

Adventures with Amanda



HORSIN' AROUND AT ZUCK STABLES

By Amanda Burlingham

TALL, DARK AND HANDSOME, Ben beckoned to me from across the room. His hair shone like a sea of dark caramel; his chestnut eyes glistened in the afternoon light. I moved closer and gasped lightly. His presence was awesome, and I imagined him carrying me off into the sunset. Weighing in at 850 pounds, Ben — a Morgan-mix training horse — would have no problems lugging me around.

This fairytale adventure begins at Zuck Farms Stables, 6500 Naeff Rd., Fairview, Pa., where Heidi Zuck greeted me warmly at the barn door. As we walked together, my nerves got the best of me. In spite of growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I've never ridden a horse. The closest I've come to horses is during annual family trips to the Butler Farm Show and, frankly, I've always been more interested in the cotton candy and corndogs than the animals. So when Ben popped his mammoth head out to see who had arrived at his stall, I startled. I asked Heidi if, like dogs and bees, horses could smell fear. She warned that indeed, if I was nervous, Ben would be nervous too. Great. As I signed yet another death and dismemberment waiver, I imagined Ben rearing up, throwing me off his back and then snickering with his horse pals as I lay writhing in pain. Heidi asked if I was afraid of horses. No. No. I mean, not really ... Should I be? ▶

We entered Ben's "room" and let him get a good whiff of me. Between our dog and the dirty diapers, I guess I smelled pretty good because he gave me a sweet nudge. Heidi attached a harness around his head and looped a rope under what I imagine was Ben's chin (do horses have chins?). She gave me instruction on how to walk with Ben; I gripped the rope and cautiously escorted Ben out of the stall. One scary exercise down, three more to go.

Next, Heidi brought an array of brushes and picks and demonstrated how to clean Ben's coat, mane and hooves. I followed behind her, gently stroking Ben with my gear, growing more comfortable with the gargantuan animal. And then it was time for me to clean Ben's hooves. Pick in hand, I prodded him to lift his leg. I scraped out the muck from the bottom of his foot, petrified that I would apply too much pressure and he would turn his head and bite my butt. Alas, I made it through without even a snort and Ben was happier and healthier because of the quick grooming.

After placing a saddle securely on Ben's back, we moved to the indoor arena. I wondered how I would mount the beast: Would Ben kneel down so I could simply sit in the saddle? Would I climb a ladder? Maybe Heidi would just hoist me up. No such luck. I placed my left foot in the stirrup, grabbed a handful of Ben's mane (no worries, that's what it's there for), jumped three times on my right foot and half lunged, half pulled my way to the top. I'm not gonna lie to you, it wasn't pretty — and Heidi had to help bring up the rear. But I felt accomplished that I had made it all the way up there and strong in my position as cowgirl.

I spent the remainder of my one-hour lesson

What to Know Before You Go

- Farms, dirt roads and livestock all have a way of making my mother squeamish. If you're like her and don't enjoy the great outdoors, this is not the adventure for you.
- Plan to get dirty. I left the farm donning a fair amount of horse hair, manure, hay and grit. That being said, leave your shoes outside when you get home. I'll never be certain what I stepped in, but I'm sure I would have died on the spot if Baby Jack had licked it off my floor.
- Wear comfortable, casual clothing including long pants to protect your legs and shoes or boots with a ½-inch heel. Shoes with a small heel help keep your feet from slipping in the stirrups.
- Don't fuss about your hair — you'll be required to wear a very attractive helmet.
- "Tack" is a term used to describe everything used to prepare a horse for riding from the saddle to the reins to the stirrups. "Tacking up," as it's called, is kind of like getting dressed in your Sunday best before running a 10K.
- Just like your cowboy, horses love to be praised and caressed. Don't be afraid to bend down and give your horse a big bear hug.
- Heidi Zuck teaches horsemanship lessons — not just riding lessons — at Zuck Farms Stables to adults and kids as young as six. Along with riding, she throws in basic horse handling, grooming and tacking to foster comfort and passion in beginning students.
- Lessons at Zuck Farms Stables cost \$40 per hour and are offered most anytime to accommodate the student's schedule. It can take as many as 15 lessons for a beginner to grasp horsemanship — worth every penny, but still, let's hope you're a quick study. Call (814) 474-5075 to giddyup!

ADVENTURE RATING:

Four out of five riding helmets.



sauntering through the indoor arena and moseying down a few outdoor trails, practicing my mount and dismount. It wasn't a comfortable experience at first, honestly. I was anxious way up on the horse's back, afraid his legs would give out and we'd both crash to the ground. By the end of the lesson, however, I was feeling close to Ben. He had safely carried me across rocky terrain, showed me the world from a brand new perspective and even warned me with a good tail

swish before he pooped at my feet. Once I gave him a few post-lesson treats, I think he felt a little closer to me, too.

I can't say I'm an equestrian at heart but I definitely enjoyed the tranquility of the farm, the smells of the country and the companionship of the Zuck family horses. I may not take another lesson, but I'll certainly introduce Baby Jack to riding at an early age with hopes he'll come to appreciate more about the farm show than the food. I give this adventure a rating of four out of five — great fun for the whole family.

WIN FREE STUFF

Ready to saddle up and give horseback riding a try? Zuck Farms Stables is giving away one free riding lesson, value \$40. Enter to win at www.HerTimes.com by Sept. 1. One entry per person, please.