

RIDERS

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state's four parks in the Santa Monicas. Preece, stressed, however, that "bona fide riders" will be granted permission.

It's no wonder that Ruthie Gerson of Agoura Hills, a longtime equestrian who came up with the idea for the ride, and her three compatriots took about three months to plan the trip, which was intended to publicize the existence of the Backbone Trail.

Well-connected in the local riding community—one of the foursome, Linda Palmer, is head of Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council—the women were able to handle the bureaucratic wrangling, but without a pack horse, the logistics were a little more difficult.

Although Gerson would have settled for basic survival grub, "I was in charge of food," said Kim Fuess of Calabasas, "and wanted to eat well, so I didn't want cucumbers for lunch and crackers for dinner." Their horses were less picky, but they did demand hay, bales of it. And gallons of water.

Where was all this food and material going to come from every night? And who was going to haul the trash away? Fortunately, the women had the answer: husbands. Driving to a prearranged location, the men would drop off supplies at night and pick up what was left the next day.

The trip was planned so carefully that the women even arranged to be met with water for the horses after a particularly steep climb.

"This ride isn't something you can plan the week before," Gerson said.

A few months ago, Gerson talked to friends who had hiked the Backbone Trail. Inspired, she contacted Fuess and

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said, "Let's do it." Then they got in touch with Palmer and Marcia Harmon of Thousand Oaks. All four are experienced horsewomen—Fuess, Gerson and Palmer ride in the Tevis Cup, a 100-mile endurance race—and are familiar with local trails. All but Harmon live in the Santa Monica Mountains.

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Starting at the western terminus of the trail in La Jolla Canyon, the women rode 20 miles the first day, setting up camp at Circle X Ranch and tethering their horses.

It was on this night that the only glitch in the trip occurred. About 3 a.m., Palmer's horse Baraka got loose, awakening the women, who were able to track down the 18-year-old Arabian gelding.

The second day's journey, from Circle X to Calamigos Ranch, was 14 miles, the last four of which were on private land, so permission had to be obtained well in advance. At Calamigos—a conference center open to the public—the women were honored with a barbecue attended by state park officials.

At night, they slept in cabins and their horses were treated to a corral with wood shavings. Gerson expected the first-class treatment: Her husband Grant owns the place.

"It was a bed and breakfast for horse and rider," Fuess said. "We even got to take a shower." The horses preferred to rough that part of it.

Their third night was spent at Malibu Creek, where campers with horses are not normally welcome.

"We were allowed because Ruthie and I are members of the Mounted Assistance Unit," said Palmer, who feels that the absence of an overnight equestrian facility at Malibu Creek is a major deterrent for anybody else who would like to ride the entire Backbone Trail.

"The average person would not have been able to do it," Palmer said.

After leaving Malibu Creek, the women rode over Saddle Peak, down the Stunt High Trail and across a segment of the Backbone named Dead Horse Trail.

Riding through Topanga State Park, they called ahead to a ranger to open the gate at the end of Los Liones Trail. Normally, they would have finished up at Will Rogers State Park, but a washout on Chicken Ridge forced them to take an alternate route.

Waiting for them was Gerson's husband and daughter with ice cream and a hacksaw, just in case the ranger didn't get the gate open.

When they were done, the women felt they had made their point about the Backbone Trail.

"It's important for the public to know you can do this ride," Palmer said. Fuess mentioned that Valley-area equestrians usually have to go to Mammoth to make long overnight rides into pristine mountain areas, "but now they can do it here," she said.

Considering the dense population flanking the Santa Monica Mountains, it would seem impossible to get away from people on a four-day horseback ride, "but you're in the back country," Fuess said. "You don't see a lot of people and you do have a feeling you're out in the wilderness."

To Palmer, the experience was almost mystical—"Riding the Backbone was like the Japanese tea ceremony. It gets you out of your ordinary mode and puts you in touch with nature." It was also the culmination of a long battle to preserve the mountains.

"I had to keep pinching myself to believe I was doing it. Fifteen years ago, the trail was nothing but a petition" urging the state to create the Backbone.

Civilization did make an appearance during the ride when a local television crew joined the women to do a feature. On the telecast, the reporter referred to them as "trail blazers," which is how the women see themselves. They hope others follow in their hoofprints.

"You don't have to be an endurance rider to ride the Backbone Trail," Fuess said. "Weekend riders can do it."

As long as their spouses cooperate.

Information: Call the State Department of Parks and Recreation at 818-706-1310.