

Sophie Clark - Wyoming placement Deer People report

I arrived at Riverton airport, Wyoming, where one of the other wranglers Will was waiting to pick me up and take me to the ranch. After a 1.5 hour drive up a dirt track into the mountains through the Shoshone Reservation I had made it. The Diamond 4 Ranch is a family run dude ranch that sits at 9,200ft in the heart of the Wind River Mountain range which makes up part of the Great Continental Divide and is Wyoming's highest elevation dude ranch. I was part of a team that was made up of 13 other wranglers, 10 of us who shared a bunkhouse. There were people from all over the States and a couple from New Zealand. Everyone was so welcoming and helpful which really helped me settle in.

The ranch has a herd of around 100 horses and mules that need tending daily. My work routine started at around 5.30am to feed the horses and get them caught, saddled and packed all before breakfast, depending on what trips were going out that day. The first few



weeks involved mainly guiding guests on two to four-hour horseback rides, and ranch maintenance. The reservation road, the only access to the ranch, is only open from June until the end of September which means all the maintenance gets done through the season. When I wasn't with guests I was chopping firewood, replacing fence posts, oiling and fixing saddles, tending to the horses' cuts and scrapes, sweeping decks, fixing roofs and checking the water lines. Since the ranch is in the middle of the mountains, we had little electricity or service.



August came around fast, which is when things started to get busier, we had new guests arriving every three to four days for different reasons. This is when the long days in the saddle began. We would saddle and pack the horses with the guests' camping gear and equipment - they could be rock climbers, fly fishers, or just keen hill walkers - and drop off their equipment at the location they were hiking out too.

The most popular locations

were on a trail that took us over the 'Bears Ears' which sat at around 12,000ft. We would set off before breakfast on horseback with a string of three horses carrying their equipment behind us. The terrain was almost all pure rock, very steep in bits, but the horses were sure footed and knew exactly

what their jobs were, which made the long days on the trail a pleasure. Once we arrived at the location to drop off the equipment, we would unpack the horses, re-tighten saddles etc, and get back on the trail to head back to the ranch. The quick turnaround meant eating your lunch on the move and some days you'd be on horseback for 16 hours.

I remember one night on the trail heading back to the ranch after a long day the darkness was upon us. I had a string of three horses behind me and we were riding through the woods. I remember looking up through the tops of the trees and seeing the stars - I have never seen stars like it, stars so bright they lit up the road home. Some nights we weren't so lucky, and the guiding stars were covered by cloud, and it was so dark you couldn't see your horse's ears in front of you. This is when I had to learn to put full trust in my horse and let them take you home, listening behind me to make sure there was nothing wrong with the string of horses I was leading, and using my senses to duck and dodge branches as I was riding through tighter parts of the trails. Not once did the horses fail in getting us back to the ranch safely in the dark, they truly are the experts of the mountains.

Not only did we drop off equipment, but we would also collect it too. This meant quite often as we were packing guests into the mountains there would be another group due to be packed out the following day. So, us wranglers would camp over night in the wild of the Wind River mountains with the horses; we had to pack very light, only a sleeping bag really. The horses would get unsaddled, hobbled and bells put on and let go out to graze, while we would sleep under the stars in our sleeping bags, getting up every one or two hours to check to make sure the horses hadn't made their way back home. I never really slept on these overnight trips as you were always listening to make sure you could hear the horses' bells, or I would hear rustling in the bushes wondering if it was an elk or bear. After a few hours' sleep, when the sun would start to rise, we would get up, catch the horses, re-saddle and pack out the group of guests.





Hunting season soon came around and we were starting to prepare for Archery Camp. A hunter who had come from Florida had finally pulled a tag for a Bull Elk in Wyoming after 15 years of waiting. Six of us set off on the trail, Jessie and Ian (the guides), the hunter and me and two other wranglers. Seven hours later we arrived at our camp at Buffalo Head for

the next seven days. We set up camp cooked some dinner and got an early night. Each morning, we (the wranglers) would get up around 4am to start boiling water for coffee and start cooking breakfast for everyone, once that was done the hunters would head out looking for an elk. On Day Six we got the call that they were successful, so we saddled the horses and met them. We followed the blood trail but could not locate the bull, so we then lined up and searched the trees in front, and on our third pass of the area we found it. We then quartered the elk and packed the meat onto the horses and headed for home.

I can't thank everyone who was involved in making this possible enough. Richard Cooke, Jessie Johnstone, Jessie Allen and of course everyone who was involved in the Deer People Placement Scheme and the ADMG. This was truly a once in a lifetime experience which I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to enjoy. I really urge others in the industry to apply, you'll widen your knowledge and skill set and make connections from all over the world!

