

Horse Camp Virgin

I was never one of those children that was part of a pony club. All the talk of gymkhanas and competitive mums shouting from the sidelines brought me out in a cold sweat. I was happy just going up to my share ponies/horses as a youngster and teenager, taking my packed lunch at the weekend or holidays and spending all daylight hours I could up at the yard... going for a hack or bathing, grooming, plaiting, yard chores etc. You see, I only found out that I suffer from anxiety 3 years ago, so all the worrying, fuzzy mind and overthinking was only calmed by being around the horses. It was my relief, my release and my recuperation.

After many years of loaning, I finally bought my horse Pie (17.1hh grey IDx 13yo) 1.5 years ago, but only really got properly riding this year as he had a Keratoma in his hoof last year, which meant lots of lameness, investigation, operation, boxrest, then a slow restart into work. I built up the courage to join a riding club at the end of last year because I wanted to go along to clinics to get Pie out and about and meet likeminded people who just wanted to enjoy and bond with their horse, rather than getting out and winning lots of competitions (although that would be a bonus!). Like you, I found Rogate District Riding Club (RDRC) to be the right choice and started joining some polework clinics, dressage shows and keeping an eye out for other things that appealed to me. To get more involved and meet people, I asked to join the committee, which meant giving up my own time to attend meetings and maintaining the website/Facebook/emails but also meet lots of lovely new friends who also just want to enjoy their horses and help other members enjoys theirs.

Anyway, enough about my back story, time to get to the nitty gritty of my first experience of Horse Camp...

Let's get right to the point, I was pooing my pants. I only agreed to go along because the other committee members kept telling me how much fun it is and I just threw caution to the wind and thought, sod it, why not! My main worries were about setting up a "corral" for my horse... what if he got out and everyone was having to chase around my loose horse; or what if he got stressed staying away from home and not knowing where he is; or what if he doesn't cope well staying out overnight etc. I don't know whether it was the anxiety thinking the What Ifs or if everyone has the same thoughts, but I just told myself that if I always keep thinking What If, we'll never stay anywhere together. Plus, the other RDRC Members kept supporting me telling me that it will be fine and that if anything happens, they will always help, not just because I'm on the committee but because they want everyone to have an enjoyable time.

So I put my big girl pants on, packed up the car and trailer for the 3 nights (who knew how much stuff there was to pack... it's like having a child, but worse!) and travelled to our venue, being Mayhill Stud this year, as they had two surface arenas so better for the horses after this heatwave and hard ground. Pam Threader (club treasurer) said she will lend me anything I needed for the corral, and saved a space next to her so that I wasn't on my own. A couple of the other girls, Lisa and Cara (show jumping organisers) were the other side of me, and helped me put my tent up and get settled.

I'd never ridden Pie twice in one day before, let alone 3 days in a row so didn't know how either of us would handle it. However, to put it bluntly, it was bloody brilliant! All the horses were quite on edge on the first lesson on the Friday, but that's to be expected at a new venue, combined with unfortunate weather of wind and rain... what were we saying earlier about the heatwave and hard ground?! By the second lesson, it had got to torrential rain and thunderstorms so we got absolutely soaked through to the bone. We popped rugs on the horses and gave them hay to keep warm whilst everyone got into 3 layers of clothes to get warmed up. Even though the weather was hideous, it

didn't dampen our spirits for a few drinks in the gazebo in the evening, along with a takeaway curry from the nearest town.

Saturday cleared up much more weather wise, so we luckily had two lessons in the dry (hoorah). Sunday was a little drizzly but because you know you're going home, you just have to chuck everything in the car and head home after.

What I truly loved about Camp is the progress you see with your horse over the three days and six lessons, where you can build on what you learn each time, where everything is so fresh in your mind. For example, Pie is a very quick and keen horse, more that he's anxious like his mumma but also still wants to please, but by the last day, we were doing some beautiful steady schooling, and even done our first ever course of jumps! I felt like a proud mum when their child does really well on a school project! Yes, it could be down to that he was very tired and just gave in, but at least I know what it felt like and I can practise it all at home knowing that he CAN do it.

I had Christine Gay for all of my sessions, just because how the planning fell with what people wanted to do in terms of flatwork, polework, gridwork or show jumping. There was also Pip Blain and Russell Cooper as the instructors, so people got to have variety in their teaching and focus on different things that people may pick up on, or explain something slightly differently.

I learnt a lot of things from Camp that I will take forward to my next one, and hopefully can impart some wisdom to any newbies too:

- 1) Never trust a weather app. It will lie to you. It will either say it will rain when it won't, or beautifully sunny when there will be a thunderstorm, or 89% chance of rain when it is torrential downpours at the same time.
- 2) Take a tent that you can stand up in, or bring a comfortable camping bed to put in the trailer or horsebox to sleep in. It is very difficult to get wet jodhpurs off whilst sitting down and trying not to fall backwards into the sides of the wet tent!
- 3) You can never have enough clothes, including coats, socks, jodhpurs or jumpers. If they get wet, you can change, change and change again.
- 4) Don't feel afraid to mingle with people you don't know. Just remember that we all have at least one thing in common and one thing we love talking about: horses. It can be overwhelming to socialise in a big group of people (trust me, as a person that suffers from anxiety, I know how scary that is, times 10)... but just bring a couple of ciders or bottle of wine (but be careful of overdoing it because you're still there to ride the next day!) and put yourself out there. You may make some new friends or just have some new conversations or just be hugely proud that you put yourself 'out there'.
- 5) You will always forget something. Always. But as long as you have your horse, tack, riding gear... everything else can be borrowed, bought or stolen... I mean, sourced!
- 6) Make sure you book off the following day from work, kids, family and life. You will be so tired, you want to cry, but still have to unpack everything when you get home. So having the next day to either sleep or sort things out will be a godsend.

I really hope this helps some of you that want to come to Camp but are worried, apprehensive, afraid or unsure... it's ok (and normal) to feel like that but we all have to start somewhere. We all joined Rogate because they are such a supportive Riding Club so take a leap of faith, like I did this year, and just go for it. A holiday with your horse, what more could you wish for?

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Fellow RDRC Member

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