my touch but, gradually, he eases in. Not bad for a first day together. Lin is cooking dinner at the campfire and the group loudly chatters around a cheese board while the cicadas set in. I learn most of us are freshly loosed from a three-month lockdown and had eagerly jumped at a chance to escape from looking at screens and the same four walls every day. Tucked into our swags and gazing up at a blanket of stars, we eventually settle on a new name for our trip: he Covid Freedom Trail.

Our idealistic enthusiasm soon gets a drenching. The next day a storm blows in at Cobungra Gap and, even wearing full-length oil skins, we're soaked through as we ride over tussock plains to our camp on Swindlers Creek. Faithful Baz trudges through it all without complaint, only grumpily biting the bums of other horses who come too close.

There's a lake in my boot but the wet is nothing a campfire, change of clothes and beer can't fix. Lin jumps into action at camp, building a fire and raising our spirits with perfectly cooked steaks and dark chocolate for dessert.

With the thrills and saturation of the first days behind us, the next few settle into a kind of meditative trance, our thoughts rising and falling with each hoof step. The air becomes colder and the bush sparser the higher we climb until we ride into the skeleton forest –

## Horses for courses

Three more heart-pounding ways to discover Victoria's High Country.

**1 MOUNTAIN BIKING:** Take advantage of the region's 300km of dedicated alpine trails and purpose-built bike parks. [mysticpark.org.au](http://mysticpark.org.au)

**2 WHITEWATER KAYAKING:** Hit the rapids on the beautiful Ovens River, refresh afterwards with a cold one at Bright Brewery. [brightadventurecompany.com.au](http://brightadventurecompany.com.au)

**3 PARAGLIDING:** For an entirely different view, take in the mountains from the seat of a tandem paraglide as you descend into Bright. [alpineparagliding.com](http://alpineparagliding.com)

the eerie, bleached remains of dead ghost gums caught in the 2004 bushfires. Their bony, lichen-covered boughs create a haunting, yet beautiful, archway as we emerge on to the Bogong High Plains. At nearly 2000m elevation, we're surrounded by some of the Great Dividing Range's highest peaks and, while there's no snow, the wind bites.

We tiptoe across the plains in search of easily startled wild brumbies and there's a curious staring competition with one mob before they majestically gallop off, foals in tow. From the top of Mount Fainter, we marvel at the eucalyptus ranges folding away into a hazy blue horizon. On our last night at Bogong Jack Hut, we gather around the fire to recite Banjo Paterson and hear the myth behind the hut – named for the infamous cattle thief who evaded conviction but suspiciously disappeared shortly after his trial.

Our Freedom Trail comes to an end back at Spring Spur and, having bonded after a week of open air, no screens and no walls, it's hard to say goodbye.

I unbridle Baz one last time and for a moment, just a moment, he leans his great head into my shoulder before he quickly pulls away.

That's enough now, he says, on with you.

*The writer was a guest of Visit Victoria*

## ESCAPE ROUTE

Spring Spur's summer pack tours depart from November 28 through to an Easter departure on April 14, 2022. The Mount Bogong Highest of High Country seven-day tour, starting on February 20, is priced from \$3450. [springspur.com.au](http://springspur.com.au)